

## Extremists in US ranks grow significantly

By NANCY MONTGOMERY  
*Stars and Stripes*

The number of people with military backgrounds identified in a database of domestic extremists has quadrupled in the past decade, a University of Maryland study found.

From 1990 through November 2021, at least 458 people affiliated with the military committed criminal acts that were motivated by political, economic, social or religious goals, according to the study “Extremism in the Ranks and After.”

The report, which came out in December, preceded the news last week that the Defense Department Inspector General will review the military’s performance in vetting recruits for extremism.

Until 2010, an average of just less than seven current or former service members were added each year to a database the researchers used, the Profiles of

Individual Radicalization in the United States.

Since 2010, though, the average has ballooned to 28.5 such additions a year.

To be included in PIRUS, a subject must have been radicalized in the United States, adhered to or espoused views that justify the use of illegal means to achieve their goals and committed a criminal offense that was clearly motivated by their ideological views, the report stated.

The attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, is significantly reflected in the spike.

But even without figuring in the numbers from the Capitol riot, an average of 17.7 people a year with military backgrounds have been added to the PIRUS database since 2010, the study said.

“It is important to note that the recent increase in subjects with military backgrounds in PIRUS is largely due to three years in

the data — 2017, 2020, and 2021,” according to the study. “Each of these years were marked by issues that mobilized comparatively large numbers of U.S. extremists.”

Those mass mobilizations included the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017, demonstrations stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice protests, activities based on the 2020 presidential election and the Capitol breach.

Since 1990, about 60% of the offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds plotted acts of violence, according to the study. Just 35.1% of them, however, successfully carried out those plans.

Another 3.8% engaged in spontaneous violent crimes, such as starting fights at protests.

Nearly half of the crimes committed targeted U.S. government entities, the U.S. military or law enforcement, the study found.

More than 30% espoused views of white supremacy, white nationalism, xenophobia or a combination of the three.

“These individuals were affiliated with no fewer than 50 extremist groups, including local skinhead gangs and several national white supremacist organizations,” according to the study.

Rachel VanLandingham, a law professor at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles and a former Air Force prosecutor, suggested on the military law website CAAFLOG that aspects of military culture may make some service members more susceptible to extremist group messaging.

“While military service teaches generic fidelity to the Constitution, our armed forces’ training, laws, customs and operations emphasize to a far, far greater extent the notion of obedience to orders — of fidelity to command,” she wrote.

## Poor state of Afghan air force known to US ahead of departure

By J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. military officials knew months before the fall of the Afghan capital of Kabul that the country’s air force could collapse if contractors and aid were withdrawn, according to a recently declassified government report released Tuesday.

The report offers new insight into Defense Department officials’ awareness of serious problems well before President Joe Biden set an Aug. 31 deadline for a full withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.

“Afghanistan is currently unable to support and sustain its equipment and capabilities, and DOD officials acknowledge that the U.S. needs to continue to support the Afghan air forces and help them build the capacity to do so,” said the report by John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction.

The 2021 time frame for withdrawal of U.S. forces and support personnel was several years before the Pentagon’s own estimates of when the Afghan air force would be able to survive on its own, the report said.

Classification of a SIGAR report is rare, an official in the inspector general’s office told The Associated Press on Monday. When it does happen, though, a declassified version is issued within two months.

But in this case, the military did not allow the January 2021 report to be declassified until a year after it was issued.

The report shows that U.S. military advisers did not think the Afghan air forces had “the ability to sustain themselves” without foreign help.

The United States spent \$8.5 billion between 2010 and 2019 to support and develop the Afghan air force and its elite unit, the Special Mission Wing, it stated.

Although the country’s pilots were able to attack Taliban positions, the air force did not have the ability to maintain its aircraft without expensive foreign contractors, the report said.

The Taliban entered Kabul on Aug. 15 after U.S.-backed President Ashraf Ghani fled the capital. Many of the warnings in the report were borne out during the final days of the Ghani government.

Over the preceding months, Afghan officials had warned that the air force was not able to stand on its own.

Ata Mohammed Noor, a powerful warlord in northern Afghanistan who was a key U.S. ally in the 2001 defeat of the Taliban, said the fleet was overused and under-maintained.

“Most of the planes are back on the ground. They cannot fly and most of them are out of ammunition,” he said, according to the AP.

# Russia denies Ukraine invasion allegations

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Russia's top diplomat angrily rejected U.S. allegations that Moscow was preparing a pretext to invade Ukraine, as Russian troops that are amassed near the Ukraine border launched more drills Monday.

The White House said Friday that U.S. intelligence officials had concluded that Russia had already deployed operatives to rebel-controlled eastern Ukraine to carry out acts of sabotage there and blame them on Ukraine in a "false-flag operation" to create a pretext for possible invasion.

Speaking to reporters Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed the U.S. claim as "total disinformation."

He reaffirmed that Russia expects a written response this week from the U.S. and its

allies to Moscow's request for binding guarantees that NATO will not embrace Ukraine or any other ex-Soviet nations, or station its forces and weapons there.

