

NATO: Ukraine shipments won't hurt West

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Delivering modern battle tanks to Ukraine won't diminish the ability of allies to defend their own territory, NATO's top military officer said Thursday, as tensions mount over Germany's reluctance to allow its tanks to be used by Ukraine to fight Russia.

"I think we can manage any risks that we're dealing with," said U.S. Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli, NATO's supreme allied commander, at the conclusion of a meeting of defense chiefs in Brussels.

Cavoli's comments came a day ahead of another round of high-level discussions happening at Ramstein Air Base, where Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will be meeting with dozens of allies to determine what additional weaponry Ukraine's military needs.

Within NATO, pressure is mounting on members to send more armored weaponry, including tanks. Germany in particular has come under withering criticism for balking at the idea of dispatching its Leopard tanks. Berlin also is standing in the way of other allies sending Kyiv their own German-made tanks to Ukraine.

German hesitance prompted Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on

Thursday to say that Warsaw was prepared to ignore German demands.

If Berlin doesn't offer permission to transfer Leopard tanks already in Polish possession, "we will do the right thing ourselves," Morawiecki said during an appearance at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. Germany has said it will send tanks to Ukraine only if the United States sends its Abrams tanks. But U.S. officials said this week that the idea of sending Abrams tanks — which require more complicated training and have unique maintenance needs — is on hold for now.

Instead, Washington is poised to announce another round of military aid for Ukraine involving armored Bradley fighting vehicles and, for the first time, highly mobile Strykers.

Those offerings, along with other gear, add up to more than \$2 billion in aid, The Associated Press reported Wednesday. The details are expected to be formally announced during the talks at Ramstein on Friday. The meeting at Ramstein will mark the second day on the job for German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, who met Austin in Berlin on Thursday. Pistorius took over after the resignation of Christine Lambrecht, who critics said hadn't moved for-

ward quickly enough on plans to upgrade Germany's military.

Meanwhile, Cavoli said neither Western tanks, nor any other system, are a "silver bullet" for Ukraine. But tanks would provide an advantage, said Cavoli, who also heads U.S. European Command.

"A balance of all systems is needed. In the end, a tank simply comes down to, conceptually, a balance between firepower, mobility and protection," Cavoli said, describing that combination as the "holy trinity" for ground forces.

So far, Western weapons have proven superior to Russia's on the battlefield in Ukraine, and Cavoli indicated he would expect the same to hold true for tanks.

"I think it's clearly the case that Western technology, modern Western technology, is outperforming Russian technology," he said.

Ukraine has continued to walk a fine diplomatic line in seeking the weapons it needs to drive Russia from its land. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has praised the United States, Germany and other nations for their help.

But on Wednesday, speaking by video link to a meeting on the sidelines of the economic meeting in Davos, he made reference to "lack of specific weaponry."

2 generals emerge as Joint Chiefs chairman contenders

The Washington Post

BRUSSELS — The Biden administration has launched its search to find the next chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, landing on the top generals in the Air Force and the Marine Corps as leading contenders, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chief of staff of the Air Force, and Gen. David H. Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, will likely be interviewed by President Joe Biden before the commander in chief settles on whom he would like to replace Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, who has served as the Pentagon's top uniformed officer since fall 2019, these people said. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the administra-

tion's internal deliberations.

By law, Milley must rotate out of the position by the end of September. He is expected to retire.

It's possible that other candidates could emerge, the people familiar with the matter said, particularly from the Army. Anyone who has served as either a service chief or a combatant commander is eligible, opening the position to senior officers in roles such as the chiefs of U.S. Central Command, Indo-Pacific Command or U.S. European Command. One such candidate is Gen. Paul Nakasone, an Army officer who leads U.S. Cyber Command and the National Security Agency, these people said.

A Navy officer is unlikely to be considered, because the No. 2 job is filled by

Adm. Christopher W. Grady, who was confirmed by the Senate to serve as vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Historically, the chair job has rotated between the military services, making an Army officer following Milley less likely. Biden's eventual nominee must also be confirmed by the Senate.

Whoever becomes the Pentagon's next top general will take over at a tumultuous time.

The Defense Department, at Biden's direction, has committed about \$25 billion in security assistance to help Ukraine fend off the bloody, nearly year-old invasion by Russia while turning its attention to an ascendant China and the fear that it could attempt an incursion of Taiwan.

US weighs Strykers in Ukraine aid package

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON—The United States plans to send about 100 Stryker armored vehicles to Ukraine as part of a new package of military aid worth about \$2.5 billion, adding another more powerful weapons system that it had previously withheld, people familiar with the matter said.

The U.S. was poised to unveil a new aid package as part of a broader announcement by Western allies of new hardware for Ukraine that's set for Friday, when defense ministers meet at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, according to the people, who asked not to be identified discussing private deliberations.

The people added that the plans remain incomplete and could change.

Spokespeople at the State and Defense departments declined to comment. Politico reported earlier that the U.S. is likely to include Strykers, which are built by a division of General Dynamics and would come from U.S. inventories.

