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US, Japan deepen ties to counter threats

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Japan will take a more proactive role in its own defense as part of an agreement Wednesday between the United States and Japan to deepen their military and security cooperation and bring more stability to the Indo-Pacific region.

“Today, we welcomed a historic alliance decision to optimize U.S. force posture in Japan,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at a joint news conference as part of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting at the State Department.

Enhancing bilateral cooperation to counter potential threats from China and North Korea was at the center of the talks, which included Austin, Japanese defense minister Yasukazu Hamada, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.

The leaders said the driving force for the new arrangements boils down to making it easier for Washington and Tokyo to

uphold rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has taken on increased importance in recent years due to tension over the sovereignty of Taiwan and provocative Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

An adjustment of U.S. troops in Okinawa and Japanese plans to build new runways on an island used for military exercises are part of the new agreement. Tokyo has also agreed to develop counter-strike capabilities and double defense spending by 2027, pledges that signal a major shift in traditional Japanese military policy.

“I’m grateful that we’re meeting at such a consequential time as Japan strengthens its own defense and further contributes to regional peace and stability,” Austin said.

Another part of the new pact includes creating the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment — an improved quick-strike force — on Okinawa by 2025. Austin said the unit will be quicker, more lethal, more capable and will operate with more intelligence, surveillance and transportation

capabilities.

Austin said the enhanced agreements reflect the “iron-clad commitment” by the U.S. to defend Japan with all its capabilities, including nuclear weapons, and counter China’s “destabilizing actions” in the region.

Colin Kahl, the undersecretary of defense for policy, called the growing U.S.-Japanese alliance an “enduring cornerstone of a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

In recent weeks, the Pentagon has repeatedly identified China as the top U.S. military and economic competitor and has labeled North Korea as a prominent “pacing challenge.”

“We agree that [China] is the greatest shared strategic challenge,” Blinken said. “Our alliance has never been more crucial to realizing a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

The deepening ties between Washington and Tokyo will also include new cooperation in space, the officials said Wednesday. Specifics on this, however, won’t be shared until

later this week.

“We agreed that attacks to, from or within space present a clear challenge,” Blinken said. “That is significant.”

Wednesday’s talks were a prelude to a meeting at the White House on Friday between Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Earlier this week, Kishida struck a new defense pact with Britain that is also aimed at reining in China. Hamada will meet with Austin again at the Pentagon on Thursday.

Tensions have been rising for years between the U.S. and China over several issues — from trade to the coronavirus and Taiwan’s status as a sovereign territory. Other tensions have centered on various Chinese military actions in the South China Sea. Most recently, the Pentagon said a Chinese fighter jet in late December unsafely “buzzed” an Air Force reconnaissance plane there — at one point coming within about 20 feet of the U.S. aircraft’s nose, forcing the pilot to take quick action to avoid a crash.

Another Biden search yields more documents

From wire reports

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden’s legal team found additional classified documents when they searched a second location after finding secret government papers in a different Biden office in early November, according to a person familiar with the investigation.

Earlier this week, an attorney for Biden said the president’s personal lawyers had discovered a small number of classified documents at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, an institute in downtown Washington that Biden started after serving as vice president. People familiar with the matter said that dis-

covery involved about 10 classified documents.

Biden’s lawyers notified government agencies, and the Justice Department opened an investigation to see how the classified material got there and whether there was any other material that should be under government lock and key.

Legal representatives for the president found additional classified material at a second location, a person said Wednesday, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation. The person would not say when that material was found. The second batch of classified material was first reported by NBC News.

Spokesmen for the Justice Department, the FBI and the White House declined to comment Wednesday.

Biden acknowledged on Thursday that a document with classified markings from his time as vice president was found in his “personal library” at his home in Wilmington, Del., along with other documents found in his garage.

Biden told reporters at the White House that he is “cooperating fully and completely” with a Justice Department investigation into how classified information and government records made their way to his home and the office of his former institute in Washington.

Vaccine refusers react to mandate reversal

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Some active-duty service members who refused the COVID-19 vaccine and faced expulsion from the military say a recent Defense Department announcement rescinding the mandatory inoculation order is a hollow victory.

The action, which was announced earlier this week by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and is required by the defense authorization bill passed last month, doesn't address damage to military careers or restore the faith of service members sidelined by their refusal to take the vaccine, said Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Caroline Crumbacker.

"It feels like I should be able to take a breath and feel like I got the outcome I wanted," said Crumbacker, who is assigned to Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy and isn't certain whether she will continue her military career past her January 2025 enlistment end date. "But at the same time, I can't let my guard down."

Crumbacker and other unvaccinated service members said they felt trivialized and ostracized because of their objections and were sidelined when it came to deployments, training and other opportunities.

