

## Russia cool to US response on Ukraine

Associated Press

MOSCOW—The Kremlin said Thursday that there was “little ground for optimism” in resolving the crisis over Ukraine after the U.S. rejected Russia’s main demands, but that dialogue was still possible.

Tensions have soared in recent weeks, as the United States and its NATO allies expressed concern that a buildup of about 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signaled that Moscow planned to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor. Russia denies having any such designs—and has laid out a series of demands it says will improve security in Europe.

But as expected, the U.S. and the Western alliance firmly rejected any concessions on Moscow’s main points Wednesday, refusing to permanently ban Ukraine from joining NATO and saying allied deployments of troops and military equipment in Eastern Europe are nonnegotiable. The U.S. did outline areas in which some of Russia’s concerns

might be addressed, possibly offering a path to de-escalation.

“There is no change, there will be no change,” U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, repeating the warning that any Russian incursion into Ukraine would be met with massive consequences and severe economic costs.

All eyes are now on President Vladimir Putin, who will decide how Russia will respond amid fears that Europe could again be plunged into war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the response from the U.S.—and a similar one from NATO—left “little ground for optimism.” But he added that “there always are prospects for continuing a dialogue, it’s in the interests of both us and the Americans.”

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the U.S. response contained some elements that could lead to “the start of a serious talk on secondary issues,” but emphasized that “the document contains no positive response on the main

issue.” Those are Moscow’s demands that NATO not expand and that the alliance refrain from deploying weapons that might threaten Russia.

Lavrov said top officials will submit proposals to Putin. Peskov said the Russian reaction would come soon.

The evasive official comments reflect the fact that it is Putin who will single-handedly determine Russia’s next moves. He has warned of unspecified “military-technical measures” if the West refuses to heed the demands.

Peskov added that Putin and President Joe Biden will decide whether they need to have another conversation following two calls last month.

Biden was set to have a call with Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy later Thursday, according to Zelenskyy’s spokesman.

Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Kyiv had seen the U.S. response before it was delivered to Russia and had

no objections. He tweeted it was “important that the U.S. remains in close contact with Ukraine before and after all contacts with Russia.”

Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said during a parliamentary debate on Ukraine that her government is closely coordinating its policy with allies, considering a range of options that could include the new Nord Stream 2 Russian gas pipeline to Germany.

While the diplomacy sputters on, so too do maneuvers that have escalated tensions. Russia has launched a series of military drills involving motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, dozens of warships in the Black Sea and the Arctic, and Russian fighter jets and paratroopers in Belarus.

NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe.

## Japan: Latest N. Korea missile test ‘greatly regrettable’

BY DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea fired another pair of projectiles believed to be ballistic missiles on Thursday in its sixth round of tests so far this month.

The communist regime is believed to have launched the short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast at around 8 a.m., according to a text message from South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. North Korea last fired a pair of cruise missiles on Tuesday, according to the military.

“Our troops are currently maintaining readiness posture,

tracking and monitoring relevant moves in preparation for the North’s additional launch,” the joint chiefs said.

The missiles are estimated to have traveled a maximum distance of 118 miles at an altitude of 12 miles.

The missiles’ estimated flight distance is shorter than the previous pair of ballistic missiles fired by North Korea on Jan. 17. Those missiles, believed by experts to be KN-24s, were pegged at 174 miles with a peak altitude of 26 miles, according to South Korea’s military.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida described the latest

test as “greatly regrettable,” according to a statement from his office Thursday.

Japan’s Ministry of Defense issued its own statement: “North Korea’s repeated launches of missiles, including ballistic missiles recently, are a serious issue for the international community as a whole, including our country.”

North Korea is prohibited from testing ballistic missiles by the U.N. Security Council and is subjected to sanctions, including penalties unilaterally imposed by the United States. Following a missile test earlier this month, the U.S. Treasury Department on

Jan. 12 slapped sanctions against six North Koreans, a Russian, and a Russian firm.

Earlier this month, the North’s state-run Korean Central News Agency called for the immediate “bolstering” of its capabilities to curb the U.S.’s “hostile moves.”

North Korea claims its weapons tests are purely defensive in nature, precautions against the U.S. and its allies, who continue to conduct joint military exercises near its border.

U.S. diplomats from President Joe Biden’s administration have stressed they are open to talks with their North Korean counterparts without preconditions.

# 23 sailors discharged for COVID-19 vaccine refusal

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The Navy said Tuesday that it has discharged 23 active-duty sailors for refusing the coronavirus vaccine, marking the first time it has thrown currently serving sailors out of the military over the mandatory shots.

The discharges came as the Navy released new COVID-19 guidance that requires all deployed sailors and air crew to be vaccinated, but relaxes some quarantine practices on ships based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Navy leaders said all operational units — meaning those involved in deployments out to sea — must be 100% vaccinated, and any sailors who have approved medical or administrative exemptions are shifted to shore duty. A significant majority of the Navy's force is in operational units, and the requirement rules out the use of any unvaccinated sailor — such as a Navy SEAL — on a deployed ship, even if they have an approved exemption or are in the process of seeking an exemption. A number of SEALs and other special warfare sailors have filed suit against the mandatory vaccine.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday, Vice Adm. William Merz, the Navy's deputy chief of operations, said there have been COVID outbreaks on a number of ships, but they have been “statistically insignificant” and have had no impact on naval operations.

