

Ship hits mark with ‘fire-and-forget’ missile

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The USS America “detected, tracked and engaged a target” with an RIM-116 rolling airframe missile this week in the Philippine Sea, an exercise the Navy says was aimed at keeping the amphibious assault ship’s crew ready for warfighting.

The RIM-116 is a low-cost, lightweight, quick-reaction, “fire-and-forget” weapon designed to destroy anti-ship cruise missiles and other air and surface threats, according to the Navy’s website.

“The missile was launched at an incoming drone meant to simulate an anti-ship cruise missile to test the ship’s surface-to-air defense systems and reinforce the

crew’s warfighting readiness,” the ship’s spokesman, Lt. Beau Nickerson, told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

Only one missile was fired during Tuesday’s exercise, which took place “in the vicinity of Okinawa,” he added.

The exercise came about two weeks after China conducted a series of naval drills, including a large-scale combat strike exercise on Jan. 9 in the Taiwan Strait.

During those drills, Chinese forces sent 57 aircraft and four ships into the strait toward Taiwan, which is less than 400 nautical miles from Okinawa, according to the island’s Ministry of National Defense.

The America’s operations manager,

Cmdr. Avery Wilson, said Tuesday’s exercise showed off his team’s ability to work together, coordinating across multiple departments, to execute a mission safely and effectively.

“We demonstrated that through the hard work of our technicians and logistics support, our equipment is fully operational and our watch-standers in the Combat Information Center are trained and prepared for any threat,” he said in a Navy press release Tuesday.

The USS America, along with Amphibious Squadron 11 and the USS Green Bay amphibious transport dock ship, have been at sea since Jan. 8 for a routine patrol of the region, Nickerson said.

Russia launches attacks after tank decision

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces fired another rash of missiles and self-exploding drones in nearly a dozen provinces of Ukraine early Thursday, causing the first attack-related death of the year in Kyiv and killing at least 11 people in all.

The spokesperson for Ukraine’s State Emergency Service, Oleksandr Khorunzhyi, announced the casualty toll in comments to Ukrainian television. He said the attacks also wounded at least 11 people.

The attacks adhered to Russia’s recent pattern of launching widespread strikes about every two weeks. The latest onslaught, however, came a day after Germany and the United States upped the ante in Russia’s 11-month war by promising to send high-tech battle tanks to Ukraine and green-lighting other allies to do the same.

Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said one person was killed during the attacks, the capital’s first such death since New Year’s Eve. Two others were injured, he said. The head of the Kyiv city administration, Serhii Popko, said Ukrainian air defenses shot down 15 cruise missiles heading to the area.

The regional prosecutor’s office in Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia province said three people were killed and seven injured in a strike on an energy facility. Valerii Zaluzh-

nyi, the commander of Ukraine’s armed forces, said Thursday’s volley involved a total of 55 missiles, of which 47 were intercepted.

Self-exploding drones swept in overnight before the missile strikes, in what a spokesperson for Ukraine’s Southern Defense Forces said appeared to be a Russian attempt to overwhelm or distract Ukraine’s air defenses. As air raid sirens echoed across the country, civilians, some tugging pet dogs on leashes, poured into subway stations, underground parking lots and basements to seek shelter.

It was the first such barrage of Russian firepower across the country since Jan. 14.

Russia has carried out massive strikes on Ukrainian power plants and other infrastructure since early October, part of a strategy to try to hamper Ukrainian forces and put civilians in the cold and dark this winter, before what many experts predict could be a springtime offensive as more conscripts reach the battlefields.

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko said energy facilities were again targeted on Thursday by Russian forces who were “trying to cause a systemic failure in the energy system of Ukraine.” He acknowledged that some energy facilities had been hit, resulting in emergency

outages, and repair teams were working to restore power supply as quickly as possible.

Maksym Marchenko, the governor of southern Ukraine’s Odesa region, said energy infrastructure facilities were damaged in his region and several others, causing “significant problems with electricity supply.”

The regional administration in the nearby Kherson region, where Ukrainian troops recaptured the regional capital in November, said Russian shelling had killed two people and wounded five over the past day.

The attacks came a day after Germany said it would supply 14 high-tech Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine and authorize other European countries to send up to 88 more. The U.S. said it planned to ship 31 Abrams M1 tanks to Ukrainian forces.

Along with Germany and the U.S., Britain, Poland, the Netherlands and Sweden are among the nations that have sent or announced plans to supply hundreds of tanks and heavy armored vehicles to fortify Ukraine as it enters a new phase of the war and tries to break through entrenched Russian lines. The conflict has largely been a stalemate in recent months, though Ukrainian forces acknowledged Wednesday a controlled pullout from the salt-mining town of Soledar in Donetsk province.

GOP seeks to reinstate troops fired in COVID order

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Republicans in Congress are pushing for the Defense Department to reinstate service members forced out of the military for refusing the recently rescinded coronavirus vaccine mandate.

