

Stalemate still keeps McCarthy from post

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pressure mounting, the speaker's chair of the U.S. House sat empty for a third day Thursday, as Republican leader Kevin McCarthy failed anew on the seventh of an excruciating string of ballots to win enough votes from his party to seize the chamber's gavel.

One of McCarthy's steadfast critics, Rep. Matt Gaetz, of Florida, even cast his vote for Donald Trump, a symbolic gesture, but one that highlighted the former president's influence over the Republican Party.

The seventh vote for speaker turned out no different from the others, with McCarthy well short of the required majority.

McCarthy emerged from a morning meeting with colleagues at the Capitol determined to persuade Republican holdouts to end the stalemate that has blighted his new

GOP majority.

Despite endless talks, signs of concessions and a public spectacle unlike any other in recent political memory, the path ahead remained highly uncertain. The day started as the other two have, with Republican allies nominating him for now a seventh time to be speaker.

Republican John James, of Michigan, put McCarthy's name up for a vote, with a nod to history.

"My family's gone from being slaves to the floor of the United States House of Representatives" in five generations, said James, a newly elected lawmaker to be, who is Black.

He said that while the House Republicans were "stuck" at the moment, McCarthy, who has failed to seize a majority to become speaker, would ultimately win.

Democrat Hakeem Jeffries,

of New York, was re-nominated by Democrats.

Republican Party holdouts again put forward the name of fellow Rep. Byron Donalds, of Florida, assuring the stalemate that increasingly carried undercurrents of race and politics would continue.

Donalds, who is Black, is seen as a future party leader and counterpoint to the Democratic leader, Jeffries, who is the first Black leader of a major political party in Congress, on track himself to become speaker someday.

"We could have elected the first Black speaker of the United States House," said conservative Republican Dan Bishop, of North Carolina, who re-nominated Donalds on Thursday.

Democrats jumped to their feet in applause, as Jeffries is, in fact, closest to the gavel with the most votes on every ballot so far.

What started as a political novelty, the first time in 100 years a nominee had not won the gavel on the first vote, has devolved into a bitter Republican Party feud and deepening potential crisis.

McCarthy is under growing pressure from restless Republicans, and Democrats, to find the votes he needs or step aside, so the House can open fully and get on with the business of governing. His right-flank detractors appear intent on waiting him out, as long as it takes.

"We're having good discussions and I think everyone wants to find a solution," McCarthy told reporters shortly before the House was prepared to gavel into session again.

House Chaplain Margaret Kibben opened the day's session, perhaps the last of the week, calling on greater powers to "still the storms of dissent."

Military parents to receive more parental leave

BY JONATHAN SNYDER

Stars and Stripes

Military parents of newborns are entitled to up to four times more parental leave, depending on their roles, under the recently authorized National Defense Authorization Act.

Birth parents can now claim a maximum 18 weeks of non-chargeable leave, six more weeks than their previous benefit; non-birth parents are entitled to 12 weeks, up from three.

The new policy also allows service members to take parental leave in seven-day increments, if permitted by their commander.

"Commanders are encouraged to approve requests for incremental periods of parental leave," the policy states. "If the unit commander does not approve taking incremental parental leave, they must allow the member to take the full 12 weeks of pa-

rental leave in one continuous period."

President Joe Biden signed the fiscal 2023 NDAA, which funds the Department of Defense and other defense-related activities, on Dec. 23. The act allocates \$816.7 billion to the DOD.

For parental leave purposes, the act took effect Dec. 27; military parents are eligible for the expanded benefit if their children were born on or after that date, according to a news release Wednesday from the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Parents have one year from the birth of their child to exercise the expanded benefit.

Individual service branches have yet to issue their own specific guidance on parental leave in accordance with the new policy, which Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force JoAnne Bass acknowledged Monday on her Facebook page.

"We've been pretty transparent in that we are waiting on guidance from OSD to drop,"

she said in response to a comment on her post Monday. "Once that does, we are ready to push the service guidance. I understand the frustration ... as we've been pushing for this for awhile."

Birth parents, who previously received six weeks of convalescent leave, are entitled to 12 more for 18 total, according to the DOD release.

Their partners, the non-birth parents, are eligible for 12 weeks of non-chargeable leave following the birth or adoption of their child, or for long-term foster care.

No birth parent is designated in the event of an adoption or surrogate birth, for example.

Unit commanders are allowed some leeway in approving leave, according to the policy: "Unit commanders must balance the needs of the unit with the needs of the member to maximize opportunity to use parental leave."

US closer to sending Bradleys to Ukraine

The Washington Post

After months of resisting Kyiv's pleas for tanks to face increasingly dug-in Russian forces along the lengthy southern and eastern fronts, the United States and its allies are now poised to deliver a variety of armored fighting vehicles to Ukraine.

Asked Wednesday if U.S.-produced Bradley Fighting Vehicles were under consideration for transfer to Ukraine, President Joe Biden replied in the affirmative. A senior administration official said that Bradleys could be included in a package of weapons to be announced as soon as this week.