"I won't get ahead of announcements," John Kirby, spokesman for the National Security Council, told reporters in Washington on Wednesday. "But you can imagine that every time there's a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting, there are announcements by many of the countries that attend in terms of what they are willing to contribute."

The U.S. Army says in an online description that there are 18 variants of the Stryker, including

an "anti-tank guided missile" vehicle and personnel carriers. "Stryker vehicles provide the warfighter with a reliable, combat-tested platform that includes significant survivability and capability enhancements since the original fielding in 2002," according to the Army.

The U.S. isn't expected to provide its main battle tank, the M1 Abrams, given its heavy demands for fuel and maintenance.

"The Abrams tank is a very complicated piece of equipment," Undersecretary of Defense Colin Kahl told reporters at the Pentagon on Wednesday. "It's expensive, it's hard to train on. It has a jet engine. I think it's about 3 gallons to the mile of jet fuel. It is not the easiest system to maintain. It may or may not be

the right system."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Tuesday that he was in talks with allies over potentially supplying German-made Leopard tanks.

But Germany won't provide its Leopard tanks — or allow other countries to send them — unless the U.S. agrees to send the Abrams, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing senior German officials it didn't name.

"We believe that the provision of modern tanks will significantly help and improve the Ukrainians' ability to fight where they're fighting now and fight more effectively going forward," Kirby said, without suggesting the U.S. will relent on its resistance to sending its Abrams tanks.

Army's new rifle named M7 because M5 was taken

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

When soldiers get their hands on the Army's new rifle, it will be known as the M7, the service said Wednesday.

More than five years in the making, the Next Generation Squad Weapon will replace the M4 rifle that all soldiers carry.

Army officials said during an April news conference that Sig Sauer would make the weapons. About 40 of the rifles are projected to roll out later this year.

Originally dubbed the M5, the Army changed course after learning Colt Industries makes a 5.56 mm carbine rifle known as the M5, according to a news release from the Army's Project Manager Soldier Lethality program at Picatinny Arsenal, N.J.

The Army's M7 uses 6.8 mm ammunition, which is also used in the service's new automatic rifle — the M250. That weapon will re-

place the M249 squad automatic weapon. Both new weapons now have an "X" designation before their names, which is given to an item before it has been fully tested and cleared for production, according to Army standards. Once the Army determines the rifles are ready to produce and field, the X will be dropped.

The new rifles are the first time in more than 65 years that the Army has deviated from ammunition size 5.56. The new ammunition size will provide more capabilities, Brig. Gen. William Boruff, the executive officer of the joint program for armaments and ammunition, said in April.

Overall, the Army said the new weapons offer capability improvements in accuracy, range and overall lethality. They are lightweight, mitigate recoil, provide better barrel performance, and include integrated muzzle sound and flash reduction.

Experts: US unlikely to fight in Taiwan if China invades

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TAIPEI, Taiwan — International support could be key to deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, according to Taipei-based defense experts who say U.S. forces aren't likely to fight on the island or in the strait separating it from mainland China.

A Chinese effort to reunify Taiwan by force is a possibility that many U.S. defense leaders take seriously, based on regular threats by Chinese President Xi Jinping and stepped-up Chinese military activity around the island. President Joe Biden in September said U.S. troops would defend Taiwan if China invaded and made a similar statement while visiting Japan in May. Walk-backs by his staff, however, suggest a deliberate policy of strategic ambiguity meant to deter conflict by leaving the possibility of U.S. intervention uncertain.

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen has said she is confident the U.S. will come to the island's defense if China attempts to invade. Defense experts in Taipei, however, think it's unlikely that significant numbers of U.S. troops will deploy to Taiwan in a crisis.

Professor I-Chung Lai, a former Taiwanese artilleryman who works at the Prospect Foundation, also doesn't think U.S. warships would enter the Taiwan Strait to oppose an invasion, because the waterway is so close to Chinese forces on the mainland.

And the Ukraine model, in which the U.S. and allies send arms and supplies to help defend the country after Russia invaded, does not apply to Taiwan, according to Ming-Shih Shen of Taipei's Institute for National Defense and Security Research.

"Taiwan is an island," Shen said. "If China blockades Taiwan, how can the U.S. supply Taiwan?"

Treasury buys time for Biden, GOP on debt deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The countdown toward a possible U.S. government default began Thursday with the Treasury implementing accounting measures to buy time, as frictions between President Joe Biden and House Republicans raise alarms about whether the United States can sidestep a potential economic crisis.

The Treasury Department said in a letter to congressional leaders that it has started taking “extraordinary measures” as the government has run up against its legal borrowing capacity of \$31.381 trillion. An artificially imposed cap, the debt ceiling has been increased roughly 80 times since the 1960s.

“I respectfully urge Congress to act promptly to protect the full

faith and credit of the United States,” Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen wrote in the letter.

Markets so far remain relatively calm, given that the government can temporarily rely on accounting tweaks to stay open and any threats to the economy would be several months away. Even many worried analysts have assumed there will be a deal.