Washington and its allies firmly rejected Moscow's demands during last week's Russia-U.S. negotiations in Geneva and a related NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels, which were held as an estimated 100,000 Russian troops with tanks and other heavy weapons are massed near Ukraine in what the West fears might be a prelude to an invasion.

Amid the troops buildup, Russia in recent weeks has held a series of war games in regions that border Ukraine.

On Monday, the military announced the launch of another exercise involving armored units stationed in the western part of

Russia that includes 300 combat vehicles. A delegation of U.S. senators is visiting Ukraine to emphasize U.S. support for the country.

"Our bipartisan congressional delegation sends a clear message to the global community: the United States stands in unwavering support of our Ukrainian partners to defend their sovereignty and in the face of persistent Russian aggression," Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said in a statement.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said after the delegation met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that if Russia invades Ukraine "we will impose crippling economic sanctions, but more important we will give the people of Ukraine the arms, lethal arms they need to defend their lives and livelihoods."

## N. Korea: Tactical missiles hit island off eastern coast

**BY DAVID CHOI**

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea claims that a pair of guided missiles launched from Pyongyang on Monday "precisely" hit their island target off the country's eastern coast.

The missiles — the fourth and fifth test-fired by the communist regime so far this month — were launched to evaluate the accuracy of the North's weapons system, the state-run Korean Central News Agency said in a statement Tuesday. The missiles' "accuracy, security and efficiency" were verified, the statement added.

The missiles were fired at 8:50 a.m. and

8:54 a.m. Monday, according to a statement from South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff. The South's military said both were launched from Sunan Airfield in the capital city.

The Joint Chiefs told reporters Monday that it was "paying attention to a possibility that North Korea might have tested the continuous shooting capabilities of a super-large multiple rocket launcher."

The missiles flew approximately 174 miles with a peak altitude of 26 miles before hitting the island, a South Korean military official speaking on the customary condition of anonymity told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

South Korean Ministry of Defense

spokesman Boo Seung-chan described the missiles as "direct and serious military threats," during a press conference Tuesday.

The projectiles appear to be North Korea's KN-24 short-range ballistic missile, which was first tested in 2019, according to Ankit Panda, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"North Korea described it as a tactical guided weapon, implying it's potentially not nuclearized just yet, but I think they would be able to convert this for a tactical nuclear weapons use if they decided to do that down the road," Panda told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

## Hong Kong to kill 2,000 hamsters over virus concerns

*The Washington Post*

HONG KONG — Hong Kong has asked pet shops and owners to hand over close to 2,000 hamsters for culling by authorities, after 11 of the small rodents tested positive for the coronavirus in a pet shop. The territory has also suspended the import of small animals.

Authorities announced the decision Tuesday after the city's health experts found two groups of hamsters, which originated from the Netherlands and arrived in Hong Kong on Dec. 22 and Jan. 7, to be "high-risk" for

carrying the coronavirus.

The hamsters turned over by pet owners will be killed to "cut the transmission chain," health officials said.

"Evidence shows that the hamsters are infected with the COVID-19 virus. It is impossible to quarantine and observe each of them and their incubation period could be long," said Leung Siu-fai, director of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department.

The role of pets in coronavirus transmis-

sion has been studied and debated since the start of the pandemic, but for the most part, infection appears to be a one-way street, with animals catching the virus from their owners and generally recovering quickly.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention called the risk of animals spreading the virus to people "low," but noted that it "can spread from people to animals during close contact." The exception appears to be minks, with cases of humans getting infected by them.

# Sinema, Manchin blasted ahead of debate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Facing stark criticism from civil rights leaders, senators return to Capitol Hill under intense pressure to change their rules and break a Republican filibuster that has hopelessly stalled voting legislation.

The Senate planned to launch debate Tuesday on the voting bill with attention focused intently on two pivotal Democrats — Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, and Joe Manchin, of West Virginia — who were singled out with a barrage of criticism during Martin Luther King Jr. Day events for their refusal to change what civil rights leaders call the “Jim Crow filibuster.”

Martin Luther King III, the son of the late civil rights leader, compared Sinema and Manchin to the white moderate his father wrote about during the civil rights bat-

les of the 1950s and 1960s — a person who declared support for the goals of Black voting rights but not the direct actions or demonstrations that ultimately led to passage of the landmark legislation.

“History will not remember them kindly,” the younger King said, referring to Sinema and Manchin by name.

This will be the fifth time the Senate will try to pass voting legislation this Congress, as elections officials warn that new state laws are making it more difficult to vote in some parts of the country.

The House has passed the package, but the legislation is stalled in the Senate, opposed by Republicans. With a 50-50 split, Democrats have a narrow Senate majority — Vice President Kamala Harris can break a tie — but they lack the 60 votes needed to

overcome the GOP filibuster.

Once reluctant to change Senate rules, President Joe Biden used the King holiday to pressure senators to do just that. But the push from the White House, including Biden’s blistering speech last week in Atlanta comparing opponents to segregationists, is seen as too late, coming as the president ends his first year in office with his popularity sagging.