For the most part, he said, sailors have minimal symptoms, and — particularly with the omicron variant — the virus comes and goes quickly, allowing sailors to keep the ships fully staffed and running. He added that the Navy strongly recommends the booster vaccine, and said it will likely become mandatory in the future.

Merz declined to say how many ships have seen outbreaks. He said the latest CDC guidelines, which shortened isolation times, have made it easier for ships to continue operating even if a small number of the crew become infected.

The Navy discharges come as the num-

ber of troops removed from the military due to vaccine refusals begins to climb across the services. The Marine Corps, as of late last week, had discharged 334 Marines, and the Air Force, as of this week, had discharged 111 airmen for refusing to get the shots. The Army is now the only service that has not yet discharged any active-duty personnel due to vaccine refusal.

The military services have been going through a methodical process to deal with those who refuse the vaccine as well as those who request medical, administrative or religious exemptions. The reviews require counseling with medical personnel and chaplains as well as senior commanders.

The number of troops discharged will begin to grow exponentially as those reviews finish and troops are given their final chances to get the vaccines. Lawsuits over the mandatory vaccine are also making their way through the courts.

The Air Force and Navy have also discharged entry-level service members going through their boot camps, who hadn't yet reported to their service jobs. There have been 22 Navy and 37 Air Force recruits who have been sent home.

All of the sailors received honorable discharges, the Navy said.

According to the Navy, a bit more than 5,000 sailors remain unvaccinated — or a little over 1% of the active-duty force. About 6% of the Navy reserve sailors are not yet vaccinated. No reserve members have been discharged for vaccine refusal.

The Pentagon has ordered all service members — active-duty, National Guard and Reserves — to get the vaccine, saying it is critical to maintaining the health and readiness of the force. COVID-19 cases continue to surge around the country as a result of the omicron variant. Merz said that under the new guidelines, sailors must wear masks during their first 10 days out at sea, but then can lessen those masking and social distancing requirements if there have been no incidents of infection on the ship. If someone later tests positive, masks and other precautions are resumed.

## Former Navy officer enters guilty plea in 'Fat Leonard' case

BY WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The former commander of a U.S. Navy destroyer pleaded guilty in federal court Wednesday to bribery, admitting he accepted lavish meals, hotel stays and the services of prostitutes from defense contractor Leonard Glenn Francis in exchange for classified information.

Stephen Shedd, who once commanded the USS Milius, admitted in Southern District Court of California that he and eight other indicted officers from the Navy's 7th Fleet received bribes from “Fat Leonard” worth more than \$250,000, the Department of Justice said in a news release Wednesday.

“The defendant has admitted he was one of the many whose allegiance was switched from the Navy to Leonard Francis,” U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman said in the release. “This abdication of the defendant's duties to the Navy and the United States comes with heavy consequences.”

Shedd, 48, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery, which carries a maximum term of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, and to bribery of a public official, with a maximum sentence of 15 years and a \$250,000 fine. Sentencing is scheduled for July.

All nine officers were indicted by a federal grand jury in March 2017 for allegedly taking bribes from Francis, who was owner and CEO of the Singapore-based Glenn Defense Marine Asia, the DOJ said.

Francis began recruiting Navy personnel to direct contracts toward his company around 2006. He pleaded guilty in federal court in January 2015 and began cooperating with investigators. He has not yet been sentenced.

His firm provided goods and services for U.S. Navy ships while in port, such as security, food, water and waste removal.

Shedd is the third defendant to plead guilty, the DOJ said.

The remaining six — Rear Adm. Bruce Loveless; Captains David Newland, James Dolan, David Lausman and Donald Hornbeck; and Cmdr. Mario Herrera — are scheduled for trial next month.

# At least 3 judges eyed for high court spot

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is eyeing at least three judges for the looming vacancy on the Supreme Court as he prepares to quickly deliver on his campaign pledge to nominate the first Black woman to the nation's highest court, according to aides and allies.

At a White House event Thursday, Justice Stephen Breyer announced his plan to retire later this year. Biden took the opportunity to affirm his pledge to nominate the first Black woman to the court.

"I've made no decision except the one person I will nominate will be someone with extraordinary qualifications, character, experience and integrity," Biden said as the 83-year-old Breyer stood by. "And that person will be the first Black woman ever nominated to the United States Supreme Court. It's long overdue."

Early discussions about a successor are focusing on U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, U.S. District Judge J. Michelle Childs and California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, according to four people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity

to discuss White House deliberations. Jackson and Kruger have long been seen as possible nominees.

Since Biden took office in January 2021, he has focused on nominating a diverse group of judges to the federal bench, installing five Black women on federal appeals courts, with three more nominations pending before the Senate. Other possible candidates for the high court could come from among that group, Biden aides and allies said, especially since almost all of the recent Supreme Court nominees have been federal appeals judges.