Two companion bills introduced in the Senate and House this week prohibit the Pentagon from replacing the mandate with another and call for the reinstatement and restoration of rank for troops separated or demoted due to their vaccine status.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin required vaccination for service members in August 2021 and rescinded the mandate at the direction of Congress in early January. About 8,200 service members were discharged from the military for refusing to get the vaccine for religious or other reasons.

“The COVID-19 vaccine mandate has ruined the livelihoods of men and women who have honorably served our country,” Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., said in a statement. “This inept bureaucratic policy should have never been imposed, and while it has since been rolled back, we still have service members who have not been rehired, promoted, or received back pay and benefits.”

The bills introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, in the Senate and Rep. Dan Bishop, R-

N.C., in the House are co-sponsored by more than two dozen Republicans.

Bishop said the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, the annual defense policy bill that included a provision requiring the removal of the mandate, did not go far enough. It did not prohibit the Defense Department from issuing a similar mandate in the future and did not provide meaningful remedies for service members who were kicked out, he said.

Service members who were involuntarily separated would be credited with missed retirement pay under the bills. Those who were demoted for refusing the vaccine would have their rank restored and receive compensation for any pay or benefits lost due to the demotion.

The measures would also change any “general” discharge given to an unvaccinated service member to “honorable” and expunge the records of service members who faced adverse action for their vaccination status.

A Pentagon spokeswoman said service members who believe they were wrongly separated can petition to have the characterization of their discharge corrected in their personnel records, which could open the door to reenlistment. But there is no potential for them to return at their previous level, she said.

Marines hold 2nd activation event for Guam camp

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

With its commandant and Guam’s governor in attendance, the Marine Corps held a second activation ceremony on Thursday for its first new installation in 70 years.

Camp Blaz — still under construction just west of Andersen Air Force Base after a soft activation in October 2020 — is expected to begin welcoming about 5,000 Marines within the next several years.

A soft activation ceremony in October 2020 was limited to a small number of Marines due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Blaz spokeswoman Maj. Diann Rosenfield told Stars and Stripes by phone after the event. Thursday’s ceremony was meant to share the special occasion with the local community, she said.

“Some may see this reactivation as the result of problems of challenges in the world — I disagree,” Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger said during the event at Asan Beach Park that was streamed live on Blaz’s Facebook page. “I think the reactivation of Camp Blaz is a symbol of increasing opportunity. It’s a sign of commitment, a sign of friendship.”

Blaz was born out of the Defense Policy Review Initiative, a joint agreement between the United States and Japan to relocate some Marine assets from Okinawa.

US arms sales up as allies respond to Russia, China

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. foreign arms sales skyrocketed in 2022, increasing by nearly 50% from the previous year as allies and partners muscled up amid concerns over Russia and China, U.S. officials said this week.

The boost added up to \$52 billion in sales during the last fiscal year, according to U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency data released Wednesday.

James Hursch, the agency’s director, said the Russian war on Ukraine and China’s military advances were likely causes for the spike.

In Europe and the Pacific, there is an “understanding among our partners and

allies that we’re back in an age of great power competition,” Hursch said in a statement.

In a separate category, privately contracted direct commercial sales also were up by 49% in 2022, totaling \$153.7 billion for the year, according to State Department figures.

The growth in that category, which also takes into account equipment transfers, was unsurprising.

“The increase ... was primarily due to authorizations adjudicated in support of Ukraine’s efforts to defend itself from Russia’s unprovoked aggression,” the State Department said.

Capabilities that have been put to effec-

tive use on the battlefield in Ukraine have been of particular interest to U.S. partners who have been on buying sprees.

High Mobility Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS, along with Javelins and Stingers are some of the weapons that have been in demand, according to sales data.

Last year’s increase also can be attributed to partners opting to buy more expensive gear, Hursch said.

“As we continue to improve our equipment, it tends to get more costly. Buying a HIMARS system, for example, is more expensive than buying a Howitzer,” Hursch said. “And that’s the sort of upgrade that several of our allies and partners are looking to do.”

US economy slowed but still grew at 2.9%

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy expanded at a 2.9% annual pace from October through December, ending 2022 with momentum despite the pressure of high interest rates and widespread fears of a looming recession.

Thursday's estimate from the Commerce Department showed that the nation's gross domestic product — the broadest gauge of economic output — decelerated last quarter from the 3.2% annual growth rate it had posted from July through September. Most economists think the economy will slow further in the current

quarter and slide into at least a mild recession by midyear.

The economy got a boost last quarter from resilient consumer spending and the restocking of supplies by businesses. Federal government spending also helped lift GDP. But with higher mortgage rates undercutting residential real estate, investment in housing plummeted at a 27% annual rate for a second straight quarter.

For all of 2022, GDP expanded 2.1% after growing 5.9% in 2021.

The economy's expected slowdown in the months ahead is an intended consequence of the Federal Reserve's aggressive

series of rate increases. The Fed's hikes are meant to reduce growth, cool spending and crush the worst inflation bout in four decades. Last year, the Fed raised its benchmark rate seven times. It is set to do so again next week, though this time by a smaller amount.

The resilience of the U.S. job market has been a major surprise. Last year, employers added 4.5 million jobs, second only to the 6.7 million that were added in 2021 in government records going back to 1940. And last month's unemployment rate, 3.5%, matched a 53-year low.