The Senate is launching what could become a weeklong debate, but the outcome is expected to be no different than past failed votes on the legislation. Biden has been unable to persuade Sinema and Manchin to join other Democrats in changing the rules to lower the 60-vote threshold. In fact, Sinema upstaged the president last week, reiterating her opposition to the rules changes just before Biden arrived on Capitol Hill to court senators’ votes.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., had shelved a promised Monday rules change vote that would have been linked to the King holiday. But he is pressing ahead Tuesday as advocates push to put senators on record, despite the expectation that no bill will pass by week’s end.

Both Manchin and Sinema have argued that preserving the Senate filibuster rules as they are, at the 60-vote threshold to advance legislation, is important for fostering bipartisanship. They also warn of what would happen if Republicans win back majority control, as is distinctly possible this election year, and could easily pass GOP-backed bills. Sinema came under particularly fierce criticism on social media for invoking King as well as the late Rep. John Lewis, whose name is on the legislation, despite her refusal to change the rules.

## King’s son implores Senate to act on voting rights bills

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A day before the U.S. Senate was expected to take up significant legislation on voting rights that is looking likely to fail, Martin Luther King Jr.’s eldest son condemned federal lawmakers over their inaction.

Speaking in Washington on Monday, Martin Luther King III said that while he was marking the federal holiday named for his father, he wasn’t there to celebrate. He was there to call on Congress and President Joe Biden to pass the sweeping legislation that would help ease Republican-led voting restrictions passed in at least 19 states that make it more difficult to cast a ballot.

“Our democracy stands on the brink of serious trouble without these bills,” he said.

Monday’s holiday marked what would have been the 93rd birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was just 39 when

he was assassinated in 1968.

King told of how his father also faced a pushback on civil rights by those who believed the issue could not be solved with legislation. “They told him he had to change hearts first. And he worked hard at that. After all, he was a Baptist preacher. But he knew that when someone is denying you your fundamental rights, conversation and optimism won’t get you very far.”

Two Democrats, Sen. Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, remain opposed to changing Senate rules that would allow for the Democrats to pass the bills without the GOP. Sinema has argued that bipartisanship is needed to address the issue, but King countered that significant milestones, including the 14th Amendment that granted citizenship to former slaves, passed Congress without bipartisan support.

## Microsoft ups its game, buys Activision Blizzard

Associated Press

Microsoft is paying nearly \$70 billion for Activision Blizzard, the maker of Candy Crush and Call of Duty, as it seeks an edge in the fiercely competitive businesses of mobile gaming and virtual-reality technology.

The all-cash \$68.7 billion deal will turn Microsoft, maker of the Xbox gaming system, into one of the world’s largest video game companies and help it compete with tech rivals such as Meta, formerly Facebook, in creating immersive virtual worlds for both work and play.

If the deal survives scrutiny from U.S. and European regulators in the coming months, it also could be one of the priciest tech acquisitions in history since Dell bought data-storage company EMC in 2016 for around \$60 billion.

Activision has been buffeted for months by allegations of mis-

conduct and unequal pay, and that was addressed Tuesday by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in a conference call with investors.

“The culture of our organization is my number one priority,” Nadella said, adding that “it’s critical for Activision Blizzard to drive forward on its” commitments to improve its workplace culture.

Activision disclosed last year it was being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission over complaints of workplace discrimination.

Last year, Microsoft spent \$7.5 billion to acquire ZeniMax Media, the parent company of video game publisher Bethesda Softworks, which is behind popular video games The Elder Scrolls, Doom and Fallout.

Microsoft, based in Redmond, Wash., said both acquisitions will help beef up its Xbox Game Pass game subscription service.

# US to fight fires by thinning forest 'hotspots'

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — The Biden administration plans to significantly expand efforts to stave off catastrophic wildfires that have torched areas of the U.S. West by more aggressively thinning forests around areas called "hotspots" where nature and neighborhoods collide.

As climate change heats up and dries out the West, administration officials said they have crafted a \$50 billion plan to more than double the use of controlled fires and logging to reduce trees and other vegetation that serves as tinder in the most at-risk areas.

They said work will begin this

year in regions where out-of-control blazes have wiped out neighborhoods and sometimes entire communities — including California's Sierra Nevada mountains, the Rocky Mountain foothills of Colorado and portions of Oregon and Washington state, officials said.

"You're going to have forest fires. The question is how catastrophic do those fires have to be," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told the Associated Press in advance of a planned public announcement of the administration's wildfire strategy at a Tuesday event in Phoenix.

"The time to act is now if we want to ultimately over time

change the trajectory of these fires," Vilsack said.

Vilsack acknowledged that the new effort will also require a "paradigm shift" within the U.S. Forest Service, from an agency devoted to stamping out fires, into one that uses what some native Americans call "good fire" on forests and rangeland to prevent even larger blazes.

Forest Service planning documents indicate the work will focus on "hotspots" that make up only 10% of the fire-prone areas across the U.S. but account for 80% of risk to communities because of their population densities and locations.