"He has a strong pool to select a candidate from, in addition to other sources. This is an historic opportunity to appoint someone with a strong record on civil and human rights," said Derrick Johnson, the NAACP's president.

By the end of his first year, Biden had won confirmation of 40 judges, the most since President Ronald Reagan. Of those, 80% are women and 53% are people of color, according to the White House.

Jackson, 51, was nominated by President Barack Obama to be a district court judge. Biden elevated her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Cir-

cuit. Early in her career, she was also a law clerk for Breyer.

Childs, a federal judge in South Carolina, has been nominated but not yet confirmed to serve on the same circuit court. Her name has surfaced partly because she is a favorite among some high-profile lawmakers, including Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C.

Kruger, a graduate of Harvard and Yale's law school, was previously a Supreme Court clerk and has argued a dozen cases before the justices as a lawyer for the federal government.

The Senate can confirm a successor before there is a formal vacancy, so the White House was getting to work and it was expected to take at least a few weeks before a nomination was formalized.

When Biden was running for the White House, he said that if he had the chance to nominate someone to the court, he would make history by choosing a Black woman. And he's reiterated that pledge since.

"As president, I'd be honored, honored to appoint the first African American woman. Because it should look like the country. It's long past time," Biden said in February 2020 shortly before

South Carolina's presidential primary.

Adding a Black woman to the court would mean a series of firsts — four female justices and two Black justices serving at the same time on the nine-member court. Justice Clarence Thomas is the court's only Black justice and just the second ever, after Thurgood Marshall.

And Biden would have the chance to show Black voters increasingly frustrated with a president they helped to elect that he is serious about their concerns, particularly after he has been unable to push through voting rights legislation.

At the same time, Breyer's replacement by another liberal justice would not change the ideological makeup of the court. Conservatives outnumber liberals by 6-3, and Donald Trump's three nominees made an already conservative court even more conservative.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Biden's nominee "will receive a prompt hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee and will be considered and confirmed by the full United States Senate with all deliberate speed."

## US economy grew 5.7% last year in rebound from 2020

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy grew last year at the fastest pace since Ronald Reagan's presidency, bouncing back with resilience from 2020's brief but devastating coronavirus recession.

The nation's gross domestic product — its total output of goods and services — expanded 5.7% in 2021. It was the strongest calendar-year growth since a 7.2% surge in 1984 after a previous recession. The economy ended the year by growing at an unexpectedly brisk 6.9% annual pace from October through December as businesses replenished their inventories, the Commerce Department reported Thursday.

"It just goes to show that the U.S. economy has learned to adapt to the new variants and continues to produce," said Beth Ann Bovino,

chief economist at Standard & Poor's Global Ratings.

Squeezed by inflation and still gripped by COVID-19 caseloads, the economy is expected to slow this year. Many economists have been downgrading their forecasts for the current January-March quarter, reflecting the impact of the omicron variant. And for all of 2022, the International Monetary Fund has forecast that the nation's GDP growth will slow to 4%.

Many U.S. businesses, especially restaurants, bars, hotels and entertainment venues, remain under pressure from the omicron variant, which has kept millions of people hunkered down at home to avoid crowds. Consumer spending, the primary driver of the economy, may be further held back this year by the loss of government aid to households,

which nurtured activity in 2020 and 2021 but has mainly expired.

What's more, the Federal Reserve made clear Wednesday that it plans to raise interest rates multiple times this year to battle the hottest inflation in nearly four decades. Those rate increases will make borrowing more expensive and perhaps slow the economy this year.

Growth last year was driven up by a 7.9% surge in consumer spending and a 9.5% increase in private investment. For the final three months of 2021, consumer spending rose at a more muted 3.3% annual pace. But private investment rocketed 32% higher, boosted by a surge in business inventories as companies stocked up to meet higher customer demand. Rising inventories, in fact, accounted for 71% of the fourth-quarter growth.

# Man charged with selling gun used on hostages

Associated Press

DALLAS — A Texas man has been charged with a federal gun crime after authorities said he sold a gun to a man who held four hostages inside a Texas synagogue earlier this month before being fatally shot by the FBI, the Justice Department said Wednesday.

Henry “Michael” Williams, 32, was charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm after authorities said he sold the weapon that Malik Faisal Akram used when he entered Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, on Jan. 15 and held the synagogue’s rabbi and three others hostage for hours.

The attorney listed for Williams in court records did not immediately respond Wednesday to a phone message and email seeking comment from The Associated Press.

Akram, a 44-year-old British citizen, held hostages in the Dallas-area suburb while demanding the release of a federal prisoner. The standoff ended after more than 10 hours when the temple’s rabbi threw a chair at Akram and fled with the other two remaining hostages just as an FBI tactical team was moving in. None of the hostages were injured.

Prosecutors said Williams sold Akram a semi-automatic pistol

on Jan. 13 — two days before the hostage-taking. The pistol was recovered from the scene.

Akram paid \$150 for the gun, according to charging documents. The documents state Williams was convicted in 2005 of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and attempted possession of a controlled substance in 2013.

