

## US launches strikes on more Houthi sites

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military fired more ship- and submarine-launch missile strikes against Houthi-controlled sites Wednesday and Thursday, directly targeting the group in Yemen.

Wednesday's strikes were launched from the Red Sea and hit 14 missiles that the command deemed an "imminent threat." The strikes followed an official announcement Wednesday that the U.S. has put the Houthis back on its list of specially designated global terrorists. The sanctions that come with the formal designation are meant to sever violent extremist groups from their sources of financing.

"Forces conducted strikes on 14 Iran-backed Houthi missiles that were loaded to be fired in Houthi controlled areas in Yemen," U.S. Central Command

said in a statement posted on X late Wednesday. "These missiles on launch rails presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and U.S. Navy ships in the region and could have been fired at any time, prompting U.S. forces to exercise their inherent right and obligation to defend themselves."

On Thursday, CENTCOM said the United States conducted a fifth strike that afternoon targeting another missile launcher site, and two missile launchers were destroyed.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden said U.S. military strikes against Houthi rebels will continue, but he acknowledged that the American and British bombardment has yet to stop shipping attacks by the militants on vessels in the Red Sea.

"When you say working, are they stopping the Houthis, no. Are they going to continue, yes,"

Biden said in North Carolina.

Despite the sanctions and military strikes, including a large-scale operation Friday carried out by U.S. and British warships and warplanes that hit more than 60 targets across Yemen, the Houthis are continuing their harassment of commercial and military ships.

The latest incident occurred Wednesday when a one-way attack drone was launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen and struck the Marshall Islands-flagged, U.S.-owned and -operated M/V Genco Picardy in the Gulf of Aden.

The U.S. has also strongly warned Iran to cease providing weapons to the Houthis. On Jan. 11 a U.S. raid on a dhow intercepted ballistic missile parts the U.S. said Iran was shipping to Yemen. Two U.S. Navy SEALs remain unaccounted for after one was knocked off the vessel

by a wave during the seizure and the second followed the overcome SEAL into the water.

There have been several incidents since the Friday joint operations.

The Houthis fired an anti-ship cruise missile toward a U.S. Navy destroyer over the weekend, but the ship shot it down. The Houthis then struck a U.S.-owned ship in the Gulf of Aden on Monday and a Malta-flagged bulk carrier in the Red Sea on Tuesday.

In response Tuesday, the U.S. struck four anti-ship ballistic missiles that were prepared to launch and presented an imminent threat to merchant and U.S. Navy ships in the region.

Hours later, the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack on the Malta-flagged bulk carrier Zografia. The ship was hit, but no one was injured and it continued on its way.

## Navy giving pregnant sailors more reassignment say

**By ALISON BATH**

*Stars and Stripes*

Pregnant sailors serving at sea now have more say in the jobs they get when reassigned to shore duty, the Navy recently announced as part of a policy change.

Under the update, pregnant sailors will fill ashore assignments that best fit their skills and the service's needs for a minimum of two years, according to a Navy administrative order that took effect Tuesday.

The change also gives the sailors more discretion in choosing their reassignment location.

Previously, pregnant sailors on sea duty were transferred

based on open ashore jobs near their current assignment.

"This keeps a sailor on their career track with meaningful and challenging assignments while also meeting critical needs the Navy has for their knowledge, skills, and abilities," the service said in a fact sheet posted to the official My-Navy HR website the same day.

The policy change allows the service to fill roles ashore that otherwise would remain open.

There are about 5,500 pregnant or post-partum sailors in the Navy, which is consistent with historical averages.

About 10% of those sailors are assigned to sea duty, the Navy told Stars and Stripes on

Thursday.

In November, the Navy had about 14,000 open, or gapped, positions ashore.

That number fluctuates due to operational adjustments such as permanent changes of station and ship decommissionings, service officials told Navy Times on Wednesday.

Sailors already serving ashore who are within 13 months of a projected rotation may have that date extended, or they may move locally to fill a vacancy, according to the fact sheet.

The policy also allows pregnant sailors serving at sea to remain in their assignments with the approval of their command-

ing officer and health care provider. Sea and shore commands can apply to be exempt from accepting pregnant sailors if the job is hazardous, the Navy said.

Shore orders will be canceled for service members at sea who experience a miscarriage or still birth.