The recently-passed federal

infrastructure bill put a down payment on the initiative — \$3.2 billion over five years that Vilsack said will get work going quickly.

Wildfire expert John Abatzoglou said lessening fire dangers on the amount of land envisioned under the administration's plan is a "lofty goal" that represents even more acreage than burned over the past 10 years across the West. But Abatzoglou, a University of California Merced engineering professor, said the focus on wildfire hazards closest to communities makes sense.

"Our scorecard for fire should be about lives saved rather than acres that didn't burn," he said.

## Tornado victim's family sues Amazon in Illinois

Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — The family of a delivery driver who died last month when a tornado collapsed the Amazon facility in central Illinois where he worked filed a wrongful death lawsuit Monday in Madison County.

The action on behalf of Austin McEwen, 26, claims that Amazon failed to warn employees of dangerous weather or provide safe shelter before a tornado slammed the Edwardsville facility Dec. 10, killing McEwen and five others. It is believed to be the first legal action taken in response to the deaths. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has opened an investigation.

McEwen's parents, Randy and Alice McEwen, allege that Amazon administrators knew severe weather was imminent but had no emergency plan and didn't evacuate employees.

"Sadly, it appears that Amazon placed profits first during this holiday season instead of the safety of our son and the other five," Alice McEwen said at a news conference Monday.

Amazon "carelessly required individuals ... to continue working up until the moments before the tornado struck," the lawsuit says, and "improperly directed" McEwen and colleagues to shelter in a restroom, which it says the company knew or should have known wasn't safe.

"They had people working up to the point of no return," said Jack Casciato, the McEwens' lawyer.

Amazon spokeswoman Kelly Nantel released a statement that countered that the lawsuit "misunderstands key facts" including the differences among severe weather alerts and the condition and safety of the building.

"This was a new building less than four years old, built in compliance with all applicable building codes, and the local teams were following the weather conditions closely," Nantel said. "Severe weather watches are common in this part of the country and, while precautions are taken, are not cause for most businesses to close down. We believe our team did the right thing as soon as a warning was issued."

## Despite volcano blast, Tonga avoids widespread disaster

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — The blast from the volcano could be heard in Alaska, and the waves crossed the ocean to cause an oil spill and two drownings in Peru. The startling satellite images resembled a massive nuclear explosion.

And yet, despite sitting almost on top of the volcano that erupted so violently on Saturday, the Pacific nation of Tonga appears to have avoided the widespread disaster that many initially feared.

Perhaps the biggest problem is the ash that has coated the main island and transformed it into a gray moonscape, contaminating the rainwater that people rely on to drink. New Zealand's military is sending fresh water and other supplies, but said Tuesday that the ash covering Tonga's main runway will delay the flight at least another day. Tonga has so far reported two deaths, and concerns remain over the fate of people on two smaller islands that were hard hit. Communications have been down, making assessments more difficult.

But on the main island of Ton-

gatapu, at least, life is slowly returning to normal. The tsunami that swept over coastal areas after the eruption was frightening for many but rose only about 2.7 feet, allowing most to escape.

"We did hold grave fears, given the magnitude of what we saw in that unprecedented blast," said Katie Greenwood, head of delegation in the Pacific for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "Fortunately, in those major population centers we are not seeing the catastrophic effect we thought might happen, and that's very good news."

Greenwood, who is based in Fiji and has been talking with people in Tonga by satellite phone, said an estimated 50 homes were destroyed on Tongatapu but that nobody needed to use shelters.

"There has been no contact from the Ha'apai Group of islands, and we are particularly concerned about two small low-lying islands — Mango and Fonoi — following surveillance flights confirming substantial property damage," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Woman loses appeal for slipping on lemon at bar**

**MI** DETROIT — A woman who said she was injured after slipping on a lemon wedge failed to revive her lawsuit against a popular Detroit tavern.

The Michigan Court of Appeals affirmed a lower court's decision in favor of Old Shillelagh.

Connie Nagel said she slipped on a lemon wedge and fell in 2018, injuring herself. She claimed to have seen several people slipping on spilled drinks and that the lemon was on the floor for a while after her fall.

But the appeals court said Nagel failed to show that Old Shillelagh staff actually knew that the lemon had created a dangerous condition.

**Announcers fired due to mocking athletes' weight**

**ME** HOULTON — Two radio announcers calling a Maine high school girl's basketball game were fired after they mocked players for being fat.

The comments were made by two broadcasters on the Houlton radio station WHOU-FM during a game between teams from two northern Maine towns that border Canada, the Portland Press Herald reported.

One commenter called two players on the court "extremely overweight," and that was followed by additional derogatory comments and laughter. The comments were captured in a video posted on Twitter.

Radio station owner Fred Grant said he fired announcers Jim Carter and Steve Shaw after

the broadcast.

**Students get sick after eating edibles with THC**

**CT** NEW HAVEN — Five students at a Connecticut magnet school were taken to the hospital as a precaution after eating chocolate containing the main psychoactive ingredient in marijuana and becoming ill, officials said.

