

# STARS AND STRIPES®

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2022

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## Supply chain slowdown hits commissaries hard

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE  
AND FRANK ANDREWS  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Air Force spouse Valerie Jackson shopped the commissary on Wednesday at this Marine Corps installation because the shelves are much emptier at nearby Kadena Air Base.

“The Kadena commissary is kind of lacking in supplies and we’re wanting tacos tonight,” Jackson, 31, told Stars and Stripes. “My husband went the other day and said that there was hardly anything left, like milk, sour cream, cheese.”

A “perfect storm” of supply chain issues coupled with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has arrived at Defense Department commissaries worldwide, leaving shelves empty and shoppers frustrated.

The new year brought food shortages to Japan and South Korea, according to Facebook posts by military commands and notices on blank shelves and dairy cases. Periodic shortages also have occurred in recent months at some stores in Germany and Italy. Chilled items and dairy products have thus far been hit the hardest.

“For the immediate future, do not expect our commissary shelves to be stocked at levels that we are used to,” said a Facebook post Tuesday by Camp Kinser, a Marine base on Okinawa. The Defense Commissary Agency, the post states, “sincerely apologizes for the inconvenience this may cause the community, but they are doing all they can to get product to the shelves.”

The same California distributor supplies commissaries in Japan and South Korea, so all are equally affected by shortages, said Kalani Patsel, commissary

zone manager in Okinawa, in an email Thursday to Stars and Stripes. Products are trickling in and shelves may be restocked by the end of the month, according to Patsel and store notices.

The same supply chain issues plaguing U.S. retailers the past year are to blame for shortages at military commissaries. Higher consumer demand, a backlog of container ships at ports around the globe and a shortage of drivers to haul merchandise away are contributing to the problem.

“We have 100s of containers with commissary products sitting out in the US ports waiting to get off-loaded,” Patsel wrote. “Now top that with a COVID case in any of these chain links and supply interruptions will occur.”

It’s a “perfect storm” of supply-chain disruption, “amplified” by COVID-19, he said.

Resupplying overseas commissaries is the top priority for the Defense Commissary Agency, Patsel said. He said he expected sufficient supplies are coming to meet demand, but panic buying could complicate matters.

Milk, cheese, butter, sour cream and yogurt, along with eggs and chilled juices, are conspicuously absent from shelves at most U.S. bases in Japan. Patsel said coffee creamer is the most requested item on Okinawa.

“There will be times that we won’t have an item in stock for whatever the reason is,” he wrote in his email, “however, I can assure you that we are doing our utmost to try and get the necessities to the customers as quickly as possible.”

Local grocery stores are still an option. Even under a stay-at-home order imposed until Jan. 24 by U.S. Forces Japan, base residents can shop in off-base stores as an essential service.

## Russia hints at sending troops to Cuba, Venezuela

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Russia on Thursday sharply raised the stakes in a showdown with the West over Ukraine, with a top diplomat saying he wouldn’t exclude a Russian military deployment to Cuba and Venezuela if tensions with the United States mount.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who led the Russian delegation in Monday’s talks with the U.S. in Geneva, said in televised remarks that he would neither confirm nor exclude the possibility that Russia could send military assets to Cuba and Venezuela. The negotiations in Geneva and Wednesday’s NATO-Russia meeting in Vienna failed to narrow the gap on Moscow’s security demands amid a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine. While Moscow demanded a halt to NATO expansion, Washington and its allies firmly rejected them as a nonstarter.

Speaking in an interview with Russian RTVI TV broadcast, Ryabkov noted that “it all depends on the action by our U.S. counterparts,” adding that President Vladimir Putin has warned that Russia could take military-technical measures if the U.S. provokes Moscow and turns up military pressure on it. Ryabkov said a refusal by the U.S. and its allies to consider the key demand for guarantees against the alliance’s expansion to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations raises doubts about continuing the talks.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry

Peskov noted “some positive elements and nuances” during the talks, but described them as “unsuccessful” because of stark disagreements on Russia’s key demands.

“The talks were initiated to receive specific answers to concrete principal issues that were raised, and disagreements remained on those principal issues, which is bad,” he said in a conference call with reporters.

Peskov warned of a complete rupture of U.S.-Russian relations if proposed sanctions targeting Putin and other top civilian and military leaders are adopted. The measures, proposed by Senate Democrats, would also target leading Russian financial institutions if Moscow sends troops into Ukraine.

Peskov criticized the proposals as an attempt to up the pressure on Moscow during the talks, saying it wouldn’t work.

“It concerns sanctions, which taking into account the inevitable adequate response, effectively amount to an initiative to rupture relations,” he warned, adding that Russia will respond in kind to protect its interests.

The talks come as an estimated 100,000 Russian troops, tanks and heavy military equipment are massed near Ukraine’s eastern border. Russia denies that it’s pondering an invasion and accuses the West of threatening its security by positioning military personnel and equipment in Central and Eastern Europe.