Williams allegedly acknowledged to investigators that he was aware he was not allowed to have a firearm and knew selling the gun to Akram was illegal.

He told FBI agents in an interview one day after the hostage crisis that he recalled meeting a man with a British accent but

didn’t remember his name. During a separate interview this week, authorities said, Williams was shown a photo of Akram and this time confirmed that he sold Akram the weapon at an intersection in South Dallas.

Williams told investigators that Akram told him he intended to use the gun to intimidate someone who owed an outstanding debt, according to authorities.

Dallas police arrested Williams on an outstanding warrant Monday, and he told federal investigators that he sold the gun to Akram after being read his rights, according to charging documents.

## He won a seat on a SpaceX flight – and he gave it away

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — He told his family and a few friends. He dropped hints to a couple of colleagues. So hardly anyone knew that the airline pilot could have — should have — been on board when SpaceX launched its first tourists into orbit last year.

Meet Kyle Hippchen, the real winner of a first-of-its-kind sweepstakes, who gave his seat to his college roommate.

Though Hippchen’s secret is finally out, that doesn’t make it any easier knowing he missed his chance to orbit Earth because he exceeded the weight limit. He still hasn’t watched the Netflix series on the three-day flight purchased by a tech entrepreneur for himself and three guests last September.

“It hurts too much,” he said. “I’m insanely disappointed. But it is what it is.”

Hippchen, 43, a Florida-based captain for Delta’s regional carrier Endeavor Air, recently shared his story with The Associated Press during his first visit to NASA’s Kennedy

Space Center since his lost rocket ride.

He opened up about his out-of-the-blue, dream-come-true windfall, the letdown when he realized he topped SpaceX’s weight restrictions of 250 pounds and his offer to the one person he knew would treasure the flight as much as himself. Four months later, he figures probably fewer than 50 people know he was the actual winner.

“It was their show, and I didn’t want to be distracting too much from what they were doing,” said Hippchen, who watched the launch from a VIP balcony.

His seat went to Chris Sembroski, 42, a data engineer in Everett, Wash. The pair roomed together starting in the late 1990s while attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. They’d pile into cars with other student space geeks and make the hourlong drive south for NASA’s shuttle launches. They also belonged to a space advocacy group, going to Washington to push commercial space travel.

## NC airport chosen as site for supersonic passenger jet plant

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — A Colorado-based aviation company announced Wednesday that it has chosen a North Carolina airport as the manufacturing site for next-generation supersonic passenger jets.

If successful, the investment could create more than 2,000 jobs in the region over the next decade while cutting flight times significantly for a post-Concorde generation of air travelers.

Boom Supersonic announced that Piedmont Triad International Airport in Greensboro will be the home for its first full-scale manufacturing plant, including the final assembly line, testing and delivery center for its proposed Overture supersonic airliner. Boom estimates it will create over 1,750 jobs by 2030, with a goal of reaching more than 2,400 jobs by 2032.

State and local governments have offered \$230 million in financial incentives to make the project a reality, including money for airport improvements, which the legislature approved in November, and other sweeteners approved Wednesday.

As with most such projects, some of the incentives going to Boom Technology Inc., the company’s parent, will be canceled if it doesn’t meet job-creation and investment goals. The anticipated capital investment is \$500 million.

Jacksonville, Fla., and Greenville-Spartanburg, S.C., were also in the running for the plant, according to a state Commerce Department official who publicly briefed an incentives committee prior to the announcement. The project had been known to recruiters as “Project Thunderbird.”

The Overture plane is designed to carry 65 to 88 passengers, consume sustainable aviation fuel and cruise at 60,000 feet at 1,300 mph — twice the speed of today’s passenger jets. Many technical and manufacturing hurdles must still be overcome before the aircraft becomes a practical option for airlines, however.

In a news release Wednesday, the company said the new factory will begin production in 2024, with the first Overture aircraft rolled out in 2025, flying in 2026 and carrying its first passengers by 2029.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Police dog rescues man lost in frigid woods**

**MI** ROSCOMMON — A northern Michigan police dog rescued a Pennsylvania man who got lost Sunday in a densely wooded area during frigid temperatures, police said.

The Roscommon County Sheriff's Office said Ghost and his handler, Deputy Dakota Darsow, were called Sunday night to Gerrish Township after local police received a report that a 58-year-old man was missing after going for a walk. Several hours had passed and the man, who police believed was likely cognitively impaired, had not returned in temperatures that were around 11 degrees Fahrenheit, police said.

The sheriff's office said Ghost and Darsow tracked the man for about a half-mile through thick woods before finding him. The man, who told officers he had gone for a walk and got lost, was taken to a local hospital for treatment for exposure, police said.

**Man sentenced for bid to ship lizards to Hong Kong**

**NJ** TRENTON — A New Jersey man who illegally tried to send 10 live lizards to Hong Kong has been sentenced to three years of probation, including with six months of home confinement.