A 13-year-old student at the Bishop Woods School in New Haven gave the edibles to four other students, ages 12 and 13, acting Police Chief Renee Dominguez said. Some of the students vomited and some became lethargic, but all were conscious and alert when taken to the hospital, Mayor Justin Elicker said at a news conference. All are expected to fully recover.

It was not clear how the student obtained the edibles, which were in packaging that listed the THC content and tested positive for THC, Elicker said.

**4 manatees flown to aquarium for treatment**

**FL** ORLANDO — SeaWorld Orlando transferred four manatee calves to an Ohio aquarium for rehabilitation, freeing space to treat more of the threatened sea mammals that have been dying in Florida at an alarming rate.

SeaWorld said DHL Express transported the manatees from its rescue and rehabilitation center to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium. DHL donated its services, including the flight.

SeaWorld said it has been getting a record number of manatees

needing treatment at its center, one of only five critical care facilities for manatees in the United States. Over 1,000 manatees died in Florida during 2021, mostly from starvation. Water pollution from agricultural, urban and other sources has triggered algae blooms that have decimated seagrass beds on which manatees depend.

**Port welcomes its biggest container ship**

**MA** BOSTON — The largest container ship to call on the Port of Boston arrived over the weekend following an \$850 million project to make way for larger vessels.

Port officials hailed the arrival of the Ever Fortune as the beginning of a "new chapter" for Boston as it works to keep up with a growing number of U.S. ports accommodating bigger container ships.

The supersized Ever Fortune is the length of three football fields and measures about 160 feet across. It can carry 12,000 metal containers measuring 20 feet long apiece.

The vessel will connect Boston to several ports in East Asia via the Panama Canal, according to the Massachusetts Port Authority.

**Man cited for hunting violations after accident**

**NC** LEWISVILLE — A North Carolina man was charged with multiple hunting offenses after an accident in which a woman was shot in the chest with an arrow as he was handing her a bow, authorities said.

The Winston-Salem Journal

reported the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission said Noah Foster Herrin, 19, and Kaitlin Marie Jones, 18, were coming down from a tree stand when Herrin handed a crossbow loaded with an arrow to Jones. During the transfer, the arrow was released and struck Jones, who was hospitalized, the report said.

N.C. Wildlife Law Enforcement Officer Brandon Lyon said Herrin was charged with hunting deer during the closed part of the season for his activities at the tree stand. He is also charged with four other hunting offenses based on prior activities, including hunting without a license and hunting big game without a license.

**'Ice wine' vintners are celebrating frigid temps**

**NY** OVID — While the vast majority of New Yorkers are hunkering down to ride out frigid temperatures and snow blasts from the latest winter storm, others are seizing on the opportunity to ... pick grapes?

One Finger Lakes-area winemaker jokingly calls it "insanity," but temperatures between 12 and 18 degrees are the ideal conditions for harvesting grapes for ice wine, a dessert variety grown in the region that is known for its sweetness. Freezing the grapes pushes out the water and concentrates the sugars and acids, resulting in more intense flavors.

December's warmer than average temperatures pushed back the harvesting, but a cold spell this month has had the pickers out in numbers.

— From wire reports



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**Reporting World, National and Military News**

# Rams wallop Cards in wild-card playoff

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — The Rams had a 20-point lead on Arizona with 4½ minutes left at raucous SoFi Stadium. Matthew Stafford's 13-year quest for his first playoff victory was all but complete after Los Angeles' dominant performance on both sides of the ball.

The quarterback still took off running on third-and-long through the heart of the Cardinals' defense on a gleeful, perilous scramble that ultimately ended short of a first down.

Even while shouldering enormous postseason pressure, Stafford never forgot to have fun. He was strong enough to carry it all — and the team is riding him on to Tampa Bay.

Stafford passed for 202 yards and two touchdowns and ran for another score in his first playoff win, and the Rams roared out of the wild-card round with a 34-11 victory over Arizona on Monday night.

"What a team effort," Stafford said. "Our defense played outstanding tonight. Special teams basically set up a score ... and we were good enough on of-

fense to score some points and come away with the win. Just happy to be moving on."

Odell Beckham Jr. and Cooper Kupp made touchdown catches for NFC West champion Los Angeles (13-5), which will visit the defending Super Bowl champion Buccaneers on Sunday for a spot in the NFC championship game.

David Long also scored on a 3-yard interception return while the Rams' defense harassed Kyler Murray into a calamitous playoff debut. Los Angeles led 28-0 before cruising in the first playoff game at SoFi, which will host Super Bowl 56 next month.

Stafford was outstanding in his first playoff game with the Rams, completing 13 of his season-low 17 passes without an interception and despite three drops. He scored his first playoff rushing TD since January 2012 on a goal-line sneak, and he coolly directed LA's offense while seizing his first playoff win in a career that began with 12 years in Detroit, where his Lions went 0-3 in the postseason.