But this particular moment seems more fraught than past brushes with the debt limit because of the broad differences between Biden and new House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who presides over a restive Republican caucus.

Those differences increase the risk that the government could default on its obligations for political reasons. That could rattle fi-

nancial markets and plunge the world’s largest economy into a wholly preventable recession.

Biden and McCarthy, R-Calif., have several months to reach agreement as the Treasury Department imposes “extraordinary measures” to keep the government operating until at least June. But years of intensifying partisan hostility have led to a conflicting set of demands that jeopardize the ability of the lawmakers to work together on a basic duty.

Biden has insisted on a “clean” increase to the debt limit so that existing financial commitments can be sustained and is refusing to even start talks with Republicans. McCarthy is calling for negotiations that he believes will lead to spending cuts. It’s unclear how

much he wants to trim and whether fellow Republicans would support any deal after a testy start to the new Congress that required 15 rounds of voting to elect McCarthy as speaker.

Asked twice on Wednesday if there was evidence that House Republicans can ensure that the government would avert a default, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said it’s their “constitutional responsibility” to protect the full faith and credit of the United States.

She did not say whether the White House saw signs at this stage that a default was off the table.

“We’re just not going to negotiate that,” Jean-Pierre said. “They should feel the responsibility.”

Americans filing for jobless benefits now at 4-month low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of people seeking unemployment benefits in the United States reached a four-month low last week, a sign that employers are holding on to their workers despite the Federal Reserve’s efforts to slow the economy and tamp down inflation.

U.S. jobless aid applications for the week ending Jan. 14 fell by 15,000 to 190,000, from 205,000 the week before, the Labor Department said Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which can even out the week-to-week volatility, declined by 6,500 to 206,000.

Jobless claims generally serve 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 watched by the Federal Reserve, which raised interest

rates seven times last year in a bid to slow job growth and bring down stubbornly high inflation.

Earlier this month, the government reported that U.S. employers added a solid 223,000 jobs in December, evidence that the economy remains healthy even as the Fed is rapidly raising interest rates to try to slow economic growth and the pace of hiring. The unemployment rate fell to 3.5%, matching a 53-year low.

Even though it was a solid report, December’s jobs data suggested that the labor market may be cooling in a way that could aid the Fed’s fight against high inflation. It was the smallest gain in two years, and it extended a hiring slowdown that began last year. Average hourly pay growth eased to its slowest pace in 16 months. That slowdown could reduce pressure on employers to raise prices to offset higher labor costs.

Mother, 1-year-old son killed in Alaska polar bear attack

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A polar bear chased several residents around a tiny, isolated Alaska Native whaling village, killing a mother and her 1-year-old son in an extremely rare attack before another community member shot and killed the bear, authorities said.

The fatal mauling, the first in more than 30 years in Alaska, happened Tuesday next to the front entrance of the school in Wales, an isolated Bering Strait coastal community located on the westernmost tip of the North American mainland — about 50 miles from Russia — that is no stranger to coexisting with polar bears.

School officials rushed people into the building after the polar bear was spotted, Bering Strait School District chief administrator Susan Nedza told the Anchorage Daily News from her office in Unalakleet.

“The bear tried to enter with them,” Nedza said, but Principal

Dawn Hendrickson “slammed the door” to keep it out.

“It’s terrifying. Not something you’re ever prepared for,” said Nedza, who didn’t return messages to The Associated Press on Wednesday.

School district officials pulled the shades in the school and locked down the building. They eventually got word out that they needed someone to “take care of the bear.”

Summer Myomick of Saint Michael and her son, Clyde Ongto-wasruk, were killed in the attack, Alaska State Troopers said in a statement. Myomick’s parents declined interviews with The Associated Press when reached Wednesday at their home.

“It’s very, very sad for Saint Michael right now, and Wales,” said Virginia Washington, the Saint Michael city administrator. She said Myomick split time between the two communities.

“She was a very sweet lady. She was very responsible,” Washington said.

Abortion foes set for 1st post-Roe march

Associated Press

Anti-abortion activists will have multiple reasons to celebrate — and some reasons for unease — when they gather Friday in Washington for the annual March for Life.

The march, which includes a rally drawing abortion opponents from across the nation, has been held annually since January 1974 — a year after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision established a nationwide right to abortion.

This year's gathering — 50 years after that decision — will be the first since the high court struck down *Roe* in a momentous ruling last June. Since then, 12 Republican-governed states have implemented sweeping bans on abortion, and several others seek to do the same. But those moves have been offset by other developments.

Abortion opponents were defeated in votes on ballot measures in Kansas, Michigan and Kentucky. State courts have blocked several bans from taking effect. And myriad efforts are underway to help women in abortion-ban states either get abortions out of state or use the abortion pill for self-managed abortions.

"It's almost like the old wild, wild West ... everything is still shaking out," said Carol Tobias, president of the National Right to Life Committee.

With numerous Democratic-governed states taking steps to protect and expand abortion access, Tobias likened the current situation to the pre-Civil War era when the

nation was closely divided between free states and slave states.