# Lawmaker wants fast US response to Taiwan

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The vice chairwoman of the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday said new legislation is needed to allow the United States to respond faster should China invade Taiwan.

President Joe Biden “doesn’t have the authority [under the law] to actually respond” should China attack the island, Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va., said, noting a U.S. response would be needed to maintain stability in the region.

“If China were to invade Taiwan today, the president would have to come to Congress for authorization to respond,” the 20-year Navy veteran said while speaking at the Surface Navy Association symposium in Arlington, Va. “We can’t lose [the] months that it would take in order for us to provide a response.”

The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act requires the president seek congressional approval before intervening militarily should China invade the democratic island, Luria wrote in an October

opinion column in The Washington Post. The War Powers Act also hinders the president from taking such action because it requires congressional approval to send military intervention abroad if the U.S., its territories or its armed forces are not under attack, she added.

Though the U.S. acknowledges China claims sovereignty over Taiwan through Beijing’s One China policy, it maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan, according to the State Department.

Luria is not alone in advocat-

ing for legislation to grant the president more authority when it comes to defending Taiwan. Congressional support for the island has grown in recent years as U.S. competition with China intensifies.

For example, Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., in February introduced the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act to allow the president to send in the military if China makes a direct attack on Taiwan, but the bill stalled in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, according to congressional records.

## China defends maritime claims after US criticism

*Associated Press*

BEIJING — China on Thursday defended its “historical rights” to virtually the entire South China Sea, following a new U.S. government report saying Beijing’s claims are almost entirely invalid.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin called the State Department report “Limits in the Seas,” issued this month, an attempt to “distort international law, confuse the public, sow discord and disrupt the regional situation.”

“China has historical rights in the South China Sea. China’s sovereignty and related rights and interests in the South China Sea have been established in a long period of history and are consistent with international law,” Wang said.

The vast maritime region has been tense

because six other governments claim all or part of the strategically vital waterway, through which an estimated \$5 trillion in global trade travels each year and which holds rich but fast-declining fishing stocks and significant undersea oil and gas deposits.

The United States holds no official position on who owns what features in the sea, but maintains the absolute right to operate in what it insists are international waters.

That includes sailing Navy warships past Chinese-held features, including artificial islands equipped with airstrips and other military facilities.

The U.S. report said Beijing’s claim “has no legal basis and is asserted by (China) without specificity as to the nature or geographic extent of the ‘historic rights’ claimed.”

The U.S. study also said that China’s claim to sovereignty covering more than 100 features submerged at high tide were inconsistent with international law, that its enclosure of vast areas of the sea was unsupported by international law and that its practice of claiming maritime zones based on labeling each island group as a whole was “not permitted by international law.”

China’s “expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea are inconsistent with international law as reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” the study said.

“The overall effect of these maritime claims is that (China) unlawfully claims sovereignty or some form of exclusive jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea,” it said.

## Passenger injured as Navy helicopter crash-lands in Va.

*The Virginian-Pilot*

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — A Navy helicopter with three people on board crashed after the pilot attempted an emergency landing Wednesday morning in Isle of Wight County, according to law enforcement officials.

Virginia State Police were called to the scene, an open field

on private property, at 11:31 a.m., said Sgt. Michelle Anaya.

“As the helicopter pilot was making the emergency landing, the momentum of the craft caused it to slide into the wood line,” Anaya said. “The craft struck several trees, sustaining damage to the front cockpit area and both sides of the landing

skids.”

Three Navy personnel were on board — two pilots and a passenger. The pilots were uninjured and the passenger was transported to the hospital with minor injuries, Anaya said.

State troopers and the Isle of Wight Sheriff’s Office responded to the scene.

The U.S. Navy Investigation and Security personnel have taken over the investigation. The Navy will investigate the cause of the accident, said Lt. Cmdr. Rob Myer, spokesman for Naval Air Force Atlantic.

The Federal Aviation Administration is not investigating the crash, Anaya said.

# Low vaccination rate among kids a concern

*Associated Press*

Distrust, misinformation and delays because of the holidays and bad weather have combined to produce what authorities say are alarmingly low COVID-19 vaccination rates in U.S. children ages 5 to 11.

As of Tuesday, just over 17% were fully vaccinated, more than two months after shots became available to the age group. While Vermont is at 48%, California is just shy of 19% and Mississippi is at only 5%.

Vaccinations among the elementary school set surged after the shots were introduced in the fall, but the numbers have crept up slowly since then, and omicron's explosive spread appears to have had little effect.

The low rates are "very disturbing," said Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director for

the Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. "It's just amazing."

Parents who hesitate "are taking an enormous risk and continuing to fuel the pandemic," Murphy said.

Hospitalizations of children under 18 with COVID-19 in the United States have climbed to their highest levels on record in the past few weeks. Many have other conditions made worse by COVID-19, though many aren't sick enough to require intensive care.

The low vaccination rates and rising hospitalizations are "a gut punch, especially when we've been working so hard to keep these kids well," said Dr. Natasha Burgert, a pediatrician in Overland Park, Kan.