"I thought he did a great job leading the way," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "He's still the same great player to me, and he always was before this game. I think it's good so you guys don't have to talk about that anymore. So pleased be able to do this with him. He's our leader out there, and we wouldn't be here without him."

After an inconsistent finish to the regular season, Los Angeles' constellation of big stars came together brilliantly around Stafford on the postseason stage.

Beckham had four catches for 54 yards, including his first career playoff touchdown catch for the Rams' first points. He also threw a 40-yard pass during his own first postseason victory.

Linebacker Von Miller added six tackles and a key early sack in his first postseason appearance since winning the MVP award in Super Bowl 50.

Murray went 19-for-34 for 137 yards and two interceptions for the Cardinals (11-7), who followed their 10-2 start with a 1-5 slide. Arizona lost on the road for only the second time in 10 games this season under coach

Kliff Kingsbury.

"We didn't do anything right the first two quarters," Kingsbury said. "The Rams handled the game and the atmosphere well. ... As an offense, we were just out of sync on a couple of things early that could have changed the game. We never got in a rhythm, and they made some big plays."

James Conner rushed for a TD for the Cardinals, who have one playoff victory since the 2009 season. Murray went 7-for-17 for 28 yards and threw two interceptions in an awful first half that left Arizona trailing 21-0 with just 40 yards of offense before it managed to get its initial first down.

"Losing is one thing, but when you don't even make it competitive is another," Murray said.

Los Angeles went up by three touchdowns when linebacker Troy Reeder's pressure prompted Murray to fling the ball blindly out of the end zone to avoid a safety. Long made a shoe-top interception and took one stride to score the shortest pick-6 in NFL playoff history.

## Murray wins Australian Open match for 1st time since '17

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Five years and five long sets later, five-time Australian Open runner-up Andy Murray finally has won another match at the season-opening Grand Slam tournament.

The former No. 1-ranked Murray, playing thanks to a wild-card invitation as he continues his career comeback from hip operations and thoughts of retirement, beat 21st-seeded Nikoloz Basilashvili 6-1, 3-6, 6-4, 6-7 (5), 6-4 on Tuesday to reach the second round at Melbourne Park.

He lost a five-setter in the first round in 2019 — a match he, and everyone else, thought

might have been his last in Australia — after missing the 2018 edition with an injury. He missed the 2020 tournament with a pelvic injury and last year's event because of COVID-19.

"It's been a tough three, four years. Put in a lot of work to get back here," Murray said. "I've played on this court many times, the atmosphere is incredible. This is the one where I thought I'd played my last.

"Amazing to be back, winning a five-set battle like that. Couldn't ask for more."

Murray beat Basilashvili in a three-hour three-setter last week in Sydney, where he re-

ached the final of the tuneup tournament. This one went almost four hours.

When the 34-year-old Murray clinched it win on his third match point, he turned to the back of the court, closed his eyes and pumped his fists to celebrate. After walking over to his court-side chair and dropping his racket, he returned to the court, punched the air and yelled "Let's go!"

It was Murray's 49th win in an Australian Open singles match, moving him ahead of Andre Agassi and Ivan Lendl into fifth-place all-time. According to the International Tennis Federation, it's the most match wins at a Grand

Slam tournament without winning the title, surpassing Lendl's 48 at Wimbledon. Regardless, match win No. 50 in Australia is the immediate priority. He next plays Taro Daniel, a qualifier from Japan.

Ninth-seeded Felix Auger-Aliassime fended off Emil Ruusuvuori 6-4, 0-6, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4, and Maxime Cressy overcame 20 double-faults to upset fellow American and No. 22-seeded John Isner 7-6 (2), 7-5, 6-7 (4), 6-7 (4), 6-4.

Second-seeded Daniil Medvedev, one of the biggest potential beneficiaries of Novak Djokovic's deportation, had a much more routine first round.

# Booker scores 48 as Suns top Spurs

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Devin Booker had a season-high 48 points and the Phoenix Suns dominated the fourth quarter to defeat the San Antonio Spurs 121-107 Monday night for their fourth straight victory.

Chris Paul added 15 points and 12 assists as the Suns won their sixth straight on the road and fifth consecutive in San Antonio.

Spurs center Jakob Poeltl had 23 points and 14 rebounds, and Dejounte Murray added 18 points.

Booker was 18-for-33 from the field and 5-for-13 on three-pointers in eclipsing his previous high of 38 points, which he collected twice.

Phoenix was without injured starter Deandre Ayton, but reserve center Bismack Biyombo responded with 17 points and 14 rebounds.

**Hawks 121, Bucks 114:** Trae Young scored 30 points for Atlanta, which trailed for much of the game before rallying for a win over Milwaukee, snapping a 10-game home losing streak.

Winning at State Farm Arena for the first time since Nov. 22, the Hawks avoided their longest stretch without a home victory since an 11-game skid near the end of the dismal 2004-05 season, when Atlanta finished 13-69.

**Mavericks 104, Thunder 102:** Luka Doncic had 20 points, 12 assists and 11 rebounds for his third triple-double in five games, and surging Dallas withstood a late run by visiting Oklahoma City.