The Pentagon directive issued Tuesday lets commanders continue to decide whether unvaccinated service members are assigned or deployed to any country, including those with a vaccine requirement. Such restrictions may limit career progression.

"I feel like the next four years would be me trying to undo the past year-and-a-half, two years just to get back to the spot where I was

already competitively (for advancement)," said Crumbacker, who at one time thought she would complete 20 years in the Navy. "Why would I want to stay in an organization that treated me like that when (I) was struggling?"

Although Austin rescinded his August 2021 mandate requiring troops to be vaccinated against COVID-19, he made it clear he believed the order was correct, saying the department would continue to promote and encourage the vaccinations.

"All commanders have the responsibility and authority to preserve the department's compelling interest in mission accomplishment," Austin stated.

While the memo ended pending involuntary separations for unvaccinated service members who asked for waivers on religious, medical or administrative grounds, it didn't help the thousands already pushed out of the service solely for refusing the vaccine.

Austin said 96% of all active-duty and reserve service members combined are fully vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says COVID-19 vaccinations are safe and effective in preventing disease and minimizing the risk of hospitalization or death in immunized people who contract the virus.

A 2022 study found that mRNA vaccines were 90% effective in preventing death from COVID-19 in adults 60 days after they received a second booster shot, according to data on the CDC website.

Many unvaccinated service members who sought waivers saw their requests de-

nied.

For example, the Navy and Army have involuntarily separated 1,639 and 1,851 active-duty service members, respectively, for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine, according to the latest data available on their websites.

In addition, 402 Navy reserve sailors have been involuntarily separated for refusing the vaccine. No Army National Guard or Army Reservists have been separated for the same reason, the data show.

Meanwhile, the Navy has approved 16 permanent medical and 51 permanent religious accommodation requests for active-duty and reserve personnel. The Army had approved 65 permanent medical and 123 permanent religious waiver requests as of Dec. 8.

Involuntary separation data for the Air Force wasn't included with its December COVID-19 update.

For the Marine Corps, 3,717 of its members had been separated as of Dec. 1 for refusing the vaccine, according to the service's website.

The service had approved 23 waivers on religious grounds and 333 medical or administrative exemptions, according to the data.

Army Sgt. Louis Paulsen, who is assigned to a base near Naples, Italy, said his request for a religious accommodation and subsequent appeal were denied.

On Thursday, he was uncertain whether he still faces an adverse action because of his refusal to take the vaccine. Paulsen said he hadn't received any notification of a change in his status and was not aware of a documented change in Army policy.

Marines cite 'loss of trust,' fire school's commander

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Marine Corps Col. John L. Medeiros was fired Tuesday from his post as the commander of the Assault Amphibian School at Camp Pendleton due to a "loss of trust and confidence" following an investigation into a nonfatal training accident that occurred at the California base, service officials said.

Brig. Gen. Farrell J. Sullivan, commander of the Marine Corps' Training Command, made the decision to relieve Medeiros because of information obtained while investigating the October accident, according to a

news release from the command.

However, the release does not clarify if the information was related to the accident or another issue.

The investigation into the training accident is ongoing, according to the command.

On Oct. 13, an Amphibious Combat Vehicle assigned to the school suffered a "reported mechanical malfunction" and overturned into the surf, according to a USNI report.

No injuries were reported, but the incident led the Marine Corps to stop waterborne operations in the surf zone until fur-

ther review.

The wheeled ACV is replacing the Marine Corps' aging fleet of tracked Assault Amphibious Vehicles, and Training Command said Wednesday that the Marine Corps is prioritizing safety and standardization in its training environment as part of the transition.

The command did not say who will serve as the school's commander until a replacement is named.

The Assault Amphibian School trains Marines on ACV and Assault Amphibious Vehicle operations and maintenance.

Snowpack helps California combat drought

Los Angeles Times

At the University of California, Berkeley Central Sierra Snow Laboratory in Donner Pass on Wednesday, snow was piled so high that lead scientist Andrew Schwartz no longer needed stairs to exit the second floor.

“We just walk directly out onto the snow!” Schwartz said. The nearly 11 feet of snow surrounding the lab was the deepest he’d seen so far this year.

The piles of powder are the result of a series of powerful atmospheric river storms that have pummeled California over the last two weeks. The storms have claimed at least 19 lives as they topple trees, overtop levees and send people scrambling for higher ground.

But while the storms have delivered chaos, they have also helped to make a dent in drought conditions. The state’s snow wa-

ter equivalent—or the amount of water contained in the snow—was 226% of normal on Wednesday, marking a high for the date not seen in at least two decades.

The last time snowpack neared such a high on Jan. 11 was in 2005, when it was 206% of normal, according to state data.

Even more promising, the Sierra snowpack on Wednesday measured 102% of its April 1 average, referring to the end-of-season date when snowpack in California is usually at its deepest. This is the first time that’s happened on Jan. 11 in at least 20 years.