The vaccines have proved highly safe and effective at reducing the risk of severe illness, hospitalization and death.

Overall, 63% of Americans are fully vaccinated. Among children 12 to 17, the rate is 54%.

COVID-19 shots for young children have been authorized in at least 12 countries. In Canada, where Pfizer shots were cleared for ages 5 to 11 in November, just 2% are fully vaccinated.

Snowstorms, tornadoes and other heavy weather in December are believed to have slowed the pace of vaccination in the U.S., along with the busy holiday season. Also, some parents are distrustful because the vaccine is so new, and many have other concerns.

# Soaring virus cases renew US debate on mask rules

*Associated Press*

Officials across the United States are again weighing how and whether to impose mask mandates as COVID-19 infections soar and the American public grows ever wearier of pandemic-related restrictions.

Much of the debate centers around the nation's schools, some of which have closed due to infection-related staffing issues. In a variety of places, mask mandates are being lifted or voted down.

The changes come as the federal government assesses the supply of medical-grade respirator face coverings, such as N95 or KN95 masks. During a briefing Wednesday, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said officials were "strongly considering options to make more high-quality masks available to all Americans," noting the government has a stockpile of more than 750 million N95 masks.

The best mask "is the one that you will wear and the one you can keep on all day long,

that you can tolerate in public indoor settings," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On Monday, officials in Wyoming's capital city voted to end a mask mandate for students and teachers that had been in place since September. The Cheyenne school district also reduced COVID-19 isolation requirements, voting to require that only people with symptoms and positive tests — not just those exposed — need to stay home for five days and mask for five days thereafter.

The University of Missouri's governing board on Tuesday rejected the university system president's request to temporarily require masks on the Columbia campus, as well as a mandate specific to classrooms and labs.

A school board meeting was canceled Monday in Wichita, Kan., after three new members refused to wear masks for a swearing-in ceremony. Meanwhile in the Topeka area, elected officials rejected a plea to mandate masks, urging people to be cautious but

saying they were not ready for a requirement.

Some jurisdictions are making the move on their own toward more stalwart masking policies, including requiring higher-grade mask materials.

Last week, the University of Arizona announced it would require a medical-grade mask in indoor spaces where social distancing is not possible. The school said on its website that it no longer considers cloth masks to be adequate, although a cloth mask can be worn over a medical-grade mask to improve fit and increase protection.

A new indoor mask mandate takes effect Wednesday in New Orleans ahead of the Mardi Gras season. Louisiana's statewide coronavirus daily hospitalization numbers have increased sevenfold in three weeks — a spike that has strained hospitals, where emergency room waits are sometimes as long as 12 hours, according to the city's health director, Dr. Jennifer Avegno.

# Unemployment claims in US increase by 23K to 230K

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week to the highest level since mid-November.

U.S. jobless claims climbed by 23,000 last week to 230,000, still low by historic standards. The four-week moving average, which smooths out week-to-week blips, was

up nearly 6,300 to almost 211,000.

The weekly applications, a proxy for layoffs, have now risen four of the last five weeks, possibly a sign that the omicron variant is having an impact on the job market, which has bounced back strongly from last year's coronavirus recession.

Altogether, 1.6 million people were collecting jobless aid in the week that ended

Jan. 1.

Companies are holding onto workers at a time when it's difficult to find replacements. Employers posted 10.6 million job openings in November, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November — a sign that they are confident enough to look something better.

# Senate Dems change strategy on voting bill

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats are trying to force a public showdown over their sweeping elections legislation, aiming to launch debate on a key party priority even though there's no assurance the bill will come to a vote.

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer outlined the plan in a memo obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, on the eve of President Joe Biden's visit to meet privately with Senate Democrats about the path forward. It still leaves the Democrats in need of a way to force a vote on the legislation, now blocked by a Republican filibuster.

"We will finally have an opportunity to debate voting rights legislation — something that Republicans have thus far denied," Schumer wrote in the memo to his Democratic colleagues, which described a workaround to avoid a Republican filibuster that for months has blocked formal debate over the legislation on the Senate floor. "Senators can finally make clear to the American people where they stand on protecting our democracy and preserving the right of every eligible American to cast a ballot."

The strategy does little to resolve the central problem Democrats face — they lack Republican support to pass the elec-

tions legislation on a bipartisan basis, but also don't have support from all 50 Democrats for changing the Senate rules to allow passage on their own. But the latest tactic could create an off-ramp from their initial approach, which was to force a vote by Monday on Senate filibuster changes as a way to pressure Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, and Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, to go along.

By setting up a debate, Schumer will achieve the Democrats' goal of shining a spotlight that spurs senators to say where they stand. The floor debate could stretch for days and carry echoes of civil rights bat-

tles a generation ago that led to some of the most famous filibusters in Senate history.

"I wouldn't want to delude anybody into thinking this is easy," Schumer told reporters Wednesday. He called the push an "uphill fight."