Those sailors will continue to serve their full assignment at sea. But they will be granted convalescent leave with guidance from their medical provider, according to the Navy fact sheet.

The update follows several recent changes to reproductive health care policies across the services.

# NATO set to stage largest Europe drill since the Cold War

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

A record number of U.S. and allied troops will launch a new series of war games next week in Europe, where top NATO commanders said Thursday that a “whole of society” effort is needed to prepare for potential conflict with Russia.

U.S. Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli, NATO’s supreme allied commander and head of U.S. European Command, said some 90,000 allied troops are slated to take part in Steadfast Defender, which would make it the largest gathering of troops for an exercise on the Continent in decades.

The drills taking place in the Baltics, Poland and other countries will include reinforcements from North America.

“This reinforcement will occur during a simulated emerging conflict scenario against a near-peer adversary,” Cavoli said at the conclusion of a two-day defense chiefs meeting in Brussels.

Adm. Rob Bauer, the Dutch chairman of the NATO military committee, said the exercise serves as preparation for possible conflict with Russia.

“I’m not saying it is going wrong tomorrow, but we have to realize it’s not a given that we are in peace,” Bauer said. “And that’s why we have the plans.”

Russia remains locked in a nearly two-year-old war with Ukraine, and both sides continue to suffer high numbers of casualties.

About 300,000 Russian troops have been killed or injured in the fighting, Bauer said. The

Kremlin also has lost an extensive amount of military hardware.

But while the ground forces have been degraded, the Russians have stepped up production of missiles and other weaponry, Bauer and Cavoli said.

“They are sparing no effort in their reconstitution,” Cavoli said. “They are devoting an enormous fraction of their budget to the military over the coming years ... and they are running their defense industrial base just as fast as they can right now.”

In Europe, military officials from countries including Germany, Belgium and Sweden have warned in recent weeks that allies have a short window to prepare for possible conflict with Russia.

While Russia’s military industrial base is on a war footing, many allies have expended ammunition stockpiles to arm Ukraine.

Bauer, who has repeatedly sounded the alarm about the need for allies to step up their industrial production capability, said societies in Europe that have grown accustomed to peace also need to become more prepared.

“It is the whole of society that will get involved (in a war) whether we like it or not,” Bauer said.

Last week, Swedish military commander-in-chief Gen. Michael Byden warned that all Swedes should mentally prepare for the possibility of war. That caused alarm, and citizens have begun stockpiling supplies.

## 911 call: Austin aide asked ambulance to arrive quietly

*Associated Press*

An aide to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asked first responders to avoid using lights and sirens in requesting an ambulance be sent to Austin’s northern Virginia home after he had complications from surgery for prostate cancer that he had kept secret from senior Biden administration leaders and staff.

Austin was hospitalized Jan. 1 and admitted to intensive care after developing an infection a week after undergoing surgery. He was released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Monday.

On the Jan. 1 call to the Fairfax County Department of Public Safety, a man who identified himself as a government employee described Austin as alert. The identity of Austin and

the caller were redacted from a copy of the 911 audio, which was obtained by The Associated Press under the Freedom of Information Act.

In the four-minute call, the reason for needing the ambulance also was redacted.

The caller said Austin was not having chest pains.

“Can I ask, like, can the ambulance not show up with lights and sirens? Um, we’re trying to remain a little subtle,” the aide said, according to the recording.

A dispatcher responded that the ambulance would comply once it got near the home.

Austin was located on the ground floor of the residence, said the aide, who indicated he would be waiting outside for the ambulance.

## Fired Navy sub commander arrested for DUI in Georgia

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

A Navy captain fired last week from command of a guided-missile submarine was arrested and charged with driving under the influence of alcohol near Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base just days before his dismissal, local jail records show.

Capt. Geoffry Patterson was arrested by local police in St. Marys, Ga., and booked into the Cumberland County jail just after midnight Jan. 8, according to local jail records. He faces charges of DUI, improper lane change and no insurance, according to the jail records. St. Marys in Cumberland County is a southeast Georgia town just outside the gates of the Navy’s submarine base, where Patterson was assigned as a com-

mander of the Ohio-Class USS Georgia.

Patterson, 53, was dismissed as the sub’s commander Jan. 12 by Rear Adm. Thomas “T.R.” Buchanan, commander of Submarine Group 10 who cited a “loss of confidence in his ability to command.”

A Navy statement issued Monday provided no specific details about Patterson’s dismissal, nor did it mention he had been arrested.