But the good times for America's workers aren't likely to last. As higher rates make borrowing and spending increasingly expensive across the economy, many consumers will spend less and employers will likely hire less.

"Looking ahead, recent data suggest that the pace of expansion could slow sharply in (the current quarter), as the effects of restrictive monetary policy take hold," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, wrote in a research report. "From the Fed's perspective, a desired slowdown in the economy will be welcome news."

Sheriff: Gunman didn't know dance hall victims

Associated Press

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. — The 72-year-old gunman who sprayed bullets into a Southern California ballroom dance hall, killing 11 people, had no known connection with the victims and investigators were still trying to determine a motive for the massacre, the Los Angeles County sheriff said.

Before the shooting Saturday night, Huu Can Tran parked a motorcycle just a block away from the ballroom in Monterey Park, which investigators believe he had planned to use as a backup getaway vehicle, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said during a news conference Wednesday hours after police seized the motorcycle.

Tran opened fire on a mostly elderly crowd of dancers at the Star Ballroom Dance Studio, killing 11 people and wounding nine, police said.

The carnage, during what should have been joyful Lunar New Year celebrations, sent ripples of fear through Asian

American communities already dealing with increased hatred and violence directed at them.

Some reports had said Tran frequented the dance hall and fancied himself as an instructor, but Luna said he hadn't been there in at least five years and did not appear to target the victims specifically.

"We have not been able to establish a connection between the suspect and any of the victims thus far," Luna said.

Luna said it wasn't clear how long Tran had been planning the attack in the city about 8 miles from downtown Los Angeles or what prompted him to spray at least 42 bullets, taking time to reload his weapon, a variant of the MAC-10 semiautomatic machine pistol with a 30-round magazine.

Outside the locked gates of Monterey Park's Star Dance Studio, a memorial grew higher Wednesday with mounds of bouquets and balloons. Hundreds of people carrying flowers, candles and incense showed up for a vigil.

Suspect in farm killings faces 7 murder counts

Associated Press

HALF MOON BAY, Calif. — A farmworker accused of killing seven people in back-to-back shootings at two Northern California mushroom farms was charged Wednesday with seven counts of murder and one of attempted murder.

Chunli Zhao, 66, was set to make his first court appearance Wednesday but it was postponed until Feb. 16, San Mateo County District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said.

Wagstaffe, speaking outside the courthouse, declined to share any additional details on a motive in the killing of Zhao's current and former co-workers, saying he wanted to keep the details out of the public eye to ensure a fair trial. Sheriff's officials have said it was workplace violence.

It was California's third mass shooting in eight days, and the largest in San Mateo County's history, Wagstaffe said. It followed the killing of 11 people in the Los Angeles area amid Lunar New Year

celebrations Saturday.

Authorities believe Zhao acted alone Monday when he entered a mushroom farm where he worked in Half Moon Bay, shot and killed four people and seriously wounded a fifth. He then drove to a nearby farm where he worked previously and killed three more people, said Eamonn Allen, a sheriff's spokesperson.

Erlin Ortiz and her sister, Miriam Ortiz, pack mushrooms at the farm where Zhao is accused of killing four people.

They were sitting in their car after their shift when they saw Zhao, who was about 40 feet away, pull a gun from a backpack, shout something in Mandarin to a fellow Chinese farmworker and then shoot the man, they told the Bay Area News Group.

Zhao then shot a second worker, and gunned down the first worker who had gotten to his feet and tried to run away, Erlin Ortiz said.

"He was super red and very angry," she said of Zhao.

Meta to allow Trump's return after 2-year ban

Associated Press

Facebook parent Meta said Wednesday that it will restore former President Donald Trump's personal account in the coming weeks, ending a two-year suspension it imposed in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The company said in a blog post that it is adding "new guardrails" to ensure there are no "repeat offenders" who violate its rules, even if they are political candidates or world leaders.

"The public should be able to hear what their politicians are saying—the good, the bad and the ugly—so that they can make informed choices at the ballot box," wrote Nick Clegg, Meta's vice president of global affairs.

Clegg added that when there is a "clear risk" to real-world harm, Meta will intervene.

"In the event that Mr. Trump posts further violating content,

the content will be removed and he will be suspended for between one month and two years, depending on the severity of the violation," he wrote. Facebook suspended Trump on Jan. 7, 2021, for praising people engaged in violent acts at the Capitol a day earlier. But the company had resisted earlier calls—including from its own employees—to remove Trump's account.

Meta said Trump's accounts will be restored "in the coming weeks" on both Facebook and Instagram. Banned from mainstream social media, Trump has been relying on Truth Social, which he launched after being blocked from Twitter.

Facebook is not only the world's largest social media site, but had been a crucial source of fundraising revenue for Trump's campaigns, which spent millions of dollars on the company's ads in

2016 and 2020. The move, which comes as Trump is ramping up his third run for the White House, will not only allow Trump to communicate directly with his 34 million followers—4.8 million currently follow him on Truth Social—but will also allow him to resume direct fundraising. During the suspension, his supporters were able to raise money for him, but couldn't run ads directly from him or in his voice.