Democrats have vowed to counteract a wave of new state laws, inspired by Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election, that have made it harder to vote. But after an initial flurry of activity, the Democrats' efforts have stalled in the narrowly divided Senate, where they lack the 60 votes to overcome a Republican filibuster, leading to their calls for a rule change.

## Official warns Afghanistan is facing 'tsunami of hunger'

*Associated Press*

BRUSSELS — Afghanistan is facing a "tsunami of hunger" because of a shortage of funds that's needed to keep the supply of food intact as the country teeters on the edge of economic ruin with more than half of the population struggling to eat this winter, a senior official with the United Nations World Food Program said Thursday.

In an interview with The Associated Press, WFP leader in Afghanistan Mary-Ellen McGroarty urged the international community to put humanitarian necessity above political discussions and avoid disaster by making sure that billions in aid keep reaching the Taliban-run country.

According to the U.N. humanitarian organization, 22.8 million people face acute food shortages, including 8.7 million close to starvation.

"We don't have enough money going into 2022," said McGroarty during a stop in Brussels. "What we call all the humanitarian sector in Afghan-

istan needs \$4.4 billion for the next 12 months to mount a comprehensive response. And for WFP, we need \$2.6 billion to do the minimum we need to be doing in 2022."

Combined with the COVID-19 crisis and a drought, the shortage of money has had catastrophic consequences amid a dramatic surge of inflation, with the price of food going up by over 50% in the last couple of months.

McGroarty said she recently met with old farmers during a trip to the northeastern province of Badakhshan, who told her they have never been confronted with such an ordeal despite the experience of living through 19 governments.

"They have never before, despite the decades of conflict, had to stand in a line with their hands out for humanitarian support," she said. "This is the first time ever for them, and they told me the hunger is worse than the conflict that they have lived through over five decades."

## House minority leader says he won't cooperate with 1/6 panel

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy is refusing a request by the House panel investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection to submit to an interview and turn over records pertaining to the deadly riot.

The panel is seeking firsthand details from members of Congress on then-President Donald Trump's actions on the day hundreds of his supporters brutally beat police, stormed the building and interrupted the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

McCarthy, R-Calif., issued a statement Wednesday refusing to cooperate with the House committee. He said the investigation was not legitimate and accused the panel of "abuse of power."

Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, requested that McCarthy provide information to the nine-member panel about his conversations with Trump "before, during and after" the riot. The request also seeks information about McCarthy's com-

munications with then-White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in the days before the attack.

"We also must learn about how the President's plans for January 6th came together, and all the other ways he attempted to alter the results of the election," Thompson said in his letter.

It remains unclear whether the panel will be able to gain testimony from McCarthy or any other congressional allies of Trump. While the committee has considered subpoenaing fellow lawmakers, that would be an extraordinary move and could run up against legal and political challenges.

The committee acknowledged the sensitive and unusual nature of its request as it proposed a meeting with McCarthy on either Feb. 3 or 4.

"The Select Committee has tremendous respect for the prerogatives of Congress and the privacy of its Members," Thompson wrote. "At the same time, we have a solemn responsibility to investigate fully the facts and circumstances of these events."

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**'Old Seven' bridge reopens after restoration**

**FL** MARATHON — A segment of a 110-year-old Florida Keys bridge has reopened to pedestrians and bicyclists following a \$44 million restoration project.

Rehabilitation construction on the oft-photographed 2.2-mile span of the Old Seven Mile Bridge began in late 2017.

"What made the project challenging was that it is a historic bridge, and we had to restore the bridge to the same aesthetic fabric as the original," said project manager Tony Sabbag, a Florida Department of Transportation contractor.

Nicknamed "Old Seven," the bridge was completed in 1912 as part of Henry Flagler's Florida Keys Over-Sea Railroad that connected the Keys with each other and mainland Florida. The span is the gateway to historic Pigeon Key, a tiny island beneath it that once housed 400 railroad construction workers.

**Officials: Fireworks may have started church blaze**

**LA** LEESVILLE — Carelessly discarded New Year's fireworks may have started a blaze that destroyed much of a church, the Louisiana State Fire Marshal's Office says.

Investigators haven't determined a definite cause of the fire at Christian Living Fellowship in Leesville, but did find remnants of fireworks in the area where the fire started between a shed next to a church wall, spokeswoman Ashley Rodrigue said.

Pastor Bobby Ganaway told The American Press that he re-

ceived an alert of possible trespassers just after 1 a.m. on Jan. 1 but nobody was there when security volunteers arrived.

Fire was spreading from the shed to the church when firefighters responded to an alarm about 2:30 a.m., authorities said.

Insurance adjusters have said the building may have to be gutted because of water damage, Ganaway said.

**Arrest made in drive-thru killing over phony bill**

**CA** LOS ANGELES — An arrest was made in the killing of a Taco Bell employee who was shot at the drive-thru window of a South Los Angeles location, the police chief announced Tuesday.

Chief Michel Moore made the announcement during a vigil for Alejandro Garcia, 41, who was killed Saturday night by a man in a car in the drive-thru lane who tried to pay for a meal with a counterfeit \$20 bill, authorities said. Garcia, who died at the scene, had been working at the restaurant with his 19-year-old son, and the shooting followed an argument that began when Garcia's son refused to accept the bill, investigators said.