A Navy spokesman on Thursday declined to comment on Patterson’s arrest or whether his dismissal was linked to the incident, citing an ongoing investigation.

Patterson had commanded the boat’s blue crew — one of two crews assigned to the submarine — since May 2022, according to the Navy.

# Deadly Israeli strike hits southern Gaza

*Associated Press*

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — An Israeli airstrike on a home killed 16 people, half of them children, in the southern Gaza town of Rafah, medics said early Thursday. The military continued to strike targets in areas of the besieged territory where it has told civilians to seek refuge.

There was meanwhile no word on whether medicines that entered the territory Wednesday as part of a deal brokered by France and Qatar had been distributed to dozens of hostages with chronic illnesses who are being held by Hamas.

More than 100 days after Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7 attack, Israel continues to

wage one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history, with the goal of dismantling the militant group that has ruled Gaza since 2007 and returning scores of captives. The war has stoked tensions across the region, threatening to ignite other conflicts.

More than 24,000 Palestinians have been killed, some 85% of the narrow coastal territory's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, and the United Nations says a quarter of the population is starving.

Hundreds of thousands have heeded Israeli evacuation orders and packed into southern Gaza, where shelters run by the

United Nations are overflowing and massive tent camps have gone up. But Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of Gaza, often killing women and children.

Dr. Talat Barhoum at Rafah's el-Najjar Hospital confirmed the death toll from the strike in Rafah and said dozens more were wounded. Associated Press footage from the hospital showed relatives weeping over the bodies of loved ones.

"They were suffering from hunger, they were dying from hunger, and now they have also been hit," said Mahmoud Qasim, a relative of some of those who were killed.

Internet and cellphone services in Gaza have been down for five days, the longest of several outages during the war, according to internet access advocacy group NetBlocks. The outages complicate rescue efforts and make it difficult to obtain information about the latest strikes and casualties.

The war has rippled across the Middle East, with Iran-backed groups attacking U.S. and Israeli targets. Low-intensity fighting between Israel and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon threatens to erupt into all-out war, and Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to target international shipping despite United States-led airstrikes.

## Pakistan launches series of retaliatory strikes at Iran

*The Washington Post*

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Pakistan launched a series of retaliatory strikes Thursday on militants in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province, its Foreign Ministry said, amid an increasingly tense situation in the Middle East that now appears to be straining relations between the nuclear-armed Pakistan and its neighbor.

Iranian state media reported that at least nine people, including three women and four children, were killed in the strikes, while Pakistani officials cited on-

ly the deaths of "a number of terrorists."

The Pakistani attacks, carried out with "drones, rockets, loitering munitions and standoff weapons," were launched in response to Iranian strikes inside Pakistan on Tuesday that killed two children, according to Pakistani officials. Both sides said they had targeted separatist militant groups that pose cross-border threats.

Pakistan's caretaker prime minister, Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, cut short his visit to the World Economic Forum in Da-

vos, Switzerland, and Pakistani officials said their military — one of the largest in the region — remained on high alert.

While the Pakistan-Iran border region has seen occasional outbreaks of violence in recent years, this week's attacks came amid growing concerns over rising instability in the region following the launch of Israel's war with Hamas militants, who are supported by Iran. Over the past week, the United States carried out several strikes against Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen, who have been attacking

shipping in the Red Sea; Iran, meanwhile, attacked targets in Iraq and Syria on Tuesday.

The strikes between Iran and Pakistan appeared somewhat unrelated, in that they targeted militant groups that primarily pose local challenges and pursue limited regional goals.

Pakistan said its strikes targeted members of the separatist Baluchistan Liberation Army and Baluchistan Liberation Front, which view themselves as representing the Baluch community that lives across Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

## Fearing attack, Russian city cancels Epiphany events

*Associated Press*

A Russian city near the Ukrainian border canceled its traditional Orthodox Epiphany festivities on Friday due to the threat of attacks as Kyiv's forces pursue a new strategy with the war approaching its two-year milestone.

The city of Belgorod has scrapped events in which the faithful plunge into ponds and pools through holes in the ice on

the feast of Epiphany every Jan. 19, the state news agency Tass reported, citing the regional emergencies ministry. The annual celebrations are widespread in Russia.