Responding to the news, Trump blasted Facebook's original decision to suspend his account as he praised Truth Social.

"FACEBOOK, which has lost Billions of Dollars in value since 'deplatforming' your favorite President, me, has just announced that they are reinstating my account. Such a thing should never again happen to a sitting President, or anybody else who is not deserving of retribution!" he

wrote.

Other social media companies also kicked him off their platforms following the insurrection. He was reinstated on Twitter after Elon Musk took over the company. He has not tweeted yet.

Civil rights groups were quick to denounce Meta's move. Letting Trump back on Facebook sends a signal to other figures with large online audiences that they may break the rules without lasting consequences, said Heidi Beirich, founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism and a member of the group Real Facebook Oversight Board that has criticized the platform's efforts.

"I am not surprised but it is a disaster," Beirich said of Meta's decision. "Facebook created loopholes for Trump that he went right through. He incited an insurrection on Facebook. And now he's back."

2 lawsuits target states' abortion pill restrictions

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Supporters of abortion rights filed separate lawsuits Wednesday challenging two states' abortion pill restrictions, the opening salvo in what's expected to be a protracted legal battle over access to the medications.

The lawsuits argue that limits on the drugs in North Carolina and West Virginia run afoul of the federal authority of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which has approved the abortion pill as a safe and effective method for ending pregnancy.

The cases were brought by a North Carolina physician who prescribes the pill, mifepristone, and GenBioPro, which makes a generic version of the drug and sued in West Virginia.

While the federal court lawsuits target specific state laws, they represent key legal tests that could determine access to

abortion for millions of women.

The new litigation turns on a long-standing principle that federal law, including FDA decisions, pre-empt state laws. Indeed, few states have ever tried to fully ban an FDA-approved drug because of past rulings in the agency's favor.

But with the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, there's little precedent for the current patchwork of laws governing abortion.

After the Supreme Court overturned the decision in June, previously adopted restrictions on abortion kicked in and two states adopted new ones. Currently, bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy are being followed in 13 states.

On top of that, 19 states—including North Carolina and West Virginia—have separate laws controlling how, when and where physicians can prescribe and dispense abortion drugs.

Asteroid coming exceedingly close to Earth, but will miss

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — An asteroid the size of a delivery truck will whip past Earth on Thursday night, one of the closest such encounters ever recorded.

NASA has insisted it will be a near miss with no chance of the asteroid hitting Earth.

NASA said Wednesday that this newly discovered asteroid will zoom 2,200 miles above the southern tip of South America. That's 10 times closer than the communication satellites circling overhead. The closest approach will occur at 7:27 p.m. EST.

Even if the space rock came a lot closer, scientists said most of it would burn up in the atmosphere, with some of the bigger pieces possibly falling as meteorites.

NASA's impact hazard assessment system, called Scout, quickly ruled out a strike, said its developer, Davide Farnocchia, an engineer at the agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena,

Calif.

"But despite the very few observations, it was nonetheless able to predict that the asteroid would make an extraordinarily close approach with Earth," Farnocchia said in a statement. "In fact, this is one of the closest approaches by a known near-Earth object ever recorded."

Discovered Saturday, the asteroid known as 2023 BU is believed to be between 11 feet and 28 feet across. It was first spotted by the same amateur astronomer in Crimea, Gennady Borisov, who discovered an interstellar comet in 2019. Within a few days, dozens of observations were made by astronomers around the world, allowing them to refine the asteroid's orbit.

The asteroid's path drastically will be altered by Earth's gravity once it zips by. Instead of circling the sun every 359 days, it will move into an oval orbit lasting 425 days, according to NASA.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Hazing suit at university ends with settlement

OH BOWLING GREEN — The family of a student who died from alcohol poisoning while pledging a fraternity will receive nearly \$3 million from Bowling Green State University to settle its hazing-related lawsuit, according to an agreement announced Monday.

As part of the settlement, the family of Stone Foltz and the university both said they will work to address and eliminate hazing on college campuses. Foltz's parents have started a foundation focused on hazing education and have spoken to students at other universities about its dangers.

A university investigation found that Foltz, 20, had attended a fraternity initiation event in March 2021 where there was a tradition of new members finishing or attempting to finish a bottle of alcohol, according to a university investigation. Foltz, from Delaware, Ohio, was found unconscious after members of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity dropped him off at his apartment. He died three days after he was put on life support.

Woman sentenced for role in reality star's death

MO ST. LOUIS — A woman who lured a former star of a St. Louis-based reality TV show to a spot where he was killed was sentenced Tuesday to three years in prison.

Terica Ellis, 39, was sentenced for conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire in the March 2016 death of 21-year-old Andrew Montgomery Jr.

Montgomery's uncle, James

"Tim" Norman, was convicted in September of hiring another man to kill Montgomery.

Montgomery and Norman starred on "Welcome to Sweetie Pie's," a long-running OWN reality show about a family soul food business in the St. Louis area owned by Robbie Montgomery, Norman's mother and the victim's grandmother.