Earlier Wednesday, France said it would provide Ukraine with an unspecified number of light tanks.

The first supply of Western mobile armor is another major milestone in the escalating provision of advanced weaponry to Ukrainian forces, including heavy artillery and long-range precision rocket launchers. It comes just weeks after the Biden administration announced that it would supply Kyiv with a Patriot missile battery, the most sophisticated air defense weapon in the U.S. arsenal, to defend against waves of Russian missile and drone attacks on energy and civilian infrastructure far from the front line.

That line, where the Ukrainian military is engaged in a grueling fight for incremental gains against Russian ground forces, is spread for hundreds of miles along a north-south front in the eastern part of the country.

U.S. officials have said the Ukrainians need the ability to conduct combined arms maneuvers, with armored vehicles allowing them to engage the enemy and move forward while under fire.

The United States assesses that "there will be continued fighting along that line ... for the foreseeable future," a second senior administration official said, with little expectation that combat will slow during the winter months. In a shift from training only small units to operate specific weapons systems, the allies are now pulling thousands of Ukrainian soldiers off the front lines for combined maneuver training in Europe.

But until now, Ukraine's allies have rebuffed Kyiv, arguing that the Western armor is too logistically complicated to be useful.

Germany has repeatedly turned down Ukrainian requests for its Marder infantry fighting vehicles and Leopard 2 main battle tanks, largely on grounds that it didn't want to be the first to provide such weaponry.

Much of the West's hesitation to send advanced armaments has revolved around reluctance to provoke Russia to escalate the war. Decisions to send systems such as HIMARS, the U.S. precision rocket launchers that were first transferred last summer, have come as the situation on the battlefield "evolved," the second administration official said.

As expected, each advancement in arming Ukraine has brought charges from Russian

President Vladimir Putin that NATO is actively fighting a war against Russia. But it is Moscow's brutality, especially attacks against civilians, that has made the West more forward-leaning, administration officials counter.

"Let's just be crystal clear here," the second official said angrily. "Mr. Putin can claim all he wants that this is a war by the West," and he is fighting "essentially for [Russia's] security. ... We all know this is a bunch of BS. This is a Russian war of aggression on Ukraine."

"We are and will continue to provide them the kind of systems to defend themselves," this official said.

The decision to send armored combat vehicles comes just weeks after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urgently appealed for tanks during a lightning visit to Washington late last month. On Wednesday, in his nightly address to the Ukrainian people, Zelenskyy hailed the French announcement as "a clear signal to all our other partners: There is no rational reason why Ukraine has not yet been supplied with Western-style tanks. ... We must put an end to the Russian aggression this year exactly, and not postpone any of the defensive capabilities that can speed up the defeat of the terrorist state."

"Modern Western armored vehicles, Western-type tanks are just one of these key capabilities," Zelenskyy said.

Pentagon suspends F-35 engine deliveries after crash

BY DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has temporarily called off engine deliveries for the F-35 Lightning II fighter jet after a crash last month at a military base in Texas, officials said Wednesday.

The F-35 Joint Program Office said an agreement was reached between defense officials and Pratt & Whitney, the maker of the engines, to suspend the deliveries pending the outcome of the crash investigation.

"Currently, acceptance of new engines has been suspended," a JPO spokesperson said, adding the suspension began Dec. 27 — 12 days after the crash. "The length of the pause is currently to be determined, and it is hard to say how long it will last."

An Air Force pilot was testing an F-35B for the Marine Corps at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Fort Worth on Dec. 15 when the jet, which can take off and land vertically, encountered trouble while hovering above a runway.

The pilot slowly began to lose control and ejected safely after the plane sank toward the ground and bounced off the runway. The aircraft ultimately came to rest just off the runway and appeared to be largely intact.

Naval Air Systems Command is investigating but has not yet given an indication of what caused the crash.

The statement from the F-35 Joint Program Office on Wednesday that it suspended engine deliveries for the fifth-generation fighter jet came just days after it grounded

some F-35s due to the crash in Texas. The JPO is the military office that oversees life-cycle management of all three F-35 variants.

The length of the delivery blackout depends on what investigators find, the JPO spokesperson said.

"The root cause analysis and accident investigation need to be completed first," the spokesperson said.

The F-35 uses only one engine in flight, the turbofan Pratt & Whitney F135. The F-35B uses the engine's 600 model, which has a thrust vectoring nozzle that allows the flow of energy to be directed downward so the plane can hover and take off and land vertically. While the jet is hovering over the ground, the engine can produce more than 40,000 pounds of thrust.

Calif. storm causes over 180K outages

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Damaging winds and heavy rains hit California on Thursday, knocking out power to tens of thousands, causing flash flooding, and leaving a child dead after a tree fell on a home.

Officials had ordered evacuations in a high-risk coastal area where mudslides killed 23 people in 2018 as the huge storm barreled into the state Wednesday. Authorities warned residents to hunker down at home in anticipation of flooded roads, toppled trees and other risks.