Cross-border attacks have become increasingly frequent in recent weeks in Belgorod, the largest Russian city near the border with about 340,000 people, and can be reached by relatively simple and movable weapons such as

multiple rocket launchers. It is about 60 miles north of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city.

On Dec. 30, shelling in the center of Belgorod killed 21 people and wounded 110, regional officials said, in what was one of the deadliest attacks on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbor.

Border villages have been targeted sporadically during the war by Ukrainian artillery fire,

rockets, mortar shells and drones launched from dense forests, where they are hard to detect. But until Thursday, no major public events were known to have been called off.

In Moscow, meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed a U.S. proposal to resume a dialogue on nuclear arms control, saying it's impossible while Washington offers military support to Ukraine.



# Uvalde report: 'Failures' and 'no urgency'

Associated Press

UVALDE, Texas — Police officials who responded to the deadly school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, “demonstrated no urgency” in setting up a command post and failed to treat the killings as an active shooter situation, according to a Justice Department report released Thursday that identifies “cascading failures” in law enforcement’s handling of the massacre.

The Justice Department report, the most comprehensive federal accounting of the hap-hazard police response to the May 24, 2022, shooting at Robb Elementary School, identifies a vast array of problems from failed communication and leadership to inadequate technology and training that federal officials say contributed to the crisis lasting far longer than it should have.

Even for a mass shooting that has already been the subject of

intense scrutiny and in-depth examinations, the nearly 600-page Justice Department report adds to the public understanding of how police in Uvalde failed to stop an attack that killed 19 children and two staff members.

Uvalde, a community of more than 15,000, continues to struggle with the trauma left by the killings, and remains divided on questions of accountability for officers’ actions and inaction.

The shooting has already been picked over in legislative hearings, news reports and a damning report by Texas lawmakers who faulted law enforcement at every level with failing “to prioritize saving innocent lives over their own safety.” In the 20 months since the Justice Department announced its review, footage showing police waiting in a hallway outside the classrooms where the gunman opened fire has become the target of national ridicule.

Attorney General Merrick Garland was in Uvalde on Wednesday ahead of the release of the report. Justice Department officials privately briefed family members at a community center in Uvalde before the findings were made public.

Berlinda Arreola, whose granddaughter was killed in the shooting, said following Wednesday night’s meeting that accountability remained in the hands of local prosecutors who are separately conducting a criminal investigation into the police response.

“I have a lot of emotions right now. I don’t have a lot of words to say,” Arreola said.

The review by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services was launched just days after the shooting, and local prosecutors are still evaluating a separate criminal investigation by the Texas Rangers. Several of the officers involved have lost their jobs.

Uvalde County District Attorney Christina Mitchell said in a statement Wednesday that she had not been given an advance copy of the Justice Department’s report but had been informed it does not address any potential criminal charges.

How police respond to mass shootings around the country has been scrutinized since the tragedy in Uvalde.

An 80-page report from a panel of state lawmakers and investigations by journalists laid bare how over the course of more than 70 minutes, a mass of officers went in and out of the school with weapons drawn but did not go inside the classroom where the shooting was taking place. The delayed response countered active-shooter training that emphasizes confronting the gunman, a standard established more than two decades ago after the mass shooting at Columbine High School showed that waiting cost lives.

## Trump caps long day in NY court with NH rally

Associated Press

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — Dan Steele knows what a long day in court is like. So he was extra appreciative on Wednesday that former President Donald Trump journeyed to New Hampshire after spending the day in a New York courtroom, where he sat defiantly during his trial to determine damages for defaming a magazine writer after she accused him of sexual assault.

A retired trial lawyer for the Justice Department, Steele said he hasn’t dug into the details of the wide array of cases against Trump. That includes four prosecutions — including two by Steele’s former employer — plus the defamation lawsuit, which comes on the heels of a \$5 million verdict for E. Jean Carroll in her initial sexual assault lawsuit, plus

a fraud case filed by the New York Attorney General’s office. But Steele dismissed them as “all campaign interference by the Democrats because they can’t beat him any other way.”

“Every time he goes into a courtroom,” Steele, 75, who retired in 2016, said approvingly of Trump, “he always comes out with more support.”

Steele and a few hundred other supporters spent hours waiting for Trump. The former president spoke more than two hours later than scheduled.

“You know I’ve been indicted more than Al Capone,” Trump told the crowd.

New Hampshire is the next state in the Republican nominating contest, and Trump seems intent on mixing court with campaigning.