Ellis admitted she lured Montgomery to a street the night of the killing and gave his location to the killer, Travell Anthony Hill. Norman was the sole beneficiary of a \$450,000 life insurance policy taken out against his nephew's life and paid Ellis about \$10,000 for her role in the plot.

Hill pleaded guilty and was sentenced in October to 32 years in prison on two murder-for-hire charges.

Governor's gun proposals include open carry ban

CT HARTFORD — Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont announced a series of proposed gun laws Monday in a state already considered one of the strictest for firearms ownership, including a statewide ban on open carrying expected to draw strong opposition from gun rights supporters.

Lamont and other officials said the legislation, which also includes new registration requirements for ghost guns and monthly limits on handgun purchases, is needed to help curb rising gun violence and crack down on illegal firearms around the state. Hartford, for example, recorded 39 murders in 2022, the most in two decades.

Republicans in the Democratic-controlled legislature issued statements criticizing the gover-

nor's proposals as focusing too much on law-abiding citizens and not enough on criminals.

Ex-mayor sentenced to 6 months for child porn

OR BEAVERTON — The former mayor of a suburb of Portland, Ore., has been sentenced to six months in federal prison for possessing child pornography.

Former Beaverton Mayor Dennis "Denny" Doyle, 74, also was sentenced Tuesday to five years probation and ordered to pay \$22,000 to his victims, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Oregon said. He will have to register as a sex offender.

Doyle pleaded guilty to a federal charge of possessing child pornography in October as part of a plea agreement in which a prison sentence of about one year was recommended.

Between November 2014 and December 2015, while Doyle was mayor, he downloaded digital media on his personal computer containing child pornography, according to court documents.

Doyle was elected mayor in 2008. He lost a reelection bid in 2020.

2 charged with vandalism at health care facilities

FL TAMPA — A Florida man and woman accused of vandalizing several anti-abortion reproductive health services facilities are facing federal charges.

A federal grand jury in Tampa returned an indictment last week accusing a 27-year-old man and a 23-year-old woman of spray-painting threatening messages last summer at facili-

ties in Hollywood, Winter Haven and Hialeah. They are charged with conspiring to prevent employees of reproductive health services facilities from providing those services.

The first act of vandalism occurred weeks after the May publication of a leaked draft of a U.S. Supreme Court opinion overturning Roe v. Wade.

Results released in girl's request regarding Santa

RI CUMBERLAND — The Rhode Island Department of Health says it was not able "to definitively confirm or refute the presence of Santa" in a young girl's home after she requested to have a partially eaten cookie and a couple of gnawed-on carrot sticks tested for DNA to see if Santa Claus is real.

The department tweeted on Monday that "we all agree that something magical may be at play."

The department said it found no complete matches to anyone in the Combined DNA Index System but said there was a partial match "to a 1947 case centered around 34th Street in New York City," referring to the movie "Miracle on 34th Street." It said it would need more DNA samples "from other known Santa encounters to make a definitive match."

The girl, a Cumberland resident, had sent the cookie and carrot sticks to the town's police department to ask if they can be tested for DNA, Chief Matthew Benson said.

Benson forwarded the "evidence" to the state's Department of Health-Forensic Sciences unit for analysis.

— From wire reports



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Hurts focused on NFC title game, not MVP

Associated Press

Asked about being an NFL Most Valuable Player finalist, Jalen Hurts revealed, "I didn't know." Nick Sirianni pounded his fist on a table in mock disgust and cracked "Oh man!" when queried about his finalist snub for Coach of the Year.

In other words, individual awards don't mean a whole lot this week in Philly.

Not when there's a Super Bowl to win.

The trophy is within reach for the Eagles as they head into the NFC championship game against the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday. Sirianni and several Eagles stumped for Hurts to win MVP in the wake of The Associated Press award finalists being announced Wednesday. Hurts took a moment to soak in having his name in the mix with fellow quarterbacks Patrick Mahomes, Josh Allen and Joe Burrow as a candidate for the NFL's highest individual prize. No Eagle has won MVP since QB Norm Van Brocklin in 1960.

"I think it's a cool honor,"

Hurts said. "I don't really have much to say about it. I'm at a loss of words, to be honest."

Hurts put up numbers in the regular season worthy of such consideration: Philadelphia went 14-1 in his starts and he had 3,701 yards passing, 760 yards rushing and 35 touchdowns combined. He led the Eagles to the top seed in the NFC and a playoff victory over the New York Giants.

"I hope Jalen wins it," Sirianni said. "You want that for your players. He's had a great year."

The funny thing is Hurts' MVP push may have been aided by results in the games he didn't play. The Eagles went 0-2 when Hurts sat out two late-season games because of a sprained right shoulder. The message was clear as they stumbled behind backup Gardner Minshew — what kind of team would they be without Hurts?

"I think he should win it," tight end Dallas Goedert said. "I think he's been the biggest piece of what we've done this year."