In Sonoma County, Occidental Volunteer Fire Chief Ronald Lunardi said a child believed to be under 2 years old died Wednesday night after a tree fell on a home, *The Press Democrat* reported.

The storm dumped rain in parts of the San Francisco Bay Area, where the region had been under flood warnings. In South-

ern California, the storm was expected to peak into early Thursday, with Santa Barbara and Ventura counties likely to see the most rain, forecasters said.

“We anticipate that this may be one of the most challenging and impactful series of storms to touch down in California in the last five years,” said Nancy Ward, director of the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed said at a news conference that the city was “preparing for a war.” Crews cleared clogged storm drains, tried to move homeless people into shelters and passed out emergency supplies and ponchos to those who refused to go.

The city distributed so many sandbags to residents that supplies temporarily ran out.

Powerful winds gusting to 85 mph or

more forced the cancellation of more than 70 flights at San Francisco International Airport and downed trees and power lines. Firefighters rescued a family after a tree fell onto their car. The fire department reported “large pieces of glass” fell off the Fox Plaza tower near the Civic Center, although no injuries were reported. It was “highly possible” the damage was wind-related, the department tweeted.

More than 180,000 homes and businesses were without power in California early Thursday, according to poweroutage.us.

The storm is the latest of three so-called atmospheric river storms in the last week to reach the drought-stricken state. California Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency to allow for a quick response and to aid in cleanup from another powerful storm that hit just days earlier.

Vehicle sales decrease 8% to lowest since 2011

Associated Press

DETROIT — Shortages of computer chips and other parts continued to hobble the U.S. auto industry last year, contributing to vehicle sales dropping 8% from 2021 to their lowest level in more than a decade.

But there’s good news for consumers in the gloomy numbers: Vehicle supplies on dealer lots are growing, albeit slowly, and automakers expect at least a small easing in prices this year as inventories grow.

Automakers reported Wednesday that they sold 13.9 million cars, trucks, SUVs and vans last year as the parts shortage limited factory output amid high demand for new vehicles. It was the lowest sales number

since 2011 when the economy was recovering from the Great Recession.

But sales were up slightly in the fourth quarter and inventories grew as parts supplies improved enough to increase production a little. Analysts are now expecting sales to grow by roughly 1 million to around 14.8 million this year as demand remains strong. But they’ll still be far short of the normal 17 million per year before the pandemic.

With many models still in short supply, though, the average new vehicle price rose 2.5% in December to a record of just over \$46,000, according to J.D Power.

There are signs, however, that prices may be starting to ebb a little as inventories ex-

pand.

Toyota, for instance, finished the year with just under 24,000 vehicles on Toyota and Lexus brand dealer lots nationwide. That’s up from about 19,000 at the end of 2021, but still far short of the 300,000 during normal years before the pandemic.

The improvement, although small, is allowing consumers to haggle a little on some slower-selling vehicles such as sedans, and even some luxury vehicles. But they’re still getting top dollar for gas-electric hybrids and other more popular vehicles that are sold before they arrive on lots, said David Christ, general manager of the Toyota Division.

Jobless aid applications fall to lowest in months

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for jobless benefits fell to the lowest level in more than three months last week, reflecting a still-robust job market despite the Federal Reserve’s efforts to cool the economy and bring down decades-high inflation.

Applications for unemployment aid for the week ending Dec. 31 fell by 19,000 to 204,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The labor market is closely monitored

by Fed policymakers, who raised interest rates seven times last year in a bid to slow job growth and bring down stubbornly high inflation. So far, there has been little indication that it has weakened the job market enough to for the Fed to alter its course in 2023.

Also Thursday morning, the payroll processing firm ADP reported that the U.S. economy gained 235,000 jobs, well above expectations.

U.S. futures dropped sharply on worries that a hot jobs market will mean the Fed

will continue with aggressive rate hikes well into the new year.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 6,750 to 213,750.

Jobless claims are generally viewed as a proxy for layoffs, which have been relatively low since the pandemic wiped out roughly 20 million jobs in the spring of 2020.

About 1.69 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Dec. 24, about 24,000 fewer than the week before.

Police: Idaho suspect's DNA found at crime scene

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — The DNA of the man accused of killing four University of Idaho students was found on a knife sheath recovered at the crime scene and cellphone data shows that in the months before the attack, he was in the area of the victims' home multiple times, an investigator said in court documents unsealed Thursday.

The affidavit written by Brett Payne, a police corporal in Moscow, Idaho, was made public minutes before Bryan Kohberger, a 28-year-old criminal justice doctoral student at nearby Washington State University, was due to appear in court after being extradited Wednesday from Pennsylvania, where his parents live and where he was arrested. He is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and felony burglary in the Nov. 13 attack.