## Power line falls on car in Ore. ice storm, killing 3

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — A power line fell on a parked car in northeast Portland, Ore., on Wednesday, killing three people and injuring a baby during an ice storm that turned roads and mountain highways treacherous in the Pacific Northwest.

Shortly before noon, dispatchers started receiving frantic calls about a downed power line and people appearing to be electrocuted, according to a statement from the city’s fire department. A branch had fallen on a power line, causing it to fall onto an SUV, the statement said.

As the chaotic situation unfolded, a resident grabbed the baby from one of the people lying in the street in a bid to save its life, according to the statement. The three killed — two adults

and one teenager — were found dead upon firefighters’ arrival, and the baby was taken to a hospital. It is believed the victims were electrocuted after they got out of the vehicle, the statement said.

The power company later deenergized the line, the statement added without specifying which company.

Around Portland, driving and even walking were virtually impossible as slick ice coated roads and sidewalks. Icicles dangled from roofs and cars, and ice encased branches, plants and leaves like thick glass.

A large swath of the region was under warnings Wednesday for as much as 1 inch of ice, promising only to add to the damage wrought by a deadly, powerful storm that hit over the weekend.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Official: Courts need \$2.6M after cyberattack

**KS** TOPEKA — The Kansas court system needs at least \$2.6 million in additional funds to recover from an October cyberattack that prevented the electronic filing of documents and blocked online access to records for weeks, the state's top judicial official told legislators Tuesday.

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Marla Luckert included the figure in a written statement ahead of her testimony before a joint meeting of the Kansas House and Senate Judiciary committees.

Luckert's written statement said the courts needed the money not only to cover the costs of bringing multiple computer systems back online but to pay vendors, improve cybersecurity and hire three additional cybersecurity officials. She also said the price tag could rise.

### Ordinance: Keep it moving on Strip pedestrian bridges

**NV** LAS VEGAS — Standing or stopping is now banned on pedestrian bridges on the Las Vegas Strip where visitors often pause to take photos amid the glittery casino lights or to watch street performers.

Violators of the ordinance that took effect Tuesday could face up to six months in jail or a \$1,000 fine.

Clark County commissioners voted unanimously this month to approve the measure prohibiting people from "stopping, standing or engaging in an activity that causes another person to stop" on Strip pedestrian bridges. That also includes up to

20 feet surrounding connected stairs, elevators and escalators.

The ban doesn't include standing or stopping if a person is waiting to use an elevator, stairway or escalator.

Clark County said in a statement that its "pedestrian flow zone ordinance" isn't meant to target street performers or people who stop to take pictures, but rather to increase public safety by ensuring a continuous flow of pedestrian traffic across the bridges.

### State deputy director sued for sexual harassment

**CA** SACRAMENTO — A lawsuit filed Tuesday accused a deputy director of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services of sexual harassment and retaliation against a senior employee while the agency did nothing to stop it.

Ryan Buras, an appointee of Gov. Gavin Newsom, harassed Kendra Bowyer for a year beginning in 2020 despite the agency's knowledge of similar previous allegations made by other female employees, the lawsuit contends. Newsom named Buras in 2019 as deputy director of recovery operations, a role that includes wildfire and other disaster response. Bowyer was a senior emergency services coordinator.

Buras' alleged harassment included crawling into bed with Bowyer while she was asleep during a gathering at his home, "touching her nonconsensually, attempting to get her alone in hotel rooms, grabbing her hand in public, calling and texting her nearly every night and more," according to a release from her lawyer.

Eventually, after rebuffing his advances, Bowyer faced retaliation from Buras that included restricting her access to resources needed to do her job, the suit contends.

### Woman who threatened official gets 30 days

**MI** DETROIT — A New Hampshire woman was sentenced to 30 days in federal jail Tuesday for texting threats to a Detroit-area election official after a November 2020 meeting to certify local results in that year's presidential race.

Katelyn Jones, 26, formerly of Olivet, Mich., and now living in Epping, N.H., targeted Monica Palmer, the Republican chairwoman of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers, and her family, the FBI said in a court filing.

Investigators say Jones sent photos of a dead body and threatened Palmer on Nov. 18, 2020, apparently because she was upset that Palmer and another Republican on the four-member Board of Canvassers initially refused to certify Wayne County's election results on Nov. 17.

The two members subsequently certified the totals in favor of Joe Biden.