Hurts is still achy in his right

shoulder — he told FOX Sports before the win over the Giants that he was "nowhere near 100%" — but it didn't show on the field. He went 7-for-7 for 89 yards in the first quarter, threw two touchdown passes and ran for a score in the 38-7 romp.

Hurts brushed off questions about his health Wednesday.

"I've felt better, but it doesn't really matter," Hurts said. "I've got to get it done."

Much has been made of the fact that 49ers QB Brock Purdy is just a 23-year-old rookie as he makes only his third career postseason start. Hurts, though, is just 24 and playing in his first NFC title game.

No one on the Eagles expects the moment to swallow Hurts. Hurts wore a Michael Jordan "I'm Back" shirt into Lincoln Financial Field for the season finale, in a nod to both of their comebacks (Hurts from the shoulder injury; Jordan from retirement). Sirianni hasn't been shy about comparing Hurts' competitiveness to Jordan's famed fierceness. Jordan, of course,

won six NBA championships. Hurts so far has an NFC East title.

"The things that Michael Jordan, you were able to see a lot of things about him in 'The Last Dance' about his competitiveness and about just his desire and will to win," Sirianni said. "So when you make that comparison, you think, the first thing, as good as he's played this year, as well as he's run the football, as well as he's thrown the football, reading defenses, accurate throws, as well as he's done all that, what you notice first about him is his will to win, his competitive drive."

Modest at the podium, Hurts has a different fire in the locker room and on the field.

"I try and set the pace, set the temperature of the room," he said.

That's one reason he's an MVP candidate. He also is in the running for Offensive Player of the Year. Eagles offensive coordinator Shane Steichen was a finalist for AP Assistant Coach of the Year.

Mahomes the old man among four quarterbacks

Associated Press

Patrick Mahomes will be the old man among the starting quarterbacks in the conference title games.

The 27-year-old All-Pro for Kansas City is the oldest member of one of the youngest groups of starting quarterbacks to make it to this round.

The other three scheduled starting QBs on Sunday are 26-year-old Joe Burrow for Cincinnati, 24-year-old Jalen Hurts for Philadelphia and 23-year-old rookie Brock Purdy for San Francisco.

The only other time all four starting QBs in the conference title game hadn't yet turned 28 came in 1996 when Brett Favre (27), Mark Brunell (26), Drew Bledsoe (24) and Kerry Collins

(24) got there.

Getting to this stage isn't new for Mahomes and Burrow. Mahomes has reached the AFC title game in all five seasons as a starter and can join Tom Brady as the only starting QBs to reach the Super Bowl three times in their first six seasons with a win on Sunday.

Burrow won his fifth playoff start last week against Buffalo, joining Russell Wilson (six) and Ben Roethlisberger (five) as the only QBs to win at least five starts in their first three seasons in the NFL.

While Burrow was the No. 1 draft pick in 2020 and Mahomes went 10th in 2017, Hurts and Purdy had more improbable journeys to this stage.

Hurts was picked in the sec-

ond round in 2020 and Purdy went with the last pick in the 2022 draft. The winner on Sunday will join Colin Kaepernick, Russell Wilson, Nick Foles and Jimmy Garoppolo as the only ones of the 192 QBs taken after the first round in the draft since 2002 to get to the Super Bowl.

Purdy has already had a noteworthy run, joining Joe Flacco (2008) and Mark Sanchez (2009) as the only rookies to win two playoff starts. The only other rookies to get to the conference title game were Shaun King (1999) and Roethlisberger (2004), who did it with one win after a bye.

Purdy is looking to become the first rookie to make it to the Super Bowl, with those four others all losing. They had a

combined 51.8 passer rating in the title games with nine interceptions, four TD passes and just 196.8 yards passing per game.

Streaking

The 49ers and Bengals are headed into championship weekend on impressive streaks.

San Francisco has won 12 straight games and Cincinnati has won 10 in a row, joining 10 other teams that reached this round on a winning streak of at least 10 games.

The last team to do it was the 2007 Patriots, who won 17 straight before beating San Diego to make the Super Bowl. Their bid for perfection ended with a loss to the Giants.

Assisting Ovechkin on goals is an art

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — Alex Ovechkin certainly has a lot of helpers.

The Russian star has climbed to second on the NHL career goals list with a supporting cast of teammates eager to help him rewrite the history books.

Only Wayne Gretzky with 894 has more goals than Ovechkin's 811, of which only 40 have been unassisted. Setting up the greatest goal scorer of this generation and perhaps one day hockey's best is an art — one that has been crafted and perfected over Ovechkin's 18-year career in North America by a growing list of Washington Capitals cohorts.

"He definitely wants pucks in certain areas of the ice," said Tom Wilson, who has assisted on 39 regular-season goals by Ovechkin in nearly a decade together. "You understand kind of when he wants it, where he wants it. As you play more games, you go with the flow and you get accustomed to it and you build that chemistry and you kind of just feel it."

Getting a feel for Ovechkin depends drastically on the situation, according to seven players who have combined for 365 primary assists (and 698 overall) on his goals.

Finding Ovechkin in his familiar spot in the left faceoff circle on the power play or getting him the puck steamrolling up the ice or putting it on his stick blade in the offensive zone are some of his most common scoring scenarios. They require passes with different speeds and locations.