Jason Ksepka, 44, of Farmingdale, pleaded guilty last September to falsely labeling an international shipment of wildlife from Lambertville in November 2017, according to federal prosecutors. He was sentenced Tuesday.

Ksepka was paid \$500 by someone else to send the pack-

age containing 10 live rhinoceros iguanas, prosecutors said. He falsely labeled the contents of the package as toys and used a fictitious name as the sender.

The package was destined for Hong Kong, but U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service inspectors intercepted it at New York's JFK Airport and removed the animals.

**Federal officials say petroglyphs damaged**

**NM** SANTE FE — Federal officials are investigating spray-painted graffiti and other damage to petroglyphs dating back thousands of years at a site west of Santa Fe.

The damage to the La Cieneguilla Petroglyphs likely occurred Jan. 18, Bureau of Land Management spokeswoman Jillian Aragon told the Santa Fe New Mexican. BLM Taos Field Office Manager Pamela Mathis' office has ordered supplies in hopes of removing the paint but long-term effects are unknown, Aragon said.

**Feds: Former city official embezzled nearly \$800K**

**KY** LOUISVILLE — A former city official in Bardstown has been charged with embezzling more than \$760,000 from the city over several years.

Tracy L. Hudson was indicted by a federal grand jury in Louisville last week. Hudson embezzled the money between 2013 and 2019 while working as the city's tax administrator and later its chief financial officer, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Louisville.

Hudson took cash from city of Bardstown funds, paid herself

for fake expenses, used city credit cards and diverted extra funding into her 401(k) retirement plan, federal prosecutors said.

Hudson was fired in 2019 after a city investigation.

A release from the U.S. Attorney's office in Louisville said Hudson, 41, is charged with one count of wire fraud. She has pleaded not guilty to the charge.

**Man arrested after guns stolen from state office**

**WA** YAKIMA — A man has been arrested in connection with stealing 15 to 20 firearms from a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife building in Yakima earlier this month, police said.

The Yakima Police Department said in a news release Tuesday that police arrested a 29-year-old man Monday.

The guns were stolen on Jan. 2 after someone entered secured fencing and cut a hole in the side of the building, according to police. The person arrested was identified through a palm print at the scene and other evidence, according to the news release.

Because guns were stolen during the incident, the case has been moved to the U.S. Bureau of Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

**Police officer dragged 5 blocks by stolen SUV**

**PA** PHILADELPHIA — A police officer was recovering after he was dragged about five blocks by the driver of what turned out to be a stolen SUV, authorities said.

Officers had stopped the vehicle Tuesday night for several

traffic violations when they saw what they believed was a gun, police said.

"The male was reaching for the gun. Even though the police officer was telling him to just show his hands, don't reach for what appeared to be the gun, and he reached for the gun very quickly," Chief Inspector Scott Small said.

Police said the officer reached into the vehicle and the 25-year-old driver dragged the officer before the vehicle collided with two other vehicles.

The officer was in stable condition with bumps and bruises, police said. The suspect was taken into custody.

**Deer on runway prompts additional fencing**

**HI** KAHULUI — A reinforced fence has been installed around a Maui airport after a deer blocked a runway earlier this month.

Vinyl fencing now overlaps an existing wood fence surrounding Kahului Airport to prevent deer from squeezing through, Maui District Airports Manager Marvin Moniz told The Maui News.

The added barrier installed for an estimated \$100,000 will prevent a "small kitten" from getting through, Moniz said.

Workers also cut brush growing along the fence to make it less appealing for hungry deer, Moniz said.

At one time, up to 700 axis deer were spotted around the perimeter of the airport fence, Moniz said, but that number has since reduced to about 300 as they move north seeking greener pastures and water.

— From wire reports



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**Reporting World, National and Military News**

# Olympians prioritize finding 'happy bubble'

Associated Press

Sean McCann peered at the targets through a spotting scope and used a hand-held magnetic board to mark where the bullets hit. He showed the results to the athlete as they left the range and then grabbed a broom to sweep shell casings off the mat before the next skier arrived.

To a casual observer, McCann appeared to be a U.S. biathlon coach helping his team get ready for the Olympic trials race earlier this season at the Soldier Hollow Nordic Center.

But McCann's not a coach.

He's a clinical psychologist who works for the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee — one of seven assigned to various teams. At certain times of the year, he is "embedded" with the U.S. biathlon team to help them perform at their best. He lives, trains and travels with the athletes and coaches, interacting with them like a friend.

"In psychology, in particular, sports psychology, those relationships of trust are really important," McCann said. "Part of our job is taking care of the whole person, not just the ath-

lete, because you can't leave the person at the door."

He may seem casual, but his presence is serious business.

"Being an elite athlete, being an Olympic athlete is very stressful," he explained. "You're constantly measured, constantly challenged. You're constantly under some sort of environmental stress, so what we do in sports psychology is stress management."

The issue of mental health in sports became part of the national conversation last year after tennis star Naomi Osaka revealed her bouts with depression. The discussion was amplified when U.S. superstar gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from competition at the Tokyo Olympics, choosing her own health and well-being over the demands to perform.