### Balloon said to look deflated before crash

**AZ** ELOY — An "unspecified problem" with the balloon portion of a hot air balloon may have led to Sunday's crash in the Arizona desert that left four people dead and another critically injured, federal authorities said Tuesday.

The National Transportation

Safety Board said in a statement that investigators had not found any mechanical anomalies. They separated the balloon from the basket, which carries passengers, and "everything appears to be intact."

Authorities said 13 people were aboard the Kubicek BB 85 Z hot air balloon when it took off. Eight were skydivers who exited the gondola before the crash around 7:45 a.m. Sunday in Eloy.

Eloy Mayor Micah Powell said witnesses told investigators that the balloon itself appeared deflated, with its material "just straight up and down" seconds before a hard impact in an empty field that serves as a drop zone for skydivers.

### Court affirms conviction in body-in-freezer case

**MS** JACKSON — The Mississippi Court of Appeals has affirmed a woman's conviction in the death of a man whose body was found stuffed into a freezer at his home.

In a unanimous decision Tuesday, the 10-member court also affirmed the sentences received by Samantha Simmons — life in prison for conviction on the murder charge in the killing of 54-year-old Thomas Burns, plus 20 years for conviction on a charge of receiving stolen property.

A Lamar County jury convicted Simmons in August 2022.

Burns' body was found in a freezer in his home in Purvis in May 2018. Court records show Simmons had started dating Burns early that year, and she was living with him.

— From wire reports

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# Third Chiefs-Bills meeting has a twist

*Associated Press*

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Get ready for Patrick Mahomes versus Josh Allen: Playoff Edition Part III.

Only this time there's a twist — and no, it doesn't involve potential sightings of Taylor Swift at Buffalo's more popular wing joints.

The most significant change from a football perspective involves the Kansas City Chiefs (12-6) leaving the frigid comforts of Arrowhead in January by traveling to the equally frigid — and snowier — confines of Highmark Stadium for an AFC divisional-round playoff showdown on Sunday night.

Rather than being serenaded by the “Tomahawk Chop,” the Chiefs will be greeted by a fanbase better known for trashing folding tables and which celebrated Buffalo's playoff-opening rout of Pittsburgh by throwing tufts of snow in the air like confetti on Monday.

Though this will be Mahomes' second trip to Western

New York following the Chiefs' 26-17 regular-season win in 2020, it'll be the quarterback's first true playoff road game.

Fittingly, it's Buffalo, where the Bills (12-6) and their fans have long fantasized over how home-field advantage might turn the tables after two of their past three playoff runs ended in Kansas City.

There was the lopsided 38-24 blowout loss in the AFC championship game in the 2020 season.

Even worse was the heart-wrenching 42-36 overtime loss in the divisional round a year later in a game dubbed “13 Seconds” by Bills fans.

That's how much time was left in regulation for the Chiefs to gain 44 yards on two plays and set up Harrison Butker's game-tying 49-yard field goal. Kansas City won the coin toss and scored on its opening possession, which led directly to the NFL changing its playoff rules in now allowing the coin-toss loser one possession to tie the

game if scored upon.

So nightmarish was the outcome, Bills coach Sean McDermott, to this day, refuses to reveal what went wrong in the team's decision to kick off into the end zone — rather than bounce it short — after Gabe Davis scored his fourth touchdown to put the Bills ahead.

This season, Buffalo earned the right to host the game with a 20-17 win at Kansas City on Dec. 10, which sparked the Bills' five-game winning streak to close the season and clinch their fourth straight AFC East title.

The Bills, however, know all too well to be careful what they wish for in knowing the task of beating the Chiefs won't be easy after splitting their previous six meetings, including playoffs, since 2020.

“We've had our battles over the years and this will be another one. I mean, you watch what they did the other night. They were dominant,” McDermott said, referring to the Chiefs' playoff-opening 26-7 win over

Miami on Saturday. “So we gotta get our rest and try and get a little bit healthier, if we can, and then, and get ourselves ready to go again.”

Complicating matters further is the Bills are playing on an even shorter week after their playoff opener was moved from Sunday to Monday because of a lake-effect storm hitting the region.

Injuries are an even bigger issue.

Buffalo closed the game against Pittsburgh with a patchwork defense after starting linebacker Terrel Bernard (right ankle), backup linebacker Baylon Spector (back), starting cornerback Christian Benford (knee