“102% of average with another week of stormy weather coming up is absolutely fantastic,” Schwartz said. “And assuming we don’t see complete and absolute dryness like we did last year, it’s shaping up to be a winter that, at the very least, will prevent us from going into further drought, if

not help pull us out of the drought.”

But Schwartz and other experts were cautious about celebrating too soon. The measurements are not static and could change depending on how the rest of the wet season develops. Last season, for example, a soggy December gave way to a bone-dry January, February and March.

Forecasters say it’s too soon to be certain what the coming months will bring. Mike Anderson, state climatologist at the Department of Water Resources, said two more atmospheric rivers were heading for California before conditions are expected dry up around Jan. 20.

Longer-range forecasts are fuzzier, he said, with the latest seasonal outlooks from the National Weather Service’s Climate Prediction Center showing equal chances of wetness or dryness in

most of Northern California through March. But there is a chance of one more atmospheric river to close out January.

DWR water operations manager Molly White said reservoirs were also seeing boosts from the storms, with some smaller reservoirs recovering fully from drought-driven deficits. But the state’s two largest reservoirs, Lake Shasta and Lake Oroville, remain far from full, topping out at 42% and 47% of capacity, respectively, on Wednesday.

Although rain is helpful, it’s snow that holds the most value for the state’s water supply, said Schwartz, of the Snow Lab. While rainfall comes in pulses that can sometimes lead to massive amounts of flooding or be difficult to capture, snow melts slowly and provides a constant source of water, especially in warmer months when it’s needed most.

June preliminary hearing set for suspect in Idaho killings

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — The man charged in the stabbing deaths of four University of Idaho students will have a preliminary hearing in late June, when prosecutors will try to show a judge that they have enough evidence to justify the felony charges.

Bryan Kohberger waived his right to a speedy preliminary hearing during a status conference Thursday morning. The 28-year-old Washington State University graduate student is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and burglary, and has not yet entered a plea and is waiting to learn whether prosecutors in the high-profile case will pursue the death penalty.

He appeared in court and gave the judge short one-word answers when she asked him if he understood his rights during the roughly five-minute-long hearing.

Kohberger’s attorney, Anne Taylor, told Magistrate Judge

Megan Marshall that Kohberger was willing to waive his right to a speedy preliminary hearing, which would have required that it be held within two weeks. The hearing itself will likely take four or five days, Taylor said.

Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson said he had no objection to waiting until June or even July for the preliminary hearing.

Marshall set the preliminary hearing for June 26 at 9 a.m., expecting it to last for five days.

The Nov. 13 slayings of Madison Mogen, Kaylee Goncalves, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin left the rural community in Moscow, Idaho, grief-stricken and afraid, prompting nearly half of the university’s students to leave town for the perceived safety of online courses.

Students returned from winter break to start classes on Wednesday, many of them coming together for the first time since news of the attack spread across campus.

Flight delays, cancellations minimal a day after outage

Associated Press

Delays and cancellations among flights across the United States were minimal on Thursday, a day after a system that offers safety information to pilots failed, grounding U.S. air traffic and leading to thousands of stranded travelers.

There were 636 delays into, within or out of the U.S. as of Thursday morning, according to flight-tracking website FlightAware. There were 82 cancellations.

The Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday that preliminary indications “traced the outage to a damaged database file.” The agency said it would take steps to avoid another similar disruption.

The breakdown showed how much American air travel depends on the computer system that generates alerts called NOTAMS—or Notice to Air Mis-

sions.

Before a plane takes off, pilots and airline dispatchers must review the notices, which include details about bad weather, runway closures or other temporary factors that could affect the flight. The system was once telephone-based but moved online years ago.

The system broke down late Tuesday and was not fixed until midmorning Wednesday. The FAA took the rare step of preventing any planes from taking off for a time, and the cascading chaos led to more than 1,300 flight cancellations and 9,000 delays by early Wednesday evening on the East Coast, according to FlightAware.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told a news conference that the problems “led to a ground stop because of the way safety information was moving through the system.”

Inflation eases to 6.5% over 12 months

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rising consumer prices in the United States moderated again last month, bolstering hopes that inflation's grip on the economy will continue to ease this year and possibly require less drastic action by the Federal Reserve to control it.

Inflation eased to 6.5% in December compared with 12 months earlier, the government said Thursday. It was the sixth straight year-over-year slowdown. On a monthly basis, prices actually slipped 0.1% from November to December, the first such drop since May 2020.

The softer readings add to growing signs that the worst inflation bout in four decades is gradually waning. Still, the Fed doesn't expect inflation to slow enough to get close to its 2% target until well into 2024. The central bank is expected to raise its benchmark rate by at least a quarter-point when it next meets at the end of this month.