John Carlson, who took over for Mike Green (70 assists, 48 primary on Ovechkin goals from 2005-15) as the point man on Washington's top power-play unit, has it down to almost a science at this stage. In the simplest terms, Carlson said: "Sometimes he beats the goalie. Sometimes you have to help him beat the goalie. Sometimes it's a combination."

What goes into that combination to set up Ovechkin for his trademark one-timer? More than meets the eye of opposing goaltenders and defenders.

"The hardest part about it is not making a 20-foot pass but trying to look off the other team, trying to set something else up because you look at him and then you're looking where the puck's coming from," said Carlson, whose 92 primary assists and 142 total on Ovechkin goals trail only longtime center Nicklas Backstrom. "For him and

how precise he is, maybe that does make a big difference. Maybe you stop the goalies 3 inches, 4 inches from getting over there. It's clearly made a difference."

Clearly, since Ovechkin has scored a league-record 294 power-play goals — many from the faceoff circle that has become his office much like the area behind the net was known as Gretzky's.

That still leaves more than 500 goals at even strength, which is where Backstrom has shined since making his NHL debut in 2007 and moving to the familiar spot as Ovechkin's center. They've now played more than 1,000 games together.

Backstrom's favorite assist: When Ovechkin is entering the offensive zone with speed and he can give him a drop pass.

"I'm always looking for his back foot," said Backstrom, who has assisted on 278 Ovechkin goals, including 136 primary. "I don't look too much on his tape that much, to be honest. When he wants to one-time it, it's usually on the back of his foot."

Most players typically want the puck on the tape of their sticks, closer to the tip of the blade. Winger T.J. Oshie, who currently uses sticks featuring

one of Ovechkin's old blades and has assisted on 42 of his goals since being traded to Washington in 2015, said the curve is big enough to want the puck closer to the back.

"He kind of covers it and lets the blade almost slingshot it," Carlson said. "His (curve) is definitely more pronounced because of how whippy his stick is. From that sense, even if you do pass it (to the front of his stick blade), if he's in motion, by the time it's released it's somewhere back there anyway."

Other teammates laugh off the notion of a perfect pass to Ovechkin. "Anything on the tape," center Evgeny Kuznetsov said with a chuckle. "I don't know," defenseman Dmitry Orlov (34 assists) said. "When he's open, probably?"

They agreed the most important ingredient to feeding Ovechkin was just making sure the puck wasn't bouncing or on edge by the time it got to him.

"As long as it's flat and it's on the tape so he doesn't have to think about how to handle all that stuff and just can play right away," said Kuznetsov, who has 66 primary and 105 total assists on Ovechkin goals. "As long as it's flat and in his spot, he'll be OK."

Trying to play good defense in NBA 'wild, hot mess'

Associated Press

DENVER — Contrary to all those high-scoring games, players are playing defense in the NBA.

Seriously, they are.

It's just that the task of stopping two-time reigning MVP Nikola Jokic or Luka Doncic or Joel Embiid or anyone else has become more challenging than ever.

Indiana Pacers coach Rick Carlisle may have described the assignment of locking down a premier — or even a reserve — player best: "It's a wild, hot mess trying to guard in the NBA now," he said.

A combination of rule changes, style-of-play alterations, the ongoing addiction to

the three-point shot and more have added up to the game being significantly tilted toward the offensive player.

Someone will win "Defensive Player of the Year" this spring, even after a season where no one seems to be able to stop anyone with the ball. It's almost certain that more players will average 20 points per game than ever before. A decade ago, there were a dozen or so players. This season, 50 isn't out of the question (there were 27 last season and 31 in 2020-21).

From zone defenses to constant rotations, teams are trying a little bit of everything to slow offensive stars. Still, the stars shine.

Scoring is up again this season, with

teams averaging more points (114.1) than the league has seen at any time in the past 50 years. Sacramento leads the way with 120 points per game, with six players averaging 12 or more points.

It's hardly a surprise to longtime NBA veteran Ish Smith that 44 players are currently averaging at least 20 points a game.

"I guarantee you, when I come and show my kids the game in 10 or 15 years, we're going to be talking about how it might be 100 guys now averaging 20," cracked Smith, the Nuggets guard who broke into the league in 2010. "It's just a tribute to guys getting better. Everybody can dribble, shoot, pass — and it makes it difficult."

SEC, Big 12 will feature marquee matchups

Associated Press

Conference races across the country are getting tight as the regular season winds toward the finish.

The Big 12 and Southeastern conferences will take a break from league games on Saturday to play each other, gifting college basketball fans with some marquee midseason nonconference games.

The 10th SEC/Big 12 Challenge will feature 10 games between the two conferences, including eight involving ranked teams.

Topping the marquee will be No. 10 Texas at No. 4 Tennessee.

The Vols have one of the nation's best defenses and moved up five spots in this week's AP Top 25 after lopsided wins over Mississippi State and LSU.

The Longhorns lost three spots in this week's poll following a loss to No. 12 Iowa State and a win over West Virginia.