According to the newly unsealed court documents, traces of DNA from a lone male later determined to be Kohberger were found on a leather knife sheath found in the rental home where the victims were killed. The sheath had a U.S. Marine Corps insignia on it, though there's no record of Kohberger having served in the military.

A woman who also lived at the house told

police that she awoke to the sound of crying during the attack and opened her bedroom door to find a masked man dressed in black, according to the court filing.

She said she stood in "frozen shock" as the man, whom she didn't recognize, walked past her and toward a glass sliding door, the investigator wrote. She then went back into her room and locked the door.

Surveillance footage captured near the home showed a white sedan — later identified as a Hyundai Elantra — drove by the home three times in the early morning hours of Nov. 13, returning a fourth time at about 4:04 a.m. The car was next spotted on surveillance cameras leaving King Road 16 minutes later "at a high rate of speed," Payne wrote. The same car was later spotted on a different camera headed toward Pullman.

Meanwhile, location data from Kohberger's cellphone showed he had traveled to the area of the victims' residence at least a dozen times between late June and the night of the killings, authorities said. Investigators haven't disclosed a possible motive or said whether they think Kohberger knew any of the victims — Kaylee Goncalves, Madison Mogen, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin.

Faithful mourn Benedict XVI at requiem Mass

Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis joined tens of thousands of faithful in bidding farewell to Benedict XVI at a rare requiem Mass Thursday for a dead pope presided over by a living one, ending an unprecedented decade for the Catholic Church that was sparked by the German theologian's decision to retire.

Bells tolled and the crowd applauded as pallbearers carried Benedict's cypress coffin out of the fog-shrouded St. Peter's Basilica and placed it before the altar in the square outside. Wearing the crimson vestments typical of papal funerals, Francis opened the service with a prayer and closed it by solemnly blessing the simple casket — decorated only with the former pope's coat of arms.

In between, Francis made only fleeting reference to Benedict in his homily, offering a meditation on Christ instead of a eulogy of his predecessor's legacy before the casket was sealed and entombed in the basilica grotto.

Heads of state and royalty, clergy from around the world and thousands of regular people flocked to the subdued ceremony, despite Benedict's request for simplicity and official efforts to keep the first funeral for a pope emeritus in modern times low-key.

Many mourners hailed from Benedict's native Bavaria and donned traditional dress, including boiled wool coats to guard against the morning chill.

"We came to pay homage to Benedict and wanted to be here today to say goodbye," said Raymond Mainar, who traveled from a small village east of Munich for the funeral. "He was a very good pope."

Ignoring exhortations for decorum at the end, some in the crowd held banners or shouted "Santo Subito!" — "Sainthood Now!" — echoing the spontaneous chants that erupted during St. John Paul II's 2005 funeral.

The former Joseph Ratzinger, who died Dec. 31 at age 95, is considered one of the 20th century's greatest theologians and spent his lifetime upholding church doctrine. But he will go down in history for a singular, revolutionary act that changed the future of the papacy: He retired, the first pope in six centuries to do so.

Beijing hospital runs out of beds as virus cases continue to spread

Associated Press

BEIJING — Patients, mostly older people, lay on stretchers in hallways or took oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as a COVID-19 outbreak stretched public health facilities' resources in China's capital Beijing, even after its reported peak.

The Chuiyangliu hospital in the city's east was packed Thursday with newly arrived patients. Beds ran out by midmorning, even as ambulances continued to bring more people in. Hard-pressed nurses and doctors rushed to take information and triage the most urgent cases.

The crush of people seeking hospital care follows China's abandonment of its most severe pandemic restrictions last month after nearly three years of lockdowns, travel bans and school closures that weighed heavily on the economy and prompted unusual street

protests in a country that quashes political dissent.

The outbreak appears to have spread the fastest in densely populated cities first. Now, authorities are concerned as it reaches smaller towns and rural areas with weaker health care systems. Several local governments began asking people Thursday not to make the trip home for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday, signaling lingering worry around opening up.

Overseas, a growing number of governments are requiring virus tests for travelers from China, saying they are needed because the Chinese government is not sharing enough information on the outbreak. The European Union on Wednesday "strongly encouraged" its member states to impose pre-departure COVID-19 testing, though not all have done so.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Sheriff: Burglars call 911 to get help moving goods

FL POINCIANA — Two people in Florida were arrested after one of them made a 911 call to get help with moving their belongings from a home they were burglarizing, authorities said.

Deputies responded to a home Saturday after a 911 call was made but nobody spoke, the Polk County Sheriff's Office said. At the home, the deputies concluded that nobody lived there, but they found a male suspect and his girlfriend inside the home after entering it through an unlocked door.

Deputies had been searching for the male suspect after identifying him from security video as a burglar at a Dollar General store in Poinciana, Fla., the sheriff's office said.

While talking to deputies, the female suspect told them that she had called 911 for the purpose of having law enforcement help them move their belongings from the house they were burglarizing.

They also wanted to get a ride to the airport so they could spend the weekend in New York, the sheriff's office said.