Even as it gradually slows, inflation remains a painful reality for many Americans, especially with such necessities as food, energy and rents having soared over the past 18 months.

For now, inflation is falling, with the na-

tional average price of a gallon of gas declining from a \$5 a gallon peak in June to \$3.27 a gallon as of Wednesday, according to AAA.

Supply chain snarls that previously inflated the cost of goods have largely unraveled. Consumers have also shifted much of their spending away from physical goods and instead toward services, such as travel and entertainment. As a result, the cost of goods, including used cars, furniture and clothing, has dropped for two straight months.

Last week's jobs report for December bolstered the possibility that a recession could be avoided. Even after the Fed's seven rate hikes last year and with inflation still high, employers added a solid 223,000 jobs in December, and the unemployment rate fell to 3.5%, matching the lowest level in 53 years.

At the same time, average hourly pay growth slowed, which should lessen pressure on companies to raise prices to cover their higher labor costs.

Another positive sign for the Fed's efforts to quell inflation is that Americans overall expect price increases to decline over the next few years. That is important because

so-called "inflation expectations" can be self-fulfilling: If people expect prices to keep rising sharply, they will typically take steps, like demanding higher pay, that can perpetuate high inflation.

On Monday, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said that consumers now anticipate inflation of 5% over the next year. That's the lowest such expectation in nearly 18 months. Over the next five years, consumers expect inflation to average 2.4%, only barely above the Fed's 2% target.

Still, in their remarks in recent weeks, Fed officials have underscored their intent to raise their benchmark short-term rate by an additional three-quarters of a point in the coming months to just above 5%. Such increases would come on top of seven hikes last year, which led mortgage rates to nearly double and made auto loans and business borrowing more expensive.

Futures prices show that investors expect the central bank to be less aggressive and implement just two quarter-point hikes by March, leaving the Fed's rate just below 5%. Investors also project that the Fed will cut rates in November and December, according to the CME FedWatch Tool.

Mont. seeking prior authorization for abortions covered by Medicaid

Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. — State officials in Republican-controlled Montana want to require prior authorization before its health department pays for abortions for people covered by Medicaid, a proposal critics say would reduce access and delay or even prevent abortion care for low-income women in the state.

The Department of Public Health and Human Services is taking public comment Thursday on the proposed rule to require doctors to provide more medical information before Medicaid would agree to pay for an abortion to save a woman's life or any other medically necessary reason. The information would include the number of her pregnancies and children.

Montana is one of 16 states whose Medicaid program is required to cover the costs of "medically necessary" abortions based on state law or a court order, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

A 2019 federal report said seven states at that time, which were not listed, required

prior authorization before Medicaid would cover abortion services.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services did not immediately respond to a phone message Wednesday seeking more information.

"Given the time sensitive nature of abortion care, requiring doctors to obtain prior authorization before providing care creates an unnecessary obstacle that may result in delays in care and increase in costs for patients," said Cat Duffy with the National Health Law Program.

In Montana, abortion is legal until 24 weeks of gestation. A 2021 law that sought a reduction to 20 weeks is being challenged in court while the state also indicated it wants the Montana Supreme Court to overturn a ruling that the state Constitution's right to privacy guarantees access to legal abortion.

The proposed rule would only allow physicians — not physician assistants or advanced practice nurses — to provide Medicaid-funded abortion care.

Jobless benefit claims at lowest level in 15 weeks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. applications for unemployment benefits fell to their lowest level in 15 weeks as the job market continues to show resiliency in the face of attempts by the Federal Reserve to cool the economy.

The number of Americans applying for jobless aid for the week ending Jan. 7 fell by 1,000 to 205,000, from 206,000 the week before, the Labor Department said Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which softens some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 1,750 to 212,500.

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

The labor market is closely monitored by Federal Reserve policymakers, who raised interest rates seven times last year in a bid to slow job growth and bring down stubbornly high inflation.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dungeness crab harvest delayed off Pacific coast

WA SEATTLE — The key Dungeness crab harvest areas from Klipsan Beach, Wash., to Cape Falcon, Ore., will not open until Feb. 1 because surveys found legal-sized males still lacked enough recoverable meat in their shells.

A policy group that includes the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife made the announcement late last week, The Seattle Times reported.

The late start to the 2022-23 commercial season is a disappointment to crabbers. Last season, the harvest started Dec. 1, 2021.

The Dungeness crab harvest is Washington state's most valuable commercial fishery.

Cigarette sales go up in smoke over 20 years

WI MADISON — Cigarette sales in Wisconsin plummeted over the past 20 years, fueled by higher taxes and smoking bans, a report released Wednesday showed.

The number of packs of cigarettes purchased in the state dropped from 420 million in 2001 to just under 193 million in 2022, the Wisconsin Policy Forum report said. On a per capita basis, more than 32 packs of cigarettes were sold per resident in 2022 compared with nearly 78 in 2001.