**Mountain lion euthanized after entering lobby**

**CO** VAIL — Wildlife officials in Colorado euthanized a mountain lion that entered the main lobby of a condominium building at the base of Vail Ski Resort.

Vail police officers were called to the Lionshead Village area on Saturday after the feline was seen in and near several properties. The mountain lion entered the condo building, and police were able to confine it in a

secure area.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife officers shot the mountain lion with a tranquilizer dart before deciding to euthanize the animal.

"Unfortunately, officers discovered the mountain lion was severely emaciated and in poor condition, which likely contributed to its desire to be in close proximity to humans," the Vail Police Department wrote in a Facebook post Tuesday.

**Body found in burned vehicle at impound lot**

**WI** MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee police are investigating after a body was found in a burned vehicle that had been towed to an impound lot.

The body of the 21-year-old woman was found by a lot attendant several hours after the vehicle crashed and caught fire Sunday morning and was towed.

"The Milwaukee Fire Department takes this matter seriously, and is conducting an internal investigation to determine if standard operating procedures and guidelines were followed during the course of this incident," a fire department statement said.

The woman has not been identified.

**Court upholds father's child cruelty conviction**

**VA** RICHMOND — A state appeals court has upheld the child cruelty conviction of a Virginia father who argued that prosecutors failed to prove he broke the law because "his only purpose was to discipline his child."

James Eberhardt was con-

victed for injuries his 9-year-old daughter received in December 2019 when he hit her with the webbed "belt" portion of a dog leash, causing redness, bruising and linear marks on the backs of her legs and buttocks.

WTOP-FM reported that Eberhardt argued in his appeal that prosecutors hadn't demonstrated the punishment constituted a "beating," or proved the intent required for a child cruelty conviction. The Virginia Court of Appeals affirmed his conviction last month.

Eberhardt, of Dinwiddie County, south of Richmond, was sentenced to five years in prison, with three years and seven months suspended.

**Mayor facing revenge porn charges resigns**

**MD** CAMBRIDGE — A mayor on Maryland's Eastern Shore has resigned, weeks after he was charged with distributing revenge porn online.

Andrew Bradshaw, 32, who was the youngest mayor in Cambridge's history when he took office last year, submitted his resignation around noon Monday, according to a statement the city posted on Facebook. Bradshaw said in a statement Monday that he decided to resign after "a period of difficult self-reflection," news outlets reported.

Bradshaw is accused of posting nude photos of a woman he was no longer in a romantic relationship with using multiple Reddit accounts. He was arrested in November and charged with 50 counts of distributing revenge porn.

A trial is set for April.

— From wire reports



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**Reporting World, National and Military News**

# Draft picks key to Bengals' resurgence

Associated Press

Many in Cincinnati scoffed when the Bengals passed on elite Oregon offensive tackle Penei Sewell to take Ja'Marr Chase with the fifth-overall pick in the NFL Draft last spring.

Cincinnati sorely needed offensive line help, and Sewell seemed an obvious choice. Chase, like Sewell, sat out the pandemic-shortened 2020 season and was perhaps less of a sure thing.

It's hard to quibble with that call now.

After shaking off some rust, Chase emerged as a record-breaking star and leading candidate for Offensive Rookie of the Year while helping the Bengals (10-7) get to the postseason for the first time since 2015.

"I still have a lot more to do," Chase said. "Hopefully I can break some playoff records."

The team used the last two drafts wisely to add some critical parts and proven winners who drove this worst-to-first AFC North champion team. Taking Burrow with the first overall pick in the 2020 draft was a no-brainer. He won the Heisman Trophy and a

national championship with LSU in 2019. His teammates — half joking, half not — nicknamed him "Joey Franchise."

Receiver Tee Higgins, who won a national championship at Clemson, was a 2020 second-round pick. He's logged nearly 2,000 receiving yards in his first two NFL seasons. Third-rounder Logan Wilson is the Bengals' best linebacker.

Then came Chase, reuniting him with former LSU teammate Burrow.

"Well, when we drafted (Chase), he said he was going to break all the records, and it was hard to know if that was going to be true or not," Cincinnati coach Zac Taylor said. "He's put himself in a position to do that, not just relying on his talent, but becoming a professional, really since day one and in his consistency over the course of the season."

Chase broke the team record for receiving yards in a season (Chad Johnson had 1,440 in 2007), finishing the 17-game schedule with 1,455 — just 18 yards short of the NFL rookie record held by Houston's Bill Groman (1,473 in 1960).

"Between Joe and Ja'Marr and I, our last

couple first-round picks all have national championship rings," noted tackle Jonah Williams, the team's top 2019 draft pick from Alabama. "And there's a bunch of other guys on the team, too, who have been there."