Dorian Finney-Smith added 17 points and 10 rebounds and Kristaps Porzingis had 13 points, eight rebounds and four blocks for the Mavericks, who have won three straight and nine of their last 10.

**Heat 104, Raptors 99:** Tyler Herro scored 23 points, Jimmy Butler got a triple-double in the game's final moment and host Miami held off Toronto.

Bam Adebayo, in his first game back after missing six weeks following thumb surgery, scored 14 points and made a pair of free throws with 8.5 seconds remaining.

**Hornets 97, Knicks 87:** Miles Bridges scored a career-high 38 points and grabbed 12 rebounds, leading Charlotte to a win at New York.

Terry Rozier added 22 points. He and Bridges combined to outscore the Knicks by themselves in the first half as the Hornets bounced back nicely from a loss to Orlando that ended their four-game winning streak. They played without LaMelo Ball.

**Grizzlies 119, Bulls 106:** Desmond Bane and Ja Morant scored 25 points each, and host Memphis dominated short-handed Chicago.

Brandon Clarke added 15 points and seven rebounds in the main event of the 20th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. The Grizzlies have won 12 of their last 13.

**Cavaliers 114, Nets 107:** Darius Garland strengthened his All-Star case with 22 points and 12 assists, leading host Cleveland over Brooklyn.

**Wizards 117, 76ers 98:** Kyle Kuzma had 15 points and 16 rebounds, and Bradley Beal added 13 points in his return from a three-game absence to lift host Washington over Philadelphia.

**Celtics 104, Pelicans 92:** Jayson Tatum scored 27 points and host Boston erased an 18-point first-half deficit with a win over New Orleans.

**Trail Blazers 98, Magic 88:** CJ McCollum scored 16 points in his first game back from a collapsed lung, Jusuf Nurkic added 21 points and a season-best 22 rebounds, and Portland won at Orlando.

**Clippers 139, Pacers 133:** Nicolas Batum scored a season-high 32 points, Reggie Jackson added 26 points and host Los Angeles beat Indiana in a matchup of sub-.500 teams.

**Lakers 101, Jazz 95:** LeBron James scored 25 points and Stanley Johnson had 10 of his 15 points in the fourth quarter to lead host Los Angeles past Utah.

## Stefanovic leads No. 4 Purdue past No. 17 Illinois

Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Sasha Stefanovic scored 22 points, including a go-ahead three at the start of double overtime that sent No. 4 Purdue over No. 17 Illinois 96-88 on Monday.

Illini guards Andre Curbelo and Alfonso Plummer made baskets in the final seconds of regulation and the first overtime before the Boilermakers (15-2, 4-2 Big Ten) broke away.

Purdue hit four straight shots to take an 89-83 lead with 1:03 left in double overtime. Eric Hunter Jr. had two of those baskets.

Stefanovic went 5-for-8 on three-point tries and also had eight rebounds. His last-second shot from long range fell short as the regulation buzzer

sounded.

"They're the best basketball team we've played," Illinois coach Brad Underwood said. "And then I thought Sasha was elite today. We've done a pretty good job on him for the most part the last few years, and today he was the difference."

Plummer led the Illini (13-4, 6-1) with 24 points, shooting 6-for-12 on threes. His layup with 9 seconds left in the first overtime made it 78-all.

Curbelo, who had missed 11 games after being injured, had 20 points, six rebounds and three assists. His basket with 14 seconds remaining in regulation tied it at 69.

Boilermakers center Zach Edey was effective, especially early on, finishing with 20

points on 9-for-14 shooting to go along with eight rebounds. He also helped limit Kofi Cockburn to 10 points on 3-for-9 shooting in 22 minutes before the Illinois center fouled out early in the first overtime.

"I thought (Edey) embraced the physicality of the game," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "He didn't turn the ball over, which was great, and he was ready to play. That's the whole thing. If you can establish your big man and really get them in a bind, that helps out everything."

Boilermakers guard Jaden Ivey struggled to hit shots, going 3-for-10, but made 13 of 15 free throws to finish with 19 points and eight rebounds.

Illinois trailed for most of

the first overtime period, but Curbelo made a turnaround jumper and Plummer had a layup to force a second overtime.

Edey was a factor early on, scoring 14 points on 6-for-7 shooting in the first half. Purdue took an 11-point lead into the break, but back-to-back three-pointers from Plummer and Da'Monte Williams helped the Illini close the deficit to 39-34 with 17:43 to play.

"This win just gives you confidence that you can go into a hornet's nest and be up against it a couple times and find a way to make a play, get a stop or get a rebound or make your free throws like we did at the end," Painter said. "Our guys hung in there."

# Avs' Francouz thwarts Wild in SO win

Associated Press

DENVER — Pavel Francouz stopped 24 shots in relief of injured Darcy Kuemper and three more in the shootout, and the Colorado Avalanche beat the Minnesota Wild 4-3 in a shootout for their 14th straight home win.