During that time span, a statewide smoking ban took effect, taxes were increased on cigarettes three times and there was a growth in substitute products

like vaping, the report noted. The statewide smoking ban, which included bars and restaurants, took effect in 2011. State taxes were increased in 2002, 2008 and 2009, while federal taxes also increased in 2002 and 2009.

The report notes that due to higher taxes in Wisconsin, some smokers may have illegally smuggled cigarettes or legally purchased them in other states where taxes are lowered.

Suit: School ban on BLM shirts is discriminatory

GA SPRINGFIELD — A Georgia school district is being sued by students who say they were barred from wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts to school events while their white peers regularly wear shirts printed with Confederate flags.

The lawsuit was filed last week in U.S. District Court against school administrators in Effingham County. It says the district's unfair application of its dress code is part of a broader pattern of discrimination and "deliberate indifference to acts of racial animosity" that violate the civil rights of Black students.

School administrators in Effingham County have cited a districtwide policy prohibiting clothing that "may contribute to disruption," the lawsuit says, to keep students from wearing Black Lives Matter shirts.

One of the student plaintiffs was denied entry to a high school football game because she wore a Black Lives Matter shirt, the lawsuit said. It alleges that white students in the school district regularly wear shirts

printed with Confederate flags.

Effingham County School Superintendent Yancy Ford said in a statement to news outlets that the district had not yet been served with the lawsuit. He said any response to its claims would be made in court.

Election official misused pandemic relief money

MS JACKSON — An election commissioner in Mississippi's largest county has pleaded guilty to fraud and embezzlement charges related to misuse of pandemic relief money from a group funded by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Hinds County Election Commissioner Toni Johnson, 37, of Clinton, entered the guilty plea Monday as jury selection was beginning for her trial, court records show. She will have to resign and will no longer be able to serve in any office handling public money, according to the state auditor's office.

Johnson was chairwoman of the Hinds County Election Commission in 2020 and 2021. According to the state auditor's office, she used COVID-19 response money from the Center for Tech and Civic Life to buy two 85-inch televisions and personal protective equipment, which she purportedly had delivered to her own home and one other private home.

In the plea deal, Johnson is expected to avoid prison time.

Police: Teacher's injury from pellet gun superficial

VT BARRE — Charges will be forthcoming after a high school teacher suffered a superficial injury after being hit with a projectile fired

from a pellet gun that had been brought to school by a student, Barre police say.

Police say the incident occurred at about 2:45 p.m. on Tuesday as students at Barre's Spaulding High School were being released for the day.

Two students were identified as having brought pellet guns to school, one of which was reported to have been involved in the incident, police say.

In a social media post, Spaulding administrators say they are working with Barre police to ensure the safety of the community, but they cannot reveal many details of the incident.

"We'd like to re-emphasize to our students and staff the importance of 'See something, Say something,'" the post said.

Lobster fishermen must report more about catch

ME PORTLAND — Fishermen in Maine, the state responsible for about 80% of the nation's lobster haul in 2021, must now report more detailed information such as when, where and how many they catch.

Few had to report until this year, making Maine the only state that harvests lobster that didn't require full details, according to the Portland Press Herald.

Fishermen started having to share the additional information with the state and regulators at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission beginning Jan. 1.

Fishermen in the state brought in about 109 million pounds of lobster in 2021.

— From wire reports

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49ers QB Purdy no longer irrelevant

Associated Press

Brock Purdy has passed every test he's faced so far in his remarkable rookie season.

Coming off the bench with no reps after Jimmy Garoppolo got hurt. Matching up against an all-time great like Tom Brady. His first road start in an intimidating stadium in Seattle. Coming from behind against the Raiders.

Next up for Purdy and the San Francisco 49ers is his first playoff game on Saturday against the Seahawks.

"I'm not trying to make it bigger than what it is," Purdy said Wednesday. "Obviously,

there's more on the line and everything. But I think having six games under my belt in terms of just playing in an NFL game and trying to win for four quarters has helped me get to this point. And all the guys in the locker room have my back. We've all grown together, so we're ready for what's ahead."

Purdy's journey from being "Mr. Irrelevant" as the last

pick in the NFL Draft to perhaps the most important player on a Super Bowl contender has been an improbable one.

Purdy keeps reaching new milestones in every start as he piles up touchdown passes and wins, putting him in company with some heralded quarterbacks from the past.

Purdy is the first rookie QB since Ben Roethlisberger to win his first five starts, joined Justin Herbert as the only rookie QBs to throw multiple touchdown passes in at least six straight games and has posted a 119 passer rating in his first five starts for the second-best mark for any quarterback in the Super Bowl era behind the 131.4 for Hall of Famer Kurt Warner.