Guard Jackson Carman, a 2021 second-rounder who also has a national championship ring from Clemson, was the sixth man on a much-improved O-line. Kicker Evan McPherson, a fifth-round 2021 pick out of Florida, made 85% of his field-goal attempts — including 9 of 11 from 50 yards or more — and could give the Bengals stability there for years.

Taylor said taking proven winners has paid off.

"A lot of them have playoff experience that's very specific to the culture and kind of how we want to build this team," he said. "That's not to say you're not going to take great players that played for other college teams that weren't in the playoffs, but we've got a quarterback and some other guys who have been in these types of moments before."

# Running game gives Bills' offense a new dimension

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Having played with both Patrick Mahomes and Josh Allen, center Mitch Morse knows a thing or two about a pass-happy offense.

He also knows the value in running the ball.

"Every team that you see makes the Super Bowl or makes a run for it has to have that dimension of the ground game," Morse said.

In that case, perhaps the Buffalo Bills have found their running game in the nick of time.

The team can thank its surging ground game for its late-season run to winning its second consecutive AFC East title. Buffalo heads into its wild-card playoff against New England on Saturday night on a four-game winning streak that is partly due to its renewed commitment to the run.

The shift in philosophy has given the Bills a new dimension to their offense, which they be-

lieve will keep opposing defenses guessing.

"If you're being one-dimensional or you can't really run the ball, it opens the playbook for these coordinators to bring all sorts of stuff that offensive linemen hate to see," Morse said. "So even the threat of run helps."

After struggling to mount a consistent rushing attack for a majority of the season, things have changed for Buffalo over the past four weeks.

The Bills have turned to Devin Singletary more frequently in the backfield, and their faith in the third-year back has been rewarded.

Singletary is coming off his best stretch as a pro, which included a career-best 110 yards against the Atlanta Falcons in Week 17. Buffalo's 233 yards rushing against the Falcons marked the Bills' second-highest total since coach Sean McDermott came to the team in 2017. Singletary had a 40-yard

burst against the New York Jets in Week 18, recording one of his most impressive runs of the year.

Singletary has six touchdowns during the past four weeks, compared to just two in Buffalo's first 13 games.

"Motor has started his engine," said left tackle Dion Dawkins, referring to Singletary by his nickname. "Motor is a younger guy trying to find his overall rhythm, and the fact that he's found it — or, I think there's still way more — and the fact that he's found a certain kick, it just puts his best version of Motor in front of him and helps us."

"Any time that a kid can turn it on and do what he does, shoot, it's special."

After Singletary found the end zone again to close the regular season against New York, the Bills improved to 10-1 when scoring a rushing touchdown this season. They're 11-2 when topping 100 yards on the ground.

They even finished the regular season sixth in the league in rushing, which was a surprise after their early season struggles.

"It's great timing," wide receiver Stefon Diggs said. "You're trying to play your best football toward the end of the season and being able to run the ball first, not having to force to throw the ball every chance or every opportunity. ... Stuff like that takes a lot of pressure off your offense and off your receivers as well. I feel like we love it. The run helps the pass and the pass helps the run."

"It opens up some windows for us, it opens up some doors for us, and it'll continue to grow if we continue to build off it."

The development has benefited both the offensive line and Buffalo's passing game. The O-line has been much improved in recent weeks, showing more consistency in both phases on offense. Allen has not been sacked in his past three games.

# Fox, Kings drop Lakers to halt slump

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — De'Aaron Fox scored 29 points, Chimezie Metu made a clutch three-pointer with 46.7 seconds remaining and the Sacramento Kings ended their longest losing streak of the season by beating the Los Angeles Lakers 125-116 on Wednesday night.

Harrison Barnes added 23 points and seven rebounds for the Kings, who dropped their previous five games. Tyrese Haliburton had 14 points and 10 assists.

LeBron James had 34 points, seven rebounds and six assists for the Lakers. Malik Monk scored 22.

"It was a much-needed win," Sacramento interim coach Alvin Gentry said. "We did a good job of attacking the paint — we ended up with 70 points in the paint. That was the difference in the game. We were able to get the ball to the basket."

Los Angeles trailed by 10 but cut it to 118-116 following a lay-up by James. Fox came back with a 12-footer near the right elbow and, after Russell Westbrook missed a three-pointer,

Metu made his big shot from the top of the arc.

Avery Bradley missed a three for the Lakers, and Haliburton made a pair of free throws to finish the scoring.

Los Angeles repeatedly built sizeable leads but then let them slip away. They led by six at halftime before the Kings took control in the third quarter, outscoring the Lakers 40-23.

**Nets 138, Bulls 112:** Kevin Durant scored 27 points, James Harden had 25 points and a season-high 16 assists and Brooklyn won at Chicago in a matchup between the Eastern Conference's top two teams.

Durant had 17 points in the third quarter. The second-place Nets outscored the East-leading Bulls by 20 in the quarter to silence a raucous crowd and came away with the win with all three of its superstars in the lineup for just the second time this season.

**Knicks 108, Mavericks 85:** RJ Barrett scored 32 points, Mitchell Robinson had a season-high 19 and host New York snapped Dallas' winning streak at six games.