Ski resort worker dies after chairlift incident

UT PARK CITY — An employee at a Utah ski resort died Monday after being ejected from a chairlift shaken by a tree that fell onto a lift cable, resort officials and police said.

Representatives of Park City Mountain and the Summit County Sheriff said a 29-year-old resort employee fell at least

25 feet from the Short Cut chairlift into a deep ravine around 11:25 a.m.

The Park City ski patrol attempted to treat his injuries and evacuated 10 others who also were on the chairlift.

Summit County Sheriff Capt. Andrew Wright told KSL-TV that the man was a ski patroller who fell to terrain that was difficult to access. Ski patrol members took at least 20 minutes to reach the victim and dig him out of what deputies called "chest-deep snow" before attempting to treat him.

Ruling backs teacher who wore MAGA hat at school

WA VANCOUVER — The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled in favor of a former teacher in Vancouver, Wash., concluding that his wearing a hat supporting former President Donald Trump to school was protected speech under the First Amendment.

Court documents show that science teacher Eric Dodge brought the "Make America Great Again" baseball cap with him to an Evergreen Public Schools building twice before the 2019-20 school year, The Columbian reported.

The first occasion was to a staff-only cultural sensitivity and racial bias training.

Wy'east Middle School Principal Caroline Garrett allegedly told him to use better judgment. Dodge said he was "verbally attacked" by Garrett and other school employees after bringing the hat again, and that retaliation amounted to a violation of his First Amendment rights.

The appeals panel concluded

in a Dec. 29 ruling that the district failed to show evidence of a "tangible disruption" to school operations necessary to outweigh the teacher's First Amendment rights, the court ruled.

Dodge resigned in 2020.

Guardsmen rescue Appalachian Trail hikers

TN KNOXVILLE — The Tennessee National Guard says it has used a military helicopter to rescue two hikers who were stranded on the Appalachian Trail.

In a news release, the Guard said the hikers were stranded on Dec. 31 due to sheer cliffs and drop-offs during early morning darkness in the Sampson Mountain Wilderness Area, south of Johnson City. The Guard said the Greene County Sheriff's Office requested the air support after deputies were unable to reach the hikers.

The crew from the 1-230th Assault Helicopter Battalion in Knoxville made the rescue that morning and administered aid during the brief flight to the hospital. The Guard said the hikers have recovered from minor injuries.

NTSB: Airline worker 'ingested' into engine

AL MONTGOMERY — An airline ground crew worker was pulled into the engine of a plane during a fatal accident at an Alabama airport, authorities said.

The National Transportation Safety Board said in a statement that the Embraer 170 aircraft operated by regional carrier Envoy Air "was parked at the gate with the parking brake

set when a ground support personnel was ingested into the engine."

The Saturday accident at the Montgomery Regional Airport is under investigation and a preliminary report is expected in two or three weeks, the agency said.

The flight was set to depart Montgomery for Dallas-Fort Worth before the accident, according to officials.

The airport said the ground crew employee worked for Piedmont Airlines, another American subsidiary.

Gray whale calf born in front of amazed crowd

CA DANA POINT — Spectators on a Southern California whale-watching cruise were excited when they spotted a gray whale, then amazed when the giant mammal gave birth right in front of them.

The birth and the first moments of the calf's life were recorded on cellphone and drone video Monday off Dana Point, south of Los Angeles.

Passengers and crew on a boat operated by Capt. Dave's Dolphin & Whale Safari spotted blood in the water and initially worried the 35-foot gray whale might be injured. The boat's captain, Gary Brighthouse, said when everyone realized they were witnessing a birth, the mood turned celebratory.

"It went from horror to pure joy and astonishment," Brighthouse told the Orange County Register. "It moved me to my core."

— From wire reports



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Packers' surge brings back 2016 memories

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers didn't make any bold proclamations about running the table this time around.

That said, the similarities between the Green Bay Packers' current turnaround and their remarkable run to the NFC championship game back in 2016 otherwise are too obvious to ignore.

After losing eight of their first 12 games, the Packers (8-8) have won four consecutive games and will reach the playoffs if they beat the Detroit Lions (8-8) on Sunday night at Lambeau Field. That 2016 team rebounded from a 4-6 start to win eight in a row before losing to the Atlanta Falcons with a Super Bowl bid at stake.

"Now, that (2016) team had some guys who'd been a part of winning some really big football games," Rodgers said. "This team has less of those guys. But I just think this team is a little bit more talented top to bottom. Definitely on the back end, the

way our guys play in this defense, I think, guy-for-guy is probably a little bit better on that side of the ball. Offense is probably pretty similar. And then we have (kick returner) Keisean Nixon."

The current Packers who played on that 2016 team included Rodgers, offensive tackle David Bakhtiari, defensive tackle Kenny Clark, kicker Mason Crosby, wide receiver Randall Cobb and injured defensive lineman Dean Lowry.

"It definitely has some similarities, the course of the season, the way that it went," Cobb said. "For us to battle back and be in this situation and have an opportunity, that's all you can ask for."