Biles' courage prompted Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian in history and an athlete who has been up front about his mental health struggles, to proclaim "it's OK to not be OK."

"It was a public education," McCann said of those mental health revelations. It was help-

ful for the athletes but also important for the public to hear those messages: Have more compassion and empathy with what the athletes are going through.

Matt Whitcomb, head coach for the U.S. cross country ski team, said every athlete works with a sports psychologist. While traveling, they also receive help from their home club coach, national team staff, physical therapists and massage therapists — a whole support network.

U.S. cross country skier Jessie Diggins literally wrote a book on the struggles female athletes face as they try to stay fit while dealing with unrealistic pressures to have a certain body type. Skinny isn't healthy, she said in her book "Brave Enough" about her journey to recover from bulimia.

Diggins has worked with a sports psychologist since she was 19, she said, and is glad more people feel comfortable talking about it.

"For many athletes, there is a priority on mental health that's coming into focus," she said. "We all have times when we're

not in a great place and it's even harder for an athlete when the moment you're struggling happens to be at the same time as the nation's spotlight is shining on you."

All Olympic sports come with pressure, though McCann notes that biathlon is "crazy. It's two sports that don't belong together."

Endurance athletes have the mentality to go as hard and fast as they can, he said. But in shooting, "it's precision. It's control. It's focus. The mentalities are really different."

So McCann helps the biathletes learn to switch their mindsets depending on where they are in the race. Ski hard when out on the trails, but in the range, execute the shots. "Focus on the process" is a biathlete's mantra.

Heading to Beijing, Olympic athletes won't be able to see their friends and family, which will be an additional challenge.

"So we'll keep our eye on the ... whole concept of loneliness that can creep in," Whitcomb said. "Because that's probably the biggest danger, but that's why we build what we've built."

## Barty bids to end nation's title drought vs. Collins

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Ash Barty ended a 42-year drought just by reaching the Australian Open final.

The top-ranked Barty, who beat Madison Keys 6-1, 6-3, needs one more victory to be the first Australian woman to win her home Grand Slam title since 1978.

Danielle Collins is in her way. The 28-year-old American was dominant in a 6-4, 6-1 win over 2020 French Open champion Iga Swiatek in the second of the two semifinals on Thursday.

The women's final is set for Saturday. Collins said the chance to take on Barty for the title at her home Grand Slam is going to be "spectacular."

Barty is the first Australian since Wendy Turnbull in 1980 to reach the women's singles final at the tournament. Chris O'Neil

was the last Australian to win it, two years before that.

Barty has already won major titles on grass at Wimbledon and clay at the French Open. Collins is into her first Grand Slam final.

Both semifinals were over quickly.

Barty hit 20 winners to only eight for Keys. She converted four of her six break-point opportunities, and saved the only two break points she faced on her serve against the 2017 U.S. Open runner-up. In six matches so far at the tournament, she has dropped one service game.

"Honestly, it's just incredible," Barty said in her on-court TV interview. "I love coming out here and playing in Australia."

The 27th-seeded Collins took only 78 minutes to beat the seventh-seeded Swiatek. Her forehand cross-court winner to set up

her first match point was typical of her semifinal form. She hit 27 winners, had only 13 unforced errors and imposed her relentless energy on the match.

While Barty is potentially one win away from giving the host nation a title, there's a guaranteed win in another competition.

Nick Kyrgios and Thanasi Kokkinakis, dubbed "Special K," ensured an all-Australian men's doubles final with a 7-6 (4), 6-4 win over third-seeded Marcel Granollers and Horacio Zeballos in a nearly full Rod Laver Arena. Fans were allowed into the main stadium with grounds passes during the day session and didn't need stadium tickets for the afternoon session.

On a near-empty adjoining Margaret Court Arena, Matthew Ebden and Max Purcell beat the second-seeded team of Rajeev Ram and Joe Salisbury 6-3, 7-6 (9).

# Roethlisberger's retirement official

*Associated Press*

PITTSBURGH — No more comebacks for Ben Roethlisberger.

The longtime Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback announced his retirement on Thursday, saying it was “time to clean out my locker, hang up my cleats” after 18 seasons, two Super Bowls, countless team records and a spot in the Hall of Fame all but secure.

“I don’t know how to put into words what the game of football has meant to me and what a blessing it has been,” Roethlisberger, 39, said in a video message. “But I know with confidence I have given my all to the game; I am overwhelmed with gratitude for what it has given me.”

The much-anticipated decision came less than two weeks after Pittsburgh’s lopsided loss to Kansas City in the first round of the postseason, the 12th time in Roethlisberger’s career the Steelers reached the playoffs.

He hinted before his final game at Heinz Field that it was time for him to move on and spend more time with his wife, Ashley, and their three children. He made it a point to embrace the moment following a Monday night win over the Browns on Jan. 3, doing a victory lap of sorts before disappearing down the tunnel surrounded by his family.

Roethlisberger called the journey from a kid growing up in Ohio to the 11th overall pick in the 2004 draft to a likely future Hall of Famer “exhilarating.”

And wildly successful.