"I will not be surprised if we have something like that for a few years," she said. "But I do know that pro-lifers are not going to give up — it's a civil rights issue for us."

The theme for this year's March for Life is "Next Steps: Marching Forward into a Post-Roe America." Scheduled speakers include Hall of Fame football coach Tony Dungy and Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch, who won the Supreme Court case that overturned *Roe*.

The president of March for Life, Jeanne Mancini, depicted the June ruling as "a massive victory for the pro-life movement."

"But the battle to build a culture of life is far from over," she said. "March for Life will continue to advocate for the unborn and policies that protect them until abortion becomes unthinkable."

On Sunday, those pressing for abortion access will rally. Biden administration officials said Vice President Kamala Harris will speak in Florida, where Democrats have been on guard for new efforts to restrict abortion from Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, a potential 2024 presidential candidate. The speech is a continuation of Harris' focus on reproductive rights in recent months, including meetings with activists, health care providers and state lawmakers from around the country.

Prospects for any federal legislation restricting abortion nationwide are negligible

for now, given that any such measures emerging from the Republican-led House would face rejection in the Democratic-led Senate.

The main battlegrounds will be in the states.

Since June, near-total bans on abortion have been implemented in Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia. Legal challenges are pending against several of those bans. Elective abortions also are unavailable in Wisconsin, due to legal uncertainties faced by abortion clinics, and in North Dakota, where the lone clinic relocated to Minnesota.

Bans passed by lawmakers in Ohio, Indiana and Wyoming have been blocked by state courts while challenges are pending. In South Carolina, the state Supreme Court on Jan. 5 struck down a ban on abortion after six weeks, ruling the restriction violates a state constitutional right to privacy.

The Guttmacher Institute, a research group that supports abortion rights, says the overall result is "a chaotic legal landscape that is disruptive for providers trying to offer care and patients trying to obtain it."

"When people do not have access to abortion care in their state, they are forced to make the difficult decision to travel long distances for care, self-manage an abortion or carry an unwanted pregnancy to term," Guttmacher staffers Elizabeth Nash and Isabel Guarnieri wrote last week.

Flavored cannabis marketing blasted for targeting kids

Associated Press

NEW YORK — When New York's first licensed recreational marijuana outlet opened last month, the chief of the state's Office of Cannabis Management, Chris Alexander, proudly hoisted a tin of watermelon-flavored gummies above the crowd.

Outside the Manhattan shop, he displayed another purchase — a jar containing dried flowers of a cannabis strain called Banana Runtz, which some aficionados say has overtones of "fresh, fruity banana and sour candy."

Inside the store run by the nonprofit Housing Works, shelves brimmed with vape car-

tridges suggesting flavors of pineapple, grapefruit and "cereal milk," written in rainbow bubble letter print.

For decades, health advocates have chided the tobacco industry for marketing harmful nicotine products to children, resulting in more cities and states, like New York, outlawing flavored tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.

Now as cannabis shops proliferate across the country, the same concerns are growing over the packaging and marketing of flavored cannabis that critics say could entice children to partake of products labeled "mad mango," "loud lemon" and

"peach dream."

"We should learn from the nicotine space, and I certainly would advocate that we should place similar concern on cannabis products in terms of their appealability to youth," said Katherine Keyes, a professor of epidemiology at Columbia University who has written extensively about the rise in marijuana use among young people.

"If you go through a cannabis dispensary right now," she said, "it's almost absurd how youth oriented a lot of the packaging and the products are."

Keyes added that public health policymakers — and researchers like her — are trying

to catch up with an industry and marketplace that is rapidly expanding and evolving.

New York, which legalized recreational marijuana in March 2021, forbids marketing and advertising that "is designed in any way to appeal to children or other minors."

But New York's state Office of Cannabis Management has yet to officially adopt rules on labeling, packaging and advertising that could ban cartoons and neon colors, as well as prohibit depictions of food, candy, soda, drinks, cookies or cereal on packaging — all of which, the agency suggests, could attract people under 21.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

3 get life in slaying of guard over face mask

MI FLINT — A married couple and their son convicted of first-degree premeditated murder in the fatal shooting of a security guard who demanded the woman's daughter wear a mask while shopping were sentenced Tuesday to life in prison without parole.

Larry Teague, wife Sharmel Teague, and Sharmel Teague's son, Ramonyea Bishop, were sentenced by Genesee Circuit Court Judge Brian Pickell in the shooting death of Calvin Munerlyn on May 1, 2020.

Munerlyn, 43, was shot at the store just north of downtown Flint shortly after telling Sharmel Teague's daughter she had to leave because she lacked a mask, Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton has said.

Two men later came to the store and shot the security guard to death, investigators said.

Group faces civil rights penalties for banner

NH CONCORD — A group accused of displaying "Keep New England White" banners from an overpass in New Hampshire faces state Civil Rights Act violations, the attorney general's office said Tuesday.

The complaints allege that on July 30, the Nationalist Social Club, also known as NSC-131, and two of its members trespassed and were motivated by race in hanging the banners from the overpass overlooking U.S. Route 1 in Portsmouth. About 10 people reportedly took part.