With a win on Saturday, Purdy will be the first rookie quarterback drafted after the first round to win a playoff game since third-rounder Russell Wilson did it for Seattle in 2012.

"I feel like I'll do a lot of reflecting after the season," Purdy said. "Right now, I'm look-

ing at it like, man, we got the Seahawks. Yes, it's playoffs, but for myself it's, I have to do my job. I'm not trying to think about this storybook ending or anything like that. It's, man, I have a great defense I have to play. I have to do my job in terms of getting the guys the ball and all that will fall into place, but definitely thankful for everything that has happened. We still have a ways to go."

The Niners players have long stopped looking at Purdy as an untested rookie as his play and demeanor are like that of a veteran.

Purdy showed flashes of that in training camp when he won a competition with Nate Sudfeld for a roster spot, and it has only grown as he has gotten to play.

"As soon as he got into the game he was our guy," right tackle Mike McGlinchey said. "No matter whether you're a rookie, a five-year vet, a 10-year vet, it doesn't matter, you're the starting quarterback

and you have to do the starting quarterback's job. That's what he's done to an unbelievable degree."

Along with playing his first playoff game, Purdy has another first as he goes up against the same opponent for a second time.

Purdy went 17-for-26 for 217 yards, two TDs and no turnovers in a 21-13 win at Seattle last month despite getting no practice time during a short week of preparation because of injuries to his ribs and oblique.

While Purdy is healthier this time around, he knows Seattle might have some new wrinkles.

"I feel like I see something new almost every week, so obviously there's six games of film out there on me," he said.

"There's still things that I'm sure coordinators are going to try to dial up and everything and try to get me to do some something different. But for myself, I just try to stay grounded in what the progression is, what the read is."

Chargers not worried about lack of experience

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Kyle Van Noy has already been everywhere the Los Angeles Chargers are trying to go on their franchise's first playoff trip in four years, and the veteran linebacker wants his new teammates to know their postseason inexperience means absolutely nothing on this journey.

"It's just about who comes out there and plays better," the two-time Super Bowl champion said Wednesday. "All the rest of it doesn't matter. I've told these guys that it's not about experience, and home-field advantage is a myth, too. Confidence matters, and that comes back to the preparation you've done."

Van Noy earned his two rings with the New England Patriots and racked up 12 games of playoff experience — more than a good chunk of his Chargers teammates combined — during his first eight years in the NFL.

Los Angeles (10-7) is headed to Jacksonville on Saturday for the Bolts' first playoff appearance since a two-game run after the 2018 season, which stands as the Chargers' only playoff appearance since the 2013 season back in San Diego.

Justin Herbert's showdown with Trevor Lawrence in both touted young quarterbacks' playoff debuts will get most of the attention heading into the game in Jacksonville, but many players on both teams will be getting their first tastes of postseason pressure.

Just six Chargers remain from the 2018 playoff team, yet they comprise much of the current team's core: receivers Keenan Allen and Mike Williams, running back Austin Ekeler, pass-rusher Joey Bosa, safety Derwin James and cornerback Michael Davis.

"We're such a different team since then, but we're hungry every year," Ekeler said. "That's why we play the entire game, to get to the playoffs and continue to build on what

we're doing. Finally getting back, I feel like we have a lot of guys that have made a lot of leaps in their career. Justin is coming along, and we brought in veterans that can help us get there, and we finally put a product together."

Other Chargers have playoff experience with other teams, but Van Noy doesn't have to look far for an illustration of his belief in the unimportance of playoff experience.

"He's told us, 'Just look at Cincinnati last year,'" Chargers linebacker Drue Tranquill said.

Indeed, the Bengals ended their franchise's five-year postseason drought and rolled all the way to the Super Bowl last season thanks to a gifted young quarterback, an impressive collection of playmakers around him, and an opportunistic defense. The Chargers have all of those things, and Tranquill is among the young leaders eager to show they can handle their first taste of playoff pressure.

Harvick: 2023 will be final NASCAR season

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kevin Harvick received the same answer nearly every time he asked another athlete how they decided to retire: Harvick would just know it was time.

The driver thrust onto the global stage when he was named Dale Earnhardt's replacement just days after Earnhardt's fatal 2001 crash will make this 23rd season his last in NASCAR. The 2014 Cup champion heads into his final year tied for ninth on NASCAR's career list with 60 victories, 13 consecutive playoff appearances and he's one of the final active drivers from the sport's halcyon days.

"From talking to all the people I've talked to, it always came down to the same, 'Oh, you'll know, you'll know it is time, you'll know the right moment,'" Harvick said in an interview with The Associated Press ahead of his Thursday announcement.

"It's great to be able to go out on your own terms and

plan it how you want it to go, but the biggest thing that sticks out to me is my kids. Being home with them and seeing the impact that you have with them when you are home, being able to be part of that daily process and be that father figure, it's just time."