Two blue-blood programs heading in opposite directions will face off when No. 9 Kansas plays at Kentucky.

The Jayhawks last week had consecutive losses in the state for the first time since 1989 after losing in overtime to rival Kansas State and being blown out by TCU at home. Kansas continued its downward trend against No. 17 Baylor on Monday night, losing 75-69 for its fourth three-game losing streak under Self.

Kentucky is no longer ranked, thanks to some lackluster losses, but seems to be rounding back into form. The Wildcats blew out Georgia and beat Texas A&M by 10 points last week.

Baylor beat Kansas for its fifth straight win, but has another difficult game against Arkansas on Saturday.

The Razorbacks were near the top 10 for most of the season before hitting a rough patch of four straight losses. Arkansas bounced back with a win over Mississippi State last week, but it wasn't enough to keep the Razorbacks in this week's poll.

No. 2 Alabama has its highest ranking since reaching No. 1 in 2002-03 and is right behind top-

ranked Purdue, receiving 23 first-place votes from a 62-person media panel in Monday's poll.

The Crimson Tide edged Mississippi State 66-63 on Wednesday before what will likely be a tough road game at Oklahoma.

Kansas State hopes to keep its momentum after an emotional win over Kansas last week helped it climb to No. 5 in this week's poll, the program's highest ranking since reaching No. 3 in 2010-11.

The Wildcats lost a huge test at No. 12 Iowa State, then host Florida on Saturday.

The Cyclones, coming off a two-point loss to Oklahoma State, have to follow up beating Kansas State by heading to Missouri on Saturday to face a team desperate to get back on track after losing three of four.

TCU handed Kansas one of its worst losses in 20 years under coach Bill Self with its 83-60 win on Saturday. That helped the Horned Frogs move up three spots to No. 11 in this week's poll.

They blew out Oklahoma on Wednesday before hosting Mississippi State on Saturday.

No. 15 Auburn has been on a nice run, winning five straight since a rough stretch last month. But the Tigers may have the toughest road draw in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge by playing at West Virginia.

The Mountaineers lost five of their first six Big 12 games, but they play a physical game and Morgantown is always a difficult place to play.

Purdue back on top

After a four-week run at No. 1, Purdue dropped out of the top spot in the poll with a loss to Rutgers on Jan. 2.

The Boilermakers bounced back from their only loss of the season with six straight wins to move back atop the AP Top 25 this week.

Purdue has what could be a pair of difficult games this week, at Michigan on Thursday and at home against Michigan State on Sunday.

Rybakina, Sabalenka earn berths in Australian Open final

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — What all seemed so different, so daunting, even, about trying to win a Grand Slam title to Elena Rybakina a little more than six months ago is now coming rather naturally.

And if she can win one more match, she will add a championship at the Australian Open to the one she collected at Wimbledon.

Rybakina, a 23-year-old who represents Kazakhstan, reached her second final in a span of three major tournaments by beating Victoria Azarenka 7-6 (4), 6-3 at Melbourne Park on Thursday, signaling a rapid rise toward the top of tennis.

"Everything was new at Wimbledon," Rybakina said after hitting nine aces in the semifinals to raise her tournament-leading total to 44. "Now I more or less understand what to expect."

That could come in handy Saturday, when she will face No. 5 seed Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus. Sabalenka reached her first Grand Slam title match at age 24 by beating unseed-

ed Magda Linette 7-6 (1), 6-2 in Thursday's second semifinal.

Sabalenka improved to 10-0 in 2023, winning all 20 sets she's contested this season.

More importantly, the victory over Linette gave Sabalenka her first taste of success in a Slam semi after going 0-3 at that stage until now, losing each previous attempt by a 6-4 score in the third set.

Rybakina and Sabalenka employ a somewhat similar brand of tennis, relying on big serves and big hitting at the baseline. Sabalenka is far less cautious, though, and her penchant for high-risk, high-reward play was evident against Linette, who had never before been past the third round in 29 appearances at majors.

Sabalenka finished with a whopping 33-9 edge in winners, but also compiled more unforced errors — including a trio that led to a break at love by Linette in the opening game.

The key to both semifinals turned out to be a first-set tiebreaker. Azarenka lost the mark on her strokes, for the most part, mak-

ing things smoother for Rybakina, while Sabalenka raced to a 6-0 lead in hers. It wasn't the case that each and every shot Sabalenka hit landed right on a line, but it must have seemed that way to Linette.

"In the tiebreaker, I really found my rhythm," Sabalenka said. "Started trusting myself. Started going for my shots."

Rybakina's win over Azarenka, the champion at Melbourne Park in 2012 and 2013, added to what was already an impressive run through a string of top opponents. She also beat No. 1 Iga Swiatek and No. 17 Jelena Ostapenko — both owners of major titles — and 2022 Australian Open runner-up Danielle Collins.

"For sure, they're very experienced players," said Rybakina, whose parents and sister have been in town throughout the Australian Open. "I knew that I have to focus on every point."

Rybakina was born in Moscow; she switched to Kazakhstan in 2018, when that country offered to fund her tennis career.