"I'd like to take a moment to

say that hate, intimidation and divisiveness are simply not part of the fabric of this great city," Police Chief Mark Newport said at a news conference in Portsmouth, noting its history as a safe harbor going back to 1630, and its place in history as the site of a treaty that formally ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.

The complaints ask a judge to enter an order prohibiting the group and its members from engaging in threatening physical force or violence and discriminatory behavior for three years.

State gambling revenue matches all-time high

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — New Jersey's gambling revenue matched its all-time high of \$5.2 billion in 2022, but only half that amount was won by casinos from in-person gamblers.

Figures released Tuesday by the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement show the casinos, the horse tracks that take sports bets, and online partners of both types of gambling won \$5.21 billion last year, up 10% from a year earlier and matching a level last seen in 2006. That was just before the advent of casino gambling in neighboring Pennsylvania sent New Jersey's gambling industry into a downward spiral that eventually led to the closures of five of the 12 casinos that were operating at the time.

But the 2022 number was reached with a hefty assist from internet gambling and sports betting — revenue streams that help contribute to the bottom line but are also heavily shared with third parties such as sports books and tech platforms.

In-person winnings from gamblers finally surpassed pre-pandemic levels of 2019 — a long-sought goal of the Atlantic City casino industry. The casinos won \$2.78 billion from in-person gamblers in 2022, compared with \$2.68 billion in 2019.

Gunfire damages another electricity substation

NC RALEIGH — A North Carolina utility said an electricity substation was damaged by gunfire early Tuesday but that it caused no power outages.

The damage comes after a gunfire attack on multiple substations in Moore County knocked out power to more than 45,000 customers for several days in early December. There have been no arrests in those shootings.

EnergyUnited said in a news release that an alarm early Tuesday alerted it to an equipment problem at the substation in Randolph County, northeast of Charlotte. It said crews found damage to the substation from an apparent gunshot and that law enforcement had been notified.

Investigators believe the attack occurred around 3 a.m. Tuesday, according to a news release from the Randolph County Sheriff's Office.

Power equipment in Washington, Oregon and Nevada also has been vandalized in recent months.

Police: Woman shot while talking with 911, dies

IA SIOUX CITY — A Sioux City man has been charged with first-degree murder in the death of a woman who was shot while she was on

the phone with 911 emergency dispatchers, police said.

Sarah Zoelle called 911 Saturday night pleading for help and saying her boyfriend, Austyn Self, was pointing a gun at her, according to court documents.

During the call, the dispatcher heard what sounded like a gunshot, according to the complaint, and Self, 23, then told the dispatcher "I shot her," the Sioux City Journal reported.

Officers found Zoelle holding a 6-month-old child and suffering from a gunshot wound when they arrived. Two other young children were in the house.

Zoelle later died at a hospital.

State to make preschool available for all kids

HI HONOLULU — Hawaii put forward a plan Tuesday to make preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds by 2032, which if successful would put the state in a rarified group of states managing to provide pre-kindergarten education to most of its children.

Hawaii's leaders have aspired to universal pre-K for decades. A recent analysis found the state was moving so slowly toward that goal that it would take 47 years to build all the public preschool capacity. The state expects it will need 465 new classrooms to serve the additional students.

Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke, who has been tasked by Gov. Josh Green to lead the state's efforts, said only half of Hawaii's 35,000 3- and 4-year-olds attend preschool, either by paying expensive tuition for private schools or obtaining one of the few spots in publicly-funded pre-K programs.

— From wire reports

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Chiefs QB Mahomes thrives in playoffs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Ask any coach or player around the NFL and they are bound to tell you that the speed of the game picks up when the playoffs arrive. There is no longer time to think on the field; decisions more often are made by in-the-moment instincts rather than carefully crafted game plans.

Perhaps that's why Patrick Mahomes thrives in the postseason.

Whether it be his preponderance of no-look passes, crazy side-arm slings or the myriad other ways that the Kansas City Chiefs quarterback sparks creativity on the field, there is arguably no better player in the NFL when it comes to playing sandlot football. His ability to make something out of nothing leaves teammates and foes alike shaking their heads.

"My family or friends are like, 'Oh my God, how's Patrick Mahomes?' And I'm like, 'He's just a special individual,'" said Chiefs wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster, whose career

has been rejuvenated during his first season playing with him.

"It's just like playing 'Madden' back when you had Michael Vick, who can just run all over the field and then launch it 80 yards down the field," Smith-Schuster explained. "It's kind of like that but for more it's ILR — in real life."

What has become known simply as Mahomes Magic around Kansas City tends to shine brightest this time of year, and the results are downright incredible: He has never failed to reach the AFC championship game in four years as a starter, twice going to the Super Bowl and once winning its MVP award while ending the franchise's 50-year title drought.

He will try to improve to 5-0 in the divisional round on Saturday night against the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"I think all the guys understood that whenever they signed with this team that we want to win the Super Bowl. And if we don't, we feel like it's

not where we should be," Mahomes said. "But you can't look ahead. We have a great team that we're playing this week, that's playing great football, so how can we practice today so that we're better by the end of the week? And I think you have to have that mindset — and I think the guys do — and I think we're in a good spot."