At the end of this season he will turn his attention to Kevin Harvick Inc., his growing management business, the enjoyable time he's spent in the television booth, some bucket list racing, and most importantly, his young racing family.

Harvick had already overcome the NASCAR odds of breaking into the Southern-based sport from Bakersfield, Calif., when Richard Childress Racing said he'd be a Cup rookie alongside seven-time champion Earnhardt in 2002. But when Earnhardt was killed on the final lap of the 2001 season-opening Daytona 500, Harvick's career was upended.

He was in the rebranded No. 29 Chevrolet five days after

Earnhardt's death — less than a week before the 25-year-old's planned wedding — and that hectic season in the spotlight was a blur. Harvick won in his third start, less than a month after Earnhardt's death, and split his time between his new Cup ride and the Busch Series championship he was chasing.

Harvick competed in 69 NASCAR national races that season with a pair of Cup victories and five wins en route to the Busch title. He was busy but grew jaded by all the attention, the endless Earnhardt comparisons, and the pressure of replacing a superstar during a yearlong grieving period that had engulfed NASCAR.

Perhaps that is what made Harvick so tough.

He fought with his rivals often early in his career and was suspended for a Cup race in 2002 for his actions in a Truck Series race at Martinsville Speedway a day earlier.

But he never softened, not even after having children.

Harvick doesn't know if his

gritiness developed from those first difficult years after Earnhardt's death, but acknowledges an internal pressure to do things his own way and carve out his own legacy that really ramped up around 2006. Some of Earnhardt's sponsors began pulling off the car and Harvick now had to stand on his own and prove his worth.

"We'd gotten through the tough years of transitioning from what Dale liked to what I liked, and through all those battles and conversations, you put your guard up and become a jerk," Harvick told the AP. "Looking back at it now, you can see that you could have handled things differently, but it was digging my heels in thinking 'I need to do this my way now' and that created some tensions."

Harvick opens the season early next month with the exhibition Clash at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, followed by his final season-opening Daytona 500 on Feb. 19.

Three-point shooting leads to more NBA scoring binges

Associated Press

Giannis Antetokounmpo set a career high with 55 points in Milwaukee's win over Washington on Jan. 3 — and it wasn't even the week's top scoring performance in the NBA's Central Division.

That belonged to Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell, with a staggering 71 the previous night.

The NBA these past few weeks has featured an almost nightly display of one-upmanship among the best scorers. Whether it was Mitchell's extraordinary effort for the Cavaliers or Dallas' Luka Doncic reaching 50 points three times in a nine-day span, everywhere you turn, it seems like another player is putting up a huge total.

"I think there are a lot of layers to it. You just see night after night, guys are having enormous offensive games," Wizards coach Wes Unseld Jr. said. "It's fun to watch as a fan, of course. Frustrating when you're trying to game plan to stop some of these guys

because they're scoring at all levels — the paint, threes, getting to the line."

Ten players have scored 50 points in a game this season: Antetokounmpo, Mitchell, Doncic, Joel Embiid, Devin Booker, Anthony Davis, Klay Thompson, Pascal Siakam, Darius Garland and Stephen Curry.

Before 2016-17, no more than eight players had ever had a 50-point game in one season, according to Sportradar. Since then, at least 10 have done it every season, including a record 14 in 2021-22.

So what's happening lately is not just higher scoring league-wide. Players are also producing huge games with remarkable frequency.

"Guys come into this league, and the most impressive thing is the skill set — the handle and the shooting," Golden State coach Steve Kerr said. "What's lacking, I think, is the foundation, the institutional knowledge that players used to have when they came into the league after a few years of college. So

metimes the defense isn't great. Transition defense is at an all-time low in this league."

Nowadays, basically every top scorer has some degree of proficiency from three-point range, whereas back in the '80s, some stars largely ignored the shot and nobody attempted all that many.

"Guys are taking 15 or 16 threes in some games," Los Angeles Clippers coach Tyronn Lue said. "Teams are encouraging guys to take those shots, and if you take so many shots, and if you get hot and make some, you can score a lot of points."

So current players have a variety of ways they can accumulate points in a hurry, and the three-point shot affects the game even beyond that.

"You have to pick and choose the guys you try and double team and get the ball out of their hands because they are not great passers, but there are some guys who can score, but can also pick you apart with their passing," Lue said.

Tennis without Serena begins in earnest

Associated Press

Tennis will move on from Serena Williams. It has to. It might not be easy, mind you, given what a transcendent figure she was, on the court and off. But that is what sports do, even when superstars leave. They all leave, of course, and sports always move on.

The matches will be played, new stars will emerge, fans will continue to watch. And Williams will be missed, of course, by spectators, executives from the tours, tournaments and television, as well as by other athletes.