Rodgers said back in 2016 he believed the Packers would "run the table" before they went on that streak. The four-time MVP quarterback didn't make a similar prediction this time, but said after the 41-17 victory over the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday that he had a good feeling

the Packers would make a late run.

He recalled thinking when the Packers were 3-6 that if they could win just one of their next three games — home matchups with Dallas and Tennessee plus a trip to Philadelphia — they could win their final five games. Green Bay beat Dallas in overtime then lost the next two games, but has gone 4-0 since while plenty of other results involving other teams have fallen their way.

"There was something in there that had hope, but it was a fool's hope at the time I think," Rodgers said. "And so much had to happen, which is why, like I said Sunday night, I had to wrap my head around the scenarios and find a peace in that."

These Packers have relied on a different formula than that 2016 team.

Rodgers led the way in 2016 by throwing 15 touchdown passes without an interception in a six-game winning streak to end the regular season. He then

threw six touchdown passes with only one interception in Green Bay's two playoff victories while throwing to a potent receiving group featuring Jordy Nelson, Davante Adams and Cobb.

The 39-year-old Rodgers has been solid but unspectacular over the past four games — he has thrown only one touchdown pass in each of them — but Green Bay's defense has come on strong after underachieving for much of the season.

During their four-game winning streak, the Packers have forced the same number of turnovers (12) that they did through their first 12 games of the season.

"I'd like to be 15 and 0," Rodgers said. "That was a fun run. But those are different teams. Different players, different mindset, different scheme. I just need to be efficient. If I'm efficient and taking care of the football as best I can, making the right checks, I can still impact the game in a positive way."

Raiders' Jacobs shakes off injuries, piles up yards

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — It's another game week, which means more questions about Raiders running back Josh Jacobs' injury status.

His availability, however, is seldom in question.

Jacobs has played through plenty of pain this season, and this week is coping with hip and oblique injuries as Las Vegas prepares to host the Kansas City Chiefs on Saturday.

Raiders coach Josh McDaniels said Wednesday that he would have to wait and see if Jacobs will be able to play against the Chiefs.

"We'll be smart with him obviously," McDaniels said. "I'm not sure how many more words I can find to describe what he's done — tough, dependable, prepared really hard every week. He's been durable. He's had the ball more than any other player on our team, clearly, and he's really done a great job of keeping himself healthy and available all season long even though he's

been banged up a number of different times."

Jacobs usually meets with the media on Wednesdays, but was not at the Raiders' facility for personal reasons.

After Sunday's 37-34 loss to the San Francisco 49ers, Jacobs said he had a responsibility to do everything he could to be ready to play.

"Like I tell these guys, I wouldn't be able to look them in the eye if I know that I could play or give it everything I had and I don't do it," he said. "That's the type of person I am, and that's the type of respect that I have for them. So I lay it out there every time I can."

That included against the 49ers.

Jacobs injured his oblique on the game's first play from scrimmage and had to go the locker room. He returned in the second quarter and finished with 69 yards and a touchdown on 17 carries.

Nothing new there.

Jacobs entered the Nov. 27 game at Seattle questionable with a calf injury and

wasn't cleared until shortly before kickoff. All he did was total 303 yards from scrimmage, including 229 yards rushing and two touchdowns.

Those TDs included an 86-yard burst up the middle for the touchdown in overtime of the 40-34 victory over the Seahawks.

He was listed as questionable again the following week against the Los Angeles Chargers, but rushed for 144 yards and a TD in the 27-20 victory.

"When you've got a guy like Josh that obviously has the pinkie and the calf he battled through ... that's what I expect from him now after knowing who he is," wide receiver Davante Adams said. "It's not something you can expect from just anybody, though."

Even with all the injuries, Jacobs leads in the NFL with 1,608 yards rushing — 160 more than Cleveland's Nick Chubb.

Marcus Allen in 1985 was the last Raider to lead the league in rushing when he gained 1,759 yards. That is also the franchise high, so Jacobs has a shot at that record.

Georgia's defense looking to bounce back

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Georgia's proud defense has allowed a combined 71 points in its two postseason games, including the 42-41 last-minute win over Ohio State in the College Football Playoff semifinal.

Even against stiff competition in the postseason, when higher-scoring games can be expected, that's a humbling and somewhat shocking development for No. 1 Georgia (14-0) as it heads into Monday night's national championship game against No. 3 TCU (13-1).

The Bulldogs, who led the nation in scoring defense while winning last season's national championship and ranked second entering this postseason, aren't accustomed to giving up so many points.

"We didn't play our best game," defensive back Javon Bullard said. "But there's a whole lot we can fix ... communication and things like that, just the basic things like that,

knowing your leverage, talking. I know we've got to talk better throughout the secondary."

Now come the Horned Frogs, who average 41.1 points per game to rank fifth in the nation following a 51-45 win over Michigan in the Fiesta Bowl semifinal.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart may be bracing for yet another shootout. He said he had no quick explanation for the lack of defense in the CFP semifinals, which saw 179 points combined.