Rarely are the Chiefs, winners of the last seven AFC West titles, in a bad spot with Mahomes on the field. In all, he is 8-3 in the postseason. He is averaging 307 yards passing per game, a number driven up by a 404-yard effort in last year's wild-card win over the Steelers. And he has thrown 28 touchdown passes against seven interceptions while adding five TD runs, including one in last year's divisional-round win over the Bills.

That night at Arrowhead Stadium may have best encapsulated Mahomes in the playoffs.

The Chiefs trailed 29-26 with less than 2 minutes left when he threw since-departed Tyreek

Hill a 64-yard touchdown pass to regain the lead. And when the Bills raced the other way and scored with 13 seconds to go, Mahomes answered with two long completions to Hill and Travis Kelce to set up Harrison Butker's tying field goal as time expired.

In overtime, Mahomes completed all six of his passes, with the last the winning TD toss to Kelce in a 42-36 victory.

"Pat's a very competitive person," Chiefs offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy said, "and on top of that, obviously, he's a great football player. He's going to do whatever he can to make sure that he can help us be successful."

That means tirelessly working on his craft, and the results are evident: Mahomes shattered his own franchise record with 5,250 yards passing this season, to go with a league-leading 41 touchdown passes and four touchdown runs.

Mahomes has been making plays for years. And making them look easy.

Giants preparing to face 'Hurts the MVP candidate'

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The New York Giants are ready for a different Jalen Hurts this time around.

A fully healthy Philadelphia Eagles quarterback, that is. And that means preparing to face one of the NFL's most dynamic dual threat players.

"Everybody's saying he's having an MVP season and I agree," Giants defensive coordinator Wink Martindale said Wednesday. "Because he can beat you with his legs, he can beat you with just being a drop-back quarterback, he can beat you with a sore shoulder.

"He can beat you a lot of different ways, and that's a great challenge because there's just a few quarterbacks that can do it

that way."

Hurts was a full participant at Eagles practice and not even listed on the injury report Wednesday, a clear indication he has healed from the sprained right shoulder he suffered early last month at Chicago.

"He's off the injury report, so I'm expecting Jalen Hurts the MVP candidate," Martindale said. "I think if you expect anything less, you're kidding yourself because the guy's definitely a competitor."

Hurts missed two games before returning for the regular-season finale against the Giants, who sat most of their starters in the Eagles' 22-16 win. The Pro Bowl quarterback was 20-for-35 for 229 yards and an interception, and ran nine times

for just 13 yards in a playoff tune-up in which he still appeared to not be 100% healthy.

When the teams meet again in their NFC divisional round playoff game Saturday night in Philadelphia, New York is expecting to see a healthy — and dangerous — Hurts.

"He's a challenge to play against," safety Julian Love said. "He's been playing at a super high level this year because of his arm, his legs. He has really elevated his game, and we have to try to play him as best we can. He has a lot of tools in his bag. ... He's posed a threat or a problem to everybody he's played this year."

The Giants know that firsthand. In the teams' first meeting in Week 14, Hurts was 21-

for-31 for 217 yards and two TDs and ran seven times for 77 yards and a score.

Hurts set career highs in his third NFL season with 3,701 yards passing, 22 touchdown throws — against a personal-low six interceptions — and 13 TD runs. Despite sitting out two games, he became the first quarterback in league history to rush for at least 10 touchdowns in back-to-back seasons. He's also the first QB with 10 or more TD runs and at least a 100 quarterback rating (101.5) in a single season.

On Tuesday, Hurts acknowledged teams are focused on stopping him — and perhaps even his banged-up shoulder could be targeted by the Giants on Saturday night.

Unsung 49ers pass rusher Omenihu steps up

Associated Press

When the San Francisco 49ers needed a game-changing defensive play in their playoff opener, it wasn't one of their three first-team All-Pros who delivered.

Instead it was under-the-radar pass rusher Charles Omenihu, who seems to have a knack for rising up on the playoff stage.

Omenihu's strip sack against Geno Smith helped San Francisco take control in the second half of a 41-23 wild-card victory last week over Seattle, and it was just the latest big postseason play he's provided in his short time in San Francisco.

"We're all big-time players, so it doesn't matter who is going to step up," he said. "Thank God I've been able to. In the year and a half that I've been here, I have been able to step up in those big-time games and help my team win."

Omenihu had two sacks against the Seahawks in a performance that was reminiscent of how he played last year in the wild-card round at Dallas when he had 1½ sacks and a forced fumble.

Omenihu is now getting ready to face the Cowboys again in the divisional round on Sunday when San Francisco (14-4) hosts Dallas (13-5) with a spot in the NFC title game on the line.

Since being acquired at the trade deadline of the 2021 season from Houston for a future sixth-round pick, Omenihu has developed into a complementary piece on a defensive line anchored by All-Pro Nick Bosa and Arik Armstead.