Robinson threw down three dunks in a powerful third quarter for the Knicks, who won for the fourth time in five games and returned to .500 at 21-21. He shot 9-for-10 from the field and had 10 rebounds.

**Hornets 109, 76ers 98:** Gordon Hayward made his first nine shots and scored 30 points and Charlotte won at Philadelphia to snap a 16-game losing streak in the series.

Hayward was 9-for-9 in first half — that included four three-pointers — for 22 points. Terry Rozier added 22 points, and Miles Bridges had 21. The Hornets hadn't beaten the 76ers since Nov. 2, 2016.

**Cavaliers 111, Jazz 91:** Lamar Stevens scored 15 of his career-high 23 points in the third quarter in Cleveland's victory at short-handed Utah.

Darius Garland had his first triple-double with 11 points, a career-high 15 assists and a career-high 10 rebounds. Lauri Markkanen added 20 points, Kevin Love had 16 and Eric Mobley finished with 15 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists. The Cavs improved to 3-1 on their

six-game trip.

**Celtics 119, Pacers 100:** Jaylen Brown scored 34 points, Jayson Tatum added 33 and Boston won at Indiana.

The Celtics snapped a six-game road losing streak, beating the Pacers for the second time in three days and the fourth straight time.

**Wizards 112, Magic 106:** Kyle Kuzma had 19 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists to help host Washington beat Orlando.

The Wizards have won three in a row, and they won for a second consecutive night without star guard Bradley Beal, who was out because of health and safety protocols.

**Heat 115, Hawks 91:** Tyler Herro had 21 points and Miami scored the first 16 points of the second half to break open a game to win at Atlanta.

Herro added 11 assists and Caleb Martin had 18 points to help the Heat finish 4-2 on a trip.

**Rockets 128, Spurs 124:** Eric Gordon had 31 points and Houston won at San Antonio to snap a three-game skid.

## Marchand's hat trick helps push Bruins past Canadiens

Associated Press

BOSTON — Brad Marchand scored twice 15 seconds apart in the first period and completed the hat trick with a short-handed goal in the second, leading the Boston Bruins to a 5-1 victory over the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday night.

Curtis Lazar also scored for Boston and Urho Vaakanainen got his first NHL goal. Linus Ullmark stopped 24 shots as he tries to hold onto his spot in the goalie rotation with Tuukka Rask, the winningest goalie in franchise history, expected to make his season debut on Thursday night.

It was the Bruins' third

straight win — their sixth in seven games — and the third time in a row they have opened a four-goal lead. Michael Pezetta scored midway through the second period for Montreal to make it 4-1 and spoil Ullmark's shutout bid.

Jake Allen gave up two goals on seven shots in the first 17:11 before he was replaced by Sam Montembeault, who stopped 31 of 34 shots the rest of the way.

**Stars 5, Kraken 2:** Joe Pavelski had two goals and three assists for his first career five-point game, Jason Robertson scored to extend his NHL-best home point streak to 11 games and host Dallas beat Seattle.

Roope Hintz had a goal and two assists and Jani Hakanpaa added an empty-netter for the Stars, who have won their last five home games and 13 of 14 at the American Airlines Center. Jake Oettinger stopped 23 shots.

Jared McCann had his team-leading 15th goal and also assisted on Calle Jarnkrok's power-play goal for the Kraken, who are 0-5-1 in their last six games. Philipp Grubauer had 20 saves.

**Coyotes 2, Maple Leafs 1:** Ryan Dzingel scored two goals, Karel Vejmelka stopped 45 shots and host Arizona beat Toronto.

Dzingel, playing his first game since Dec. 10, matched his previous season output of two goals. Auston Matthews scored 14 seconds into the third period (24th) from Jake Muzzin and Michael Bunting. The goal set a franchise record for Matthews, who grew up in nearby Scottsdale — his ninth consecutive road-game goal, breaking the record previously held by Babe Dye, Frank Mahovlich and Daniel Marios.

Toronto goalie Petr Mrazek had 16 saves while playing just his second game since November and his fourth of the season. He missed 20 games with a groin injury.

# No. 8 Duke downs Wake with Coach K sidelined

Associated Press

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Paolo Banchero had 24 points and eighth-ranked Duke hit 13 straight shots to blow it open after halftime and beat Wake Forest 76-64 on Wednesday night with Hall of Fame coach Mike Krzyzewski sidelined by illness.

Fellow freshman A.J. Griffin had a season-high 22 points in his first start, the next steps in his growth after missing the majority of the past two seasons in high school due to injury. That helped the Blue Devils bounce back from a weekend home loss to Miami, along with securing a win while Krzyzewski was out with what the school called a “non-COVID-related virus.”

Associate head coach Jon Scheyer — designated as Krzyzewski’s successor when he retires this spring — worked as acting coach.

“I think there was a lot of motivation coming off that Miami game with things that we can do better,” Scheyer said.