Kuemper was injured when Minnesota's Jordan Greenway ran into him in the crease and knocked him down. He remained in the game until he was replaced by Francouz with 10:34 left in the second period.

Mikko Rantanen had a goal and an assist for Colorado and the only tally in the shootout. Nathan MacKinnon also had a goal and an assist for the Avalanche.

Wild goaltender Kaapo Kahkonen finished with 36 saves. Kirill Kaprizov scored two goals and Kevin Fiala had the other for Minnesota.

**Sharks 6, Kings 2:** Timo Meier set a San Jose franchise record with five goals on Monday, and host San Jose used a

huge first period to beat Los Angeles.

Meier, a sixth-year winger who made his first All-Star team this season, had a hat trick before the first period even ended. He scored his fourth goal less than two minutes into the second period and broke the Sharks' record with his fifth just 27 seconds before the second intermission.

**Blues 5, Predators 3:** Brayden Schenn and Ivan Barbashev each had two goals and two assists as host St. Louis came from behind to beat Nashville.

Ryan O'Reilly added a goal and two assists in the first meeting between the teams since they played back-to-back games in February 2020. The Blues' victory left the clubs tied for second place in the Central Division with 51 points apiece.

**Penguins 5, Golden Knights 3:** Jason Zucker scored twice and Pittsburgh rallied from an early three-goal deficit to win at Las Vegas.

The Penguins scored five unanswered goals to improve to 13-2-0 since Dec. 4, including a 4-2-0 mark on their six-game road trip — the team's longest of the season.

**Red Wings 3, Sabres 2 (OT):** Dylan Larkin scored the tying goal in regulation and notched the game-winner 2:07 into overtime, giving Detroit the win before a sparse crowd in Buffalo.

Vladislav Namestnikov also scored for the Red Wings, who beat the Sabres for the second time in three days. Alex Nedelkovic made 26 saves.

**Coyotes 5, Canadiens 2:** Nick Schmaltz and Johan Larsson each had a goal and an assist, and host Arizona stretched Montreal's losing streak to six games.

Travis Boyd and Janis Moser also scored for the Coyotes, who were without coach Andre Tourigny and four players due to COVID-19 protocols. Clayton Keller added an empty-net goal and Karel Vejmelka had

24 saves.

**Kraken 3, Blackhawks 2 (SO):** Ryan Donato got the tying goal early in the third period, Joonas Donskoi scored in the shootout and host Seattle snapped its nine-game losing streak with a win over Chicago.

Donato scored at 2:02 of the third to pull the Kraken even at 2. Donato also converted in the second round of the shootout and Donskoi — stuck without a goal this season in 38 games — put the winner past Marc-Andre Fleury.

**Islanders 4, Flyers 1:** Brock Nelson and Casey Cizikas scored less than three minutes apart in the second period and host New York handed Philadelphia its eighth straight loss.

Anthony Beauvillier and Matt Martin also scored, and Ilya Sorokin stopped 26 shots to help the Islanders get their fifth win in seven games (5-1-1). New York coach Barry Trotz was back on the bench after missing three games, the last two in COVID-19 protocols.

## Raiders fire GM Mayock after three seasons

Associated Press

The Las Vegas Raiders have fired general manager Mike Mayock after three seasons and will begin a search for a coach and GM following their second playoff berth in the past 19 seasons.

The Raiders announced the move to get rid of Mayock on Monday, two days after losing their wild-card playoff game to Cincinnati 26-19.

"We thank Mike for his contributions over the last three years in helping to form the foundation for the franchise to build upon in its future," the team said in a statement.

Coach Jon Gruden brought Mayock in to replace Reggie McKenzie following the 2018 season, but the team had spotty

results in the draft and free agency in recent years.

Gruden resigned in October following the publication of his old offensive emails, and now Mayock is out as well, potentially giving owner Mark Davis a clean slate.

### Nets' Irving still refuses to get COVID-19 vaccine

CLEVELAND — Brooklyn Nets guard Kyrie Irving insists an injury to teammate Kevin Durant won't change his stance on not getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

Irving, who only recently returned to action after a drawn-out stalemate over getting vaccinated, said Monday following a loss to the Cavaliers that he

has no intention of getting the shot — and nothing will sway him.

"That's my decision already, and I'm standing on it," Irving said.

The seven-time All-Star point guard has become a lightning rod of sorts for his decision not to get the vaccine. And due to COVID-19 mandates in New York City concerning public arenas, Irving is not permitted to play in home games.

### Women's hockey league raises cap, adds teams

The Premier Hockey Federation is more than doubling each teams' salary cap to \$750,000 and adding two expansion franchises next season in a bid to

capitalize on the wave of attention women's hockey traditionally enjoys following the Winter Olympics.

The PHF's announcement on Tuesday of its board of governors' commitment to invest more than \$25 million over the next three years is also considered a major step in attempting to thaw its relationship with U.S. and Canadian national team players, who have balked at joining North America's lone professional women's hockey league.

The six-team PHF is moving forward with plans to establish a team in Montreal and, without disclosing where, adding another expansion franchise in the United States.