"I figured out what worked best for me," he said. "Just over time, I continued preparing and studying myself. I understand how I should maneuver and play in this system."

Omenihu is the latest reclamation product of defensive line coach Kris Kocurek, who has excelled in his time in San Francisco at bringing in low-profile defensive linemen and turning them into valuable pieces for the defense.

The Niners have gotten key contributions this season from linemen like Omenihu, Jordan Willis and Hassan Ridgeway, who struggled to produce in their previous stops.

"He's really revamped his preparation," Bosa said about Omenihu. "He was more of a big interior guy when he came in. The time that's he's been here, he's really bought into the scheme. He's a really good player for us."

Omenihu's versatility has been important to the 49ers as he has lined up at both end spots, as well as playing in the interior, where he has used his length

and quickness to "carve up" guards in pass rushing situations.

Omenihu said Kocurek has helped teach him how to use his 36-inch arms to become a better pass rusher.

"Charles has such good length and even when he is blocked, he has a way of affecting the quarterback because of the length that he has," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "But what he has done, not only in just getting to the quarterback that you guys see with the stats and everything, but it's also important when you don't get to him to not let him out of that pocket and just rush up the field. And I think he's done a real good job of that here in these last couple games of still being able to affect the quarterback and not just always trying to rush past the quarterback because he's condensed that pocket."

With Hamlin recovering, Bills and Bengals shift focus

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Damar Hamlin is back on his feet, and that's uplifting enough in allowing coach Sean McDermott and the Buffalo Bills to focus on their immediate future rather than an emotional past in preparing to host the Cincinnati Bengals in an AFC divisional playoff on Sunday.

In some three weeks time, the Bills — and the Bengals for that matter, too — have gone from having their game canceled after Hamlin went into cardiac arrest and needed to be resuscitated on the field in Cincinnati, to being consoled by the safety's remarkable recovery.

"I think the guys are in a good spot," McDermott said on Wednesday in noting that Hamlin has made regular visits to the Bills facility this week.

"As he continues to improve, I think that certainly helps," McDermott added. "That experience, we'll carry with us, and there's a challenge to that. But there's also a lot of good that came from that. And I think right now, we need to focus on the positives."

The positives are numerous, and start with Hamlin back home a week after being released from the hospital. There's also the outpouring of support Hamlin received in the

wake of his sudden collapse.

And McDermott believes the passing of time — and the chance to return to the field to play the following two weekends — helped ease whatever emotional residue he and his players felt.

"I shared this with my kids on Sunday after the New England game because that's when I had a chance to slow down," McDermott said, following a season-ending 35-23 win over the Patriots two weeks ago.

"When you can go through your life 48 years and not really have an experience like that, and then that happens, you know that God's real," he added. "And you know that there's power in prayer and miracles do happen."

McDermott said Hamlin is not attending team meetings, but taking what he called "a baby step at a time" in re-establishing a normal routine by "just kind of dipping his toe back in here and getting on the road to just getting back to himself."

The mood this week in Cincinnati was similarly upbeat after the Bengals were also left stunned by the sight of Hamlin collapsing after making what appeared to be a routine tackle of receiver Tee Higgins in the first quarter.

"To see Damar getting healthier as time

passes and see where it ended up, there is always going to be a strong connection between these two organizations, and that's a good thing," coach Zac Taylor said.

Now it's a matter of two teams who bonded on the field and in the locker rooms in a time of crisis by agreeing that the Week 17 game could not proceed, essentially picking up where they left off. Rather than having the AFC's top-seed hanging in the balance as it was supposed to be on Jan. 2, the stakes are even higher.

The one issue facing both teams involves game-planning, and whether to go with a similar approach as three weeks ago. The Bills only had one possession, which ended with a field goal. The Bengals, who led 7-3 on Joe Burrow's 14-yard touchdown pass to Tyler Boyd, were on their second offensive series when the game was called off.

"I think you've got to be careful about digging too much, trying to uncover this or that, because we spent a lot of time prior to our last game," Bills defensive coordinator Leslie Frazier said. "You have to be careful of overthinking it, overanalyzing it, giving the players too much, and you end up not playing your best football."

American Brooksby ousts No. 2 Ruud

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Oh-so-close to completing a straight-set upset of No. 2 seed Casper Ruud at the Australian Open, Jenson Brooksby frittered away three match points, sat down at a changeover and began yelling at himself.

“How?! How?! God!!”

His face was flush, his emotions unhidden, his game unraveling. Soon enough, that set slipped away, as Ruud’s confidence seemed to surge and Brooksby’s collapse momentarily continued. And then, in a blink, Brooksby was back in charge, taking command immediately in the fourth set along the way to a 6-3, 7-5, 6-7 (4), 6-2 victory over Ruud and a spot in a surprisingly American-filled third round at Melbourne Park.

“I was getting a little more frustrated out there that I didn’t close it out, and my mentality was changing a little bit,” said the 39th-ranked Brooksby, who sipped from little jars of pickle juice in the fourth set at Rod Laver Arena. “Those are the situa-

tions you have to handle sometimes in matches, and you’re going to face. I think the biggest question is: How do you respond? I just told myself to reset.”