"I don't know how to pinpoint it," Smart said. "I don't know. Traditionally, the teams that are in these games, they're pretty good offensively. You'd like to say they're also pretty good defensively, but I think the studies and numbers indicate that as the season goes on and especially the semifinal and final games, scoring has to be going up."

Even after having five defensive players selected in the first round of last spring's NFL draft,

Georgia's defense was strong again during the season. The Bulldogs allowed a combined 64 points in their first seven games; five games had 10 or fewer points allowed, including two shutouts.

Thanks to that, Georgia's defense still ranks near the top of the national leaders. After leading the nation with its average of 10.2 points allowed last season, Georgia ranks fifth at 14.8. Georgia is 11th with 304.6 yards allowed per game.

Georgia had to play several freshmen late against Ohio State. Outside linebacker became a position of concern after Nolan Smith's season-ending pectoral injury against Florida on Oct. 29. The position took another hit against Ohio State when Chaz Chambliss needed help leaving the field with an apparent left knee injury.

Among freshmen who played on defense last week were starting safety Malaki Starks, defensive end Mykel Williams and li-

nebacker Jalon Walker.

Smart said the freshmen "didn't actually do what they were supposed to do every play" and he hopes to have all his injured players back for TCU.

"We don't make excuses around here and talk about injuries and these problems, but we've had our fair share," Smart said. "And nobody feels sorry for us and don't want anybody to. But we have to get those guys ready to play at a higher level."

Georgia beat LSU 50-30 in the Southeastern Conference championship game, allowing 502 passing yards. Then Ohio State's C.J. Stroud passed for 348 yards and four touchdowns against the Bulldogs..

"We finished the job and did what we had to do," linebacker Smael Mondon said after the game. "We didn't play our best game and know we'll have to play a lot better. We have to go finish the drill."

Title-seeking TCU used to being the underdog

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Big right guard Wes Harris and his TCU teammates are hearing again just how big and physical their next opponent is and how much of an underdog they are against Georgia in the national championship game.

They heard a lot of the same things going into their College Football Playoff semifinal against Big Ten champion Michigan, which is sitting at home while the Horned Frogs (13-1) get ready to play the defending national champions Monday night.

"It just kind of lights a fire underneath you," Harris said Tuesday. "Definitely gave us a little bit of extra juice. We were tired of hearing about it ... and were able to make a statement to show we were a physical football team, too."

Immediately after their 51-45 win in the Fiesta Bowl on New Year's Eve, first-year Frogs coach Sonny Dykes said he felt they were the definitely the most physical team on the field. TCU had four sacks and out-rushed Michigan 263 yards to 186, even after

the Wolverines had a 54-yard run on the game's very first snap.

"We knew we were a physical team, and we got to show that during the game, and we've got to keep the same mindset," said defensive end Dylan Horton, who had all four of those sacks.

The Horned Frogs are listed as 13½-point underdogs against Georgia (14-0) in the championship game, according to Fanduel Sportsbook. They were 7½-point underdogs against Michigan.

Linebacker Dee Winters said the predictions were simply fuel for the team.

"Obviously being the underdog is something we're not unfamiliar with," added standout receiver Quentin Johnston. "So going to try to just keep moving like we did the rest of the season. And keep our heads to the ground and keep playing football."

TCU's only loss this season was in overtime to Kansas State in the Big 12 championship game after Heisman Trophy runner-up Max Duggan led them to 11 points in the final 7½ minutes of regulation to tie the game. The

Frogs won five games in the regular season by coming from behind after halftime, including double-digit deficits in back-to-back games against Top 25 teams in October.

"The interesting thing was we felt like we've been a physical team all year. And I think those inside the football program certainly recognize that," Dykes said. "We felt like our success in the second half was because of that physical play, that mentality that we carried, really, all season. As the game went along, we felt like our guys got stronger and got more physical. And that's been, you know, pretty consistent really throughout the year."

Dykes sees a lot of similarities in Georgia and Michigan, though he believes the Bulldogs are more athletic, including their "typical SEC defensive ends" that are physical with great speed and skills.

"That's kind of the whole team," Dykes said. "It's just a very athletic football team, what you would expect from a defending national championship team and a team that's been No. 1 for most of the year."

Suns on brink, and not in a good way

Associated Press

Only 18 months ago, the Phoenix Suns were on the brink. They held a 2-0 lead over the Milwaukee Bucks in the NBA Finals. They were two wins away from the parade. Chris Paul was finally going to get his ring. Suns in Four was not just a stadium chant but a very real possibility.

The Suns are on the brink again now.

A very different brink.

A team that lost 18 games in the entirety of the 2021-22 regular season lost its 19th game of this regular season — with 43 games left to play — on Wednesday, a 90-88 loss at Cleveland that was their fourth straight defeat. That came on the heels of an embarrassing 102-83 loss to New York on Monday, the score making it seem closer than it really was. The game was really over with 4:30 left in the first half, the Knicks then holding a 52-20 lead.