The Steelers never endured a losing season during Roethlisberger’s tenure and captured Super Bowls 40 and 46 — the latter coming on a now-iconic touchdown pass over the outstretched hands of three Arizona defenders to Santonio Holmes in the back corner of the end zone.

“Putting that jersey on every

Sunday with my brothers will always be one of the greatest joys of my life,” he said.

Roethlisberger’s personal journey, unlike his professional one, was more complicated. He wasn’t wearing a helmet when he broke his jaw and his nose in a motorcycle crash in 2006 shortly after becoming the youngest quarterback ever to win a Super Bowl.

He was twice accused of sexual assault, once in 2009 and again in 2010. A civil case filed against him stemming from an incident at Lake Tahoe in 2009 was settled out of court. A woman in Georgia alleged he assaulted her at a bar in March 2010, but prosecutors did not formally charge him.

The NFL suspended him for the start of the 2010 season for violating the league’s personal conduct policy. He returned to lead the Steelers to the Super Bowl, a loss to Green Bay.

The second half of his career hinted at his evolution both as a

player and a person. Known more for his rugged “Ben being Ben” approach to the game during his 20s, he morphed into one of the league’s premier passers in his 30s. He twice led the league in yards passing and retires in the all-time top 10 in yards passing and touchdown passes and game-winning drives.

Off the field, he got married in 2011 and started a family while largely retreating from public view.

The only thing that didn’t really change? Winning.

Roethlisberger posted a 165-81-1 record as a starter, the most in franchise history and fifth-most ever. The Steelers won the AFC North eight times with his familiar No. 7 behind center and the player known universally as “Big Ben” seemed to thrive when Pittsburgh was in a tight spot. His 53 game-winning drives are tied for second in NFL history behind Peyton Manning’s 54.

# Rams' Stafford fired up to realize Super dreams

*Associated Press*

LOS ANGELES — Matthew Stafford usually mutes his emotions in public, whether he’s under center or behind a bank of microphones. He had a measure of California cool long before he moved to the West Coast last year to pursue his biggest football dreams before it was too late.

That’s why the rest of the Los Angeles Rams were joyously surprised last Sunday when Stafford let it all out.

After the quarterback completed a majestic 44-yard pass to Cooper Kupp to set up the field goal that sent the Rams to the NFC championship game, Stafford spiked the ball to stop the clock — and then he spiked it again in a frenzied, screaming celebration while he

bounced off the field.

“All the guys on the sideline were like, ‘Man, you were in a dark place,’” Stafford said. “I said, ‘Sometimes, you just have to go to those places and make some plays happen.’ I was enjoying the moment. In my mind, I live for those kind of moments. I would have loved to have been taking a knee up three scores, but it’s a whole lot more fun when you’ve got to make a play like that to win the game and just steal somebody’s soul.”

Bold, provocative words from a player who isn’t prone to grand pronouncements — or even interesting responses to questions during most game weeks.

But everything about Stafford has been focused and am-

plified while he chases his first Super Bowl ring. With his best chance yet to reach every player’s ultimate goal, Stafford has been near his absolute best.

After a strong regular season colored by late-season turnover problems, Stafford has thrown for 570 yards and completed 74.5% of his passes without an interception while earning the first two playoff victories of his career. He has thrown four TD passes and rushed for two more scores while showcasing a poise worthy of the game’s best quarterbacks.

His gutsy completion to Kupp — while getting clobbered by Ndamukong Suh, no less — and his subsequent celebration were the punctuation on a clear, declarative state-

ment of Stafford’s desire.

“It was kind of Kobe-esque,” Los Angeles coach Sean McVay said, evoking the ultimate measure of sports passion in the city.

Stafford’s first season with the Rams (14-5) has been the most successful of his 13-year NFL career, but he leads Los Angeles against the San Francisco 49ers (12-7) on Sunday knowing his team will probably need another superlative effort from him to beat an opponent that has owned the Rams for three years.

“This is an unbelievable opportunity,” Stafford said Wednesday. “It’s a whole lot of fun to be doing what we’re doing, playing football when we’re one of the last four teams left.”

# Reimer, Sharks thwart struggling Caps

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — James Reimer made 32 saves, Jonathan Dahlen scored in one of his dad's old home arenas and the San Jose Sharks beat the Washington Capitals 4-1 on Wednesday night to snap a two-game skid.

Reimer stopped Alex Ovechkin eight times and was San Jose's best penalty killer as Washington came up empty on four power plays.

Noah Gregor scored his second goal this season and Nicolas Meloche had the first of his NHL career to help the Sharks win the opener of a four-game East Coast trip.

Dahlen made it 3-1 with 3:09 left, his second goal in 22 games. His father, Ulf Dahlen, played two seasons from 1999-2001 for the Capitals late in his NHL career.

Andrew Cogliano sealed it with an empty-netter.

Washington has lost back-to-back games in regulation for the first time this season. It has dropped eight of its past 11, smarting from the absence of top-six winger T.J. Oshie.

**Avalanche 4, Bruins 3 (OT):** Gabriel Landeskog tied the game with 36.5 seconds

left in regulation and Cale Makar scored a power-play goal 3:01 into overtime as Colorado rallied past Boston for its 17th straight home victory.