Banchero and Griffin led the way as Duke (13-2, 3-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) suddenly stretched out a two-possession lead in the final minute of the first half — then carried a hot hand into the second that wobbled the Demon Deacons (13-4, 3-3) for good.

“It felt like kind of how we played at the beginning of the season,” junior Wendell Moore Jr. said. “It was a lot of fun — guys sharing the ball, a lot of guys smiling. You’re not even knowing who’s scoring. You just know Duke’s scoring.”

The Blue Devils made their last four shots of the first half, then roared out of the break by hitting their first nine.

Alondes Williams scored 25 points for Wake Forest.

**No. 10 Michigan State 71, Minnesota 69:** Joey Hauser made a low-post shot with 0.1 seconds left, lifting the host Spartans over the Golden Gophers for their ninth straight win.

Michigan State (14-2, 5-0 Big Ten) had the ball with 18.1 seconds left, and A.J. Hoggard drove into the lane in the final seconds and set up Hauser for the final basket.

Spartans freshman Max Christie had 16 points, Gabe Brown scored 13 and Tyson Walker added 10.

Minnesota (10-4, 1-4) was very competitive throughout the game and had opportunities to pull off the upset.

The Golden Gophers’ chances to win were hurt when Eric Curry injured his left ankle with a minute left, putting him on the bench with 19 points.

Eyljah Stephens scored 18 points for Minnesota and made four free throws late, tying it at 69.

**No. 12 LSU 64, Florida 58:** Darius Days scored 20 points about 25 miles from his hometown and Eric Gaines added 15 in his second start of the season to lead the Tigers past the host Gators.

LSU (15-1, 3-1 Southeastern Conference) won its first game without starting point guard Xavier Pinson, who sat out with a sprained knee. Gaines helped pick up the slack, scoring eight points in the second half and going 4-for-5 on free throws down the stretch.

Florida (9-6, 0-3) lost for the sixth time in nine games and fell to 0-3 in league play for the first time since the 1980-81 season.

The Gators’ biggest issue was at the free-throw line. They missed 11 from the charity stripe, including seven of nine down the stretch.

Colin Castleton led Florida with 19 points and nine rebounds.

**No. 14 Villanova 64, No. 17 Xavier 60:** Collin Gillespie scored 21 points, Justin Moore had 16 and the Wildcats defeated the host Musketeers.

Moore, the reigning Big East player of the week, scored 10 points in the second half and finished with nine rebounds to help Villanova (12-4, 5-1 Big East) win its fifth straight. Eric Dixon added 15 points and 10 boards.

Paul Scruggs and Nate Johnson each scored 15 for Xavier (12-3, 2-2), which trailed by 12 with 10 minutes left before rallying.

Scruggs hit two key three-pointers, including one that tied the score at 56 with 2:16 left. But then Moore made a layup, Brandon Slater sank two free throws and the Wildcats were back in front by four with a minute to play. Moore sealed it by hitting two foul shots with six seconds left.

“Really proud of our guys, against a great Xavier team,” Villanova coach Jay Wright said. “We knew there was no way they were going to lay down, and they didn’t. They were great in the second half. We just gutted it out.”

# Djokovic in Australian Open draw for now

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic now knows he’ll face fellow Serbian Miomir Kecmanovic in the first round of his Australian Open title defense, if Djokovic is allowed to play.

His visa status dominated attention until the moment the draw was conducted Thursday, after a postponement of 75 minutes, to determine the brackets for the men’s and women’s singles draws at the first major tennis tournament of 2022.

He was still in limbo after it.

The Australian immigration minister was still considering whether to deport the nine-time and defending Australian Open champion, who is not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Top-ranked Djokovic had his visa canceled on arrival in Melbourne last week when his vaccination exemption was rejected, but he won a legal battle on procedural grounds that allowed him to stay in the country.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke has been considering the question since a judge reinstated Djokovic’s visa last Monday. The tournament starts next Monday.

If he’s allowed to stay, Djokovic’s bid for a men’s record 21st major title could mean a quarterfinal against No. 7-ranked Matteo Berrettini and possibly a semifinal against Rafael Nadal or third-seeded Alexander Zverev.

He is tied with Nadal and Roger Federer on 20 Grand Slam titles, missing a chance for the all-time record when he lost the U.S. Open final to Daniil Medvedev last year.

Medvedev, who also ended Djokovic’s run at a calendar-year Grand Slam with that win in New York, is on the opposite end of the draw as the No. 2 seed in Australia. A finalist here last year, he could meet local favorite Nick Kyrgios in the second round, and also No. 5 Andrey Rublev, No. 9 Felix Auger-Aliassime, John Isner in his quarter of the draw. He’s seeded to meet No. 4 Stefanos Tsitsipas in the semis.

On the women’s side, top-ranked Ash Barty and defending champion Naomi Osaka ended up in the same section of the draw, meaning two of the best players in the tournament could meet in a fourth-round match that could have the feeling of a final.

After that, No. 5 Maria Sakkari or No. 9 Ons Jabeur could be waiting in the quarterfinals.