And as the Australian Open gets started Monday, the first Grand Slam tournament to be held since she walked away with a farewell at the U.S. Open in September, shortly before her 41st birthday tennis will get a real taste of what a post-Serena world looks like on a big stage.

That is the case even if her impact won't fade away, as U.S. Open tournament director Stacey Allaster put it: "She leaves an indelible legacy of grace and grit that will inspire athletes, female and male, for many generations to come."

There will surely be those who keep an eye on tangible data at Melbourne Park and as this

season, and future seasons, go along. Numbers such as attendance figures and TV ratings will be parsed in an effort to gauge what effect there is from the departure of someone who earned status as a just-one-name-necessary celebrity.

In a way, that is all a bit beside the point, however.

"Her legacy is really wide, to the point where you can't even describe it in words. She changed the sport so much. She's introduced people that have never heard of tennis into the sport," said Naomi Osaka, a 25-year-old from Japan who has won four Grand Slam titles but hasn't played a full match since August and will sit out the Australian Open. "I honestly think that she's, like, the biggest force in the sport. That's not intentionally trying to make (Roger) Federer or (Rafael) Nadal smaller. I just think she's the biggest thing that will ever be in the sport."

In recent decades, folks might have worried about what would happen when Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova stopped playing. Or when Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors moved on. Or Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. Or Steffi Graf. And so on.

"It's always a loss when you have great players leave. But I've been through six or seven generations of this," said Billie Jean King, a two-time inductee into the International Tennis Hall of Fame who won 12 Grand Slam trophies in singles and another 27 in women's or mixed doubles.

"I mean, I remember when Sampras left and when Martina and Chris left. I was like, 'Oh, no! What's going to happen?' Well, Sampras was there, and guess what? There's Roger Federer. There's Nadal. ... It's the same thing with the women. We've got Iga (Swiatek) now, who's taken over," King said. "Every generation gets better, and the depth of women's tennis is better than it's ever been, and Serena is somewhat responsible for that, because every generation builds on the last generation."

Shortly after Williams lost to Ajla Tomljanovic in the third round at Flushing Meadows, another titan of tennis, 20-time major champ Federer, announced his retirement. Federer hadn't played an official match in more than a full year because of a series of knee operations.

For Williams, there were moments when she stepped away

from competing for stretches, either because of health issues or simply because she wanted to spend time on other interests, which she thought contributed to her longevity.

WTA CEO and Chairman Steve Simon thinks those gaps left room for some new faces to emerge in women's tennis, such as current No. 1 Swiatek and American teenager Coco Gauff.

"Serena has played what I would call a limited schedule over the last several years, anyway. So clearly, we have a new set of stars that are coming in and certainly establishing themselves and doing well," Simon said. "But I see us continuing to celebrate Serena — and I hope she comes back and plays another five or 10 years."

Good luck with that.

But those she brought to tennis, whether players or fans, should last long beyond that timeframe.

"Serena got a lot of people interested in our sport. And now it's up to the next generation to do that," King said. "People always — the media — goes into this every time: 'Oh, they're leaving! Oh, what's going to happen?' Somebody always comes up to the top. The cream rises to the top."

Unvaccinated Djokovic back in play 1 year later

Associated Press

Novak Djokovic had just wrapped up last season by winning the ATP Finals for a record sixth time when, rather than looking ahead to 2023, his mind immediately went back to the way 2022 began: He was unable to compete in the Australian Open after being deported from the country because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19.

That whole episode, and the decision to eschew the shots required for entry elsewhere, too, helped define his season and, perhaps to some, his legacy. So as he reflected on his triumph at the year-ending championships in Italy last November, Djokovic viewed it through the prism of what occurred in Australia last January.

"It feels deeply satisfying and, at the same time, huge relief, because of the circumstances that I have been through this year — situations earlier this year, of course, with Australia. ... That had an effect, obviously, on my start of the year," the 35-year-old from Serbia said. "For the first several months, I was trying to find that balance, game-wise but also mentally, in order to be able to come back to the court and find that tennis level that I need."

When the new Grand Slam season begins at the Australian Open on Monday, Djokovic will be back. Back in Australia — despite never getting inoculated — thanks to government decisions to remove any vaccination requirements for visitors and to waive

what could have been three-year ban for him as someone whose visa had been revoked. He's now back at a tournament he has dominated like no other, resulting in nine of his 21 major trophies, including the past three times he played there.

He's also back in position to strive for elite status and to challenge his great rival Rafael Nadal for supremacy in the Grand Slam title chase. Sure, it is Nadal who is the defending champion and who owns a men's-record 22 majors. It is Djokovic, though, who will draw the most attention. And it is Djokovic who will be viewed as the favorite. Djokovic and Nadal have been placed on opposite halves of the bracket in the draw, meaning they can only meet in the final.