Phoenix managed its fewest points since November 2018, a span of 372 games, including playoffs. The bigger issue was the lack of ... well, whatever has set the Suns apart over the last

two-plus years.

“It’s a mindboggling thing,” Suns coach Monty Williams said. “It’s happened too many times to this team.”

In the past four weeks, the Suns are 4-12; only Charlotte, at 3-12 in that span, has been worse. In fairness, Phoenix is missing Devin Booker, who was playing at an All-NBA level and likely will be sidelined a few more weeks with a left groin strain. But it wasn’t exactly going perfectly when Booker was healthy, either.

Some things have gone as expected, or better than expected, in the NBA so far this season. League-leading Boston hasn’t missed a beat because of Ime Udoka’s suspension and Joe Mazzulla taking over as interim coach. New Orleans and Memphis had high hopes after the way they finished last season; right now, they’re both among the best in the Western Conference. Brooklyn, when there’s no drama, has been as good as anyone in the NBA. Milwaukee, the team that beat the Suns in those 2021 NBA Finals, looks poised for a deep postseason run.

And then there’s the surprises of the not-good variety. Phoenix is 20-19 with three games left until the season’s midpoint. The Suns are in play-in tournament range and headed in the wrong direction. There’s still time, sure, but efforts like Monday don’t give much reason for hope.

“I don’t even know what’s going on,” Suns center Deandre Ayton said. “For me, I could tell you this: I’m not used to the no fight in us.”

Championship windows usually don’t close in an instant. It happened that way in Chicago in 1998 when Michael Jordan and Phil Jackson left the Bulls and the franchise started over after six titles in eight years. It could be argued it happened that way when LeBron James left Cleveland in 2010, Miami in 2014 and Cleveland again in 2018. What’s more typical, though, is a team tends to age out, fall apart, see the locker room bonds start to fade or some combination thereof.

It might be all the above in Phoenix’s case.

Jae Crowder — who has leadership skills that teammates

from other stops in his NBA career rave about — has held out all season, remains under contract to the Suns on paper only and clearly is missed. Tension between Williams and past No. 1 overall pick Ayton was a storyline in the preseason. It’s been a question mark since as well, but perception might not exactly mirror reality. A video shot from the stands of a Phoenix loss to Washington in December seemed to show Williams and Ayton getting heated during a timeout, but what was really happening was Ayton was having a back-and-forth with teammate Mikal Bridges and Williams wanted them both to shut up.

“We were just going at each other,” Bridges said. “I apologized to him.”

Regardless, it wasn’t a happy huddle. The Suns haven’t had many of those in a while.

Nobody over the last 2½ seasons has a better regular-season record than the Suns, and it isn’t close — they’ve won 70% of their games in that span, Philadelphia has won 64% to be second on that list. But this current version of the Suns looks nothing like a contender.

Reynas reported Berhalter incident, creating turmoil

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The U.S. soccer team was plunged into public turmoil Wednesday when the family of former U.S. captain Claudio Reyna said it notified the U.S. Soccer Federation of a decades-old incident involving Gregg Berhalter and his wife in response to the coach’s disparagement of Claudio’s son, young star Gio Reyna.

Berhalter said Tuesday his 1991 behavior in which he kicked the woman who would become his wife was “shameful” and that he was “looking forward to continuing my conversations with U.S. Soccer about the future.”

The U.S. Soccer Federation has commissioned an investigation by an outside law firm, along with the staff review of the team’s performance over the four-year cy-

cle. All of it leaves the program’s leadership uncertain as the run-up begins to the 2026 World Cup, which the United States will co-host.

“Obviously this is a not a positive time for soccer in this country and for our men’s national team,” USSF president Cindy Parlow Cone said Wednesday during a news conference.

The controversy has become a messy public dispute involving Berhalter; Claudio Reyna, who was the best man at Berhalter’s wedding; Danielle Egan Reyna, a former U.S. women’s player; Rosalind Santana Berhalter, the coach’s wife and Egan’s college roommate; and Gio Reyna, the 20-year-old midfielder limited to 53 minutes by Berhalter at the 2022 World Cup.

For the time being, Anthony Hudson, a

member of Berhalter’s staff, will coach the team ahead of exhibitions against Serbia on Jan. 25 and Colombia three days later.

USFF sporting director Earnie Stewart, a former teammate of Reyna’s and Berhalter’s, has been delegated by Parlow Cone and the USSF board to make a coaching recommendation.

Danielle Reyna said she told Stewart of the 1991 incident on Dec. 11, five days after Berhalter made remarks that clearly were criticism of Gio Reyna.

“I wanted to let him know that I was absolutely outraged and devastated that Gio had been put in such a terrible position, and that I felt very personally betrayed by the actions of someone my family had considered a friend for decades,” Danielle Reyna said in a statement Wednesday.