So leave it to a pair of 20-something Californians to rid the men’s bracket of its two highest seeded players: Brooksby, 22, delivered his unexpected triumph at the same stage and in the same stadium that Mackenzie McDonald, 27, defeated No. 1 seed and defending champion Rafael Nadal a day earlier. That makes this the first Grand Slam tournament since the 2002 Australian Open that the Nos. 1-2 seeds lost before the end of the second round.

Ruud was the runner-up at the French Open to Nadal last June and at the U.S. Open to Carlos Alcaraz last September.

Like Ruud, Ons Jabeur reached the finals of two Grand Slams in 2022. Like Ruud, she came to Australia as the No. 2 seed. And like Ruud, she was bounced in the second round, beaten 6-1, 5-7, 6-1 by 2019

French Open runner-up Marketa Vondrousova in a match that ended at about 1 a.m. on Friday.

Later still, Andy Murray and Thanasi Kokkinakis faced down exhaustion and each other for more than 5½ hours in a second-round match until Murray emerged with a 4-6, 6-7 (4), 7-6 (5), 6-3, 7-5 victory that ended at just past 4 a.m.

Murray won 196 points, Kokkinakis 192. And they combined for 171 winners.

It was the second consecutive five-setter this week for three-time major champion Murray, a 35-year-old from Britain with an artificial hip.

The exits of Nadal and Ruud make nine-time champion Novak Djokovic — who dealt with a persistent heckler and a left hamstring that he says worries him during a four-set victory over 191st-ranked qualifier Enzo Couacaud on Thursday night — even more of a title favorite in his return to Australia.

Also a big deal: The progress of U.S. men through the year’s first major championship. None

has won a Grand Slam title since Andy Roddick at the 2003 U.S. Open.

By reaching the third round, Brooksby joined countrymen Michael Mmoh, Ben Shelton, Tommy Paul and J.J. Wolf, who also won Thursday, along with McDonald, No. 16 Frances Tiafoe and No. 29 Sebastian Korda, who all won Wednesday. The highest-seeded American man, though, could not make it that far: No. 8 Taylor Fritz bowed out with a 6-7 (4), 7-6 (2), 6-4, 6-7 (6), 6-2 loss to 113th-ranked Australian wild-card entry Alexei Popyrin.

Still, the eight men from the United States remaining are the most into the third round in Australia since the same number did it in 1996.

Mmoh, who lost in qualifying but got into the main draw when another player withdrew, made it this far at a major tournament for the first time by defeating No. 12 Alexander Zverev 6-7 (1), 6-4, 6-3, 6-2.

Brooksby next plays Paul; Mmoh takes on Wolf.

Trio of LIV golfers playing in European tour event

Associated Press

The European tour is weeks away from discovering whether it has the right to issue bans to those members who joined the Saudi-funded LIV Golf league in a development that rocked the world of golf last year.

While the legal dispute drags on, players such as Lee Westwood, Ian Poulter and Henrik Stenson are happy to get what they can from the tour — world ranking points, Ryder Cup qualification points — whether they are welcome on it or not.

The veteran trio are playing at the Abu Dhabi Championship this week, with the presence of Stenson the most eye-catching.

It has been six months since the 46-year-old Swede chose

LIV Golf over the Ryder Cup, a decision which cost him the captaincy of the European team for this year’s event in Rome and has, for some, sullied his legacy.

He hadn’t played on the European tour since — his last non-LIV appearance was at the British Open in July.

“It’s been great,” the 46-year-old Stenson said after starting the Abu Dhabi Championship with a 4-under 68 on Thursday. “It’s been a while. It’s been good fun to catch up with some longtime friends that I haven’t seen for a long time.”

Stenson might not have many more events on the tour that propelled his career.

A British arbitration judge is expected to give his verdict in

February on the legal tussle between the European tour and those who left for LIV Golf. The Desert Swing, which also comprises the Dubai Desert Classic next week, could be one last hurrah.

“It’s going to be an interesting few months,” Irish golfer Shane Lowry told the BBC.

Luke Donald, who replaced Stenson as European Ryder Cup captain, also is teeing it up in Abu Dhabi, which has for one of the signature Rolex Series events that have prize money of \$9 million.

That would be seen as a huge prize pot if it wasn’t for Saudi-bankrolled LIV Golf offering much, much more — a fact that doesn’t escape Lowry.

“I think what’s happened in the last year or so, we’ve got sidetracked in thinking that 20 million or 100 million (dollars) is just normal and that’s what we should be playing for and that’s what we’re worth,” said Lowry, who — at No. 20 — is the highest-ranked player in the field in Abu Dhabi.

“The way I look at it, when all of us went to play on the PGA Tour back in the day, we shouldn’t have been welcomed back, either, then,” Stenson said. “There’s multiple tours in the world and as far as I’m concerned, as long as you fulfill your criteria and earn your right to be there, you should be able to play in as many tournaments as you like.”