With Mike Reilly serving a tripping penalty, Makar took a feed from Nazem Kadri and sent a shot past Linus Ullmark to give the Avalanche their eighth consecutive win overall.

Colorado, which overcame the loss of star Nathan MacKinnon to a bloody injury in the first period, broke a tie with the 1975-76 Bruins for the fifth-longest home winning streak in NHL history. The record is 23, set by Detroit during the 2011-12 season.

The Avalanche last lost at home on Nov. 3 to Columbus 5-4 in overtime.

**Flames 6, Blue Jackets 0:** Matthew Tkachuk scored twice and visiting Calgary fired a team-record 62 shots on goal in trouncing Columbus.

It was the most by a visiting team in a regular-season game since the NHL started tracking shots on goal in 1955-56, according to STATS.

Jacob Markstrom made 23 saves for his

13th career shutout, sending the Blue Jackets to their third straight loss and fourth in a row at home.

**Maple Leafs 4, Ducks 3 (SO):** Auston Matthews scored the shootout winner and host Toronto got three power-play goals in a victory over Anaheim.

Mitch Marner, William Nylander and John Tavares all scored with the man advantage to give the Maple Leafs a two-goal lead in a mostly empty Scotiabank Arena because of COVID-19 restrictions.

But a late goal in the second period by Jakob Silfverberg and another from Ducks forward Vinni Lettieri with 6:37 remaining in the third sent the game to overtime.

**Blackhawks 8, Red Wings 5:** Dylan Strome scored three goals and visiting Chicago had its highest-scoring game of the season in a win over Detroit.

Alex DeBrincat added two third-period goals for the Blackhawks, who led 4-0 in the first but twice allowed the Red Wings to get within one goal. DeBrincat's empty-netter with 1:43 remaining finally put the game away as Chicago ended a four-game slide.

# Booker leads Suns past Jazz for 8th straight victory

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Devin Booker had 43 points and 12 rebounds, Chris Paul scored 15 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter and the Phoenix Suns extended their winning streak to eight with a 105-97 victory Wednesday over the Utah Jazz.

Booker paced the Suns through three quarters, but didn't get a shot in the fourth until he missed a runner with 3:45 to play. But Paul took over the offensive burden with his mid-range jumpers and drives to the basket.

The Jazz trailed 98-94 when Hassan Whiteside committed an offensive foul and a technical. Booker made two technical free throws around a jumper that beat the shot clock to give the Suns the cushion they needed.

**Hornets 158, Pacers 126:** Charlotte broke the franchise's single-game scoring record and

notched the highest point total in the NBA this season in a rout of visiting Indiana.

Kelly Oubre Jr. had a career-high 39 points, going 10 of 15 on threes — also a career best. LaMelo Ball had his fourth triple double of the season with 29 points, 13 assists and 10 rebounds. Four players had 20 or more points, and the Hornets matched a season-best by making 24 3s.

**Cavaliers 115, Bucks 99:** Kevin Love scored 25 points, Cedi Osman added 23 and host Cleveland beat defending NBA champion Milwaukee.

The Cavs made 19 three-pointers, won for the eighth time in nine games and leap-frogged the Bucks in the Eastern Conference standings. Darius Garland scored 19 and rookie Evan Mobley had 16 for Cleveland.

**Clippers 111, Magic 102:** Amir Coffey scored 19 points, Luke Kennard added 17 and Los

Angeles rallied to win at Orlando one day after matching the second-largest comeback in NBA history.

The Clippers were down by a maximum of 14 points on Wednesday, and trailed by two to start the fourth quarter, in which they outscored the Magic 35-24.

**Nuggets 124, Nets 118:** Nikola Jokic had 26 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists, Austin Rivers added 25 points off the bench and Denver won at Brooklyn.

Will Barton had 21 points and 10 rebounds and DeMarcus Cousins chipped in 13 points off the bench for the Nuggets.

**Hawks 121, Kings 104:** Bogdan Bogdanovic scored 18 points in his return from a knee injury, Onyeka Okongwu also scored 18 off the bench and host Atlanta recovered from a slow start to beat Sacramento.

The Hawks relied on their

backups for their fifth consecutive win. Atlanta's bench outscored the Kings' backups 70-24, including a 41-11 advantage in the first half. Harrison Barnes led Sacramento with 28 points.

**Bulls 111, Raptors 105:** DeMar DeRozan scored 29 points, Zach LaVine added 23 and Chicago won at Toronto.

**Grizzlies 118, Spurs 110:** Ja Morant matched a season high with 41 points in Memphis' win at San Antonio.

**Mavericks 132, Trail Blazers 112:** Luka Doncic had 15 points, 10 rebounds and 15 assists for his sixth triple-double this season, and Dallas led wire-to-wire in its win at Portland.

**Heat 110, Knicks 96:** Duncan Robinson scored 25 points while shooting 7-for-11 from three-point range, leading four Miami players with 20 or more points in a victory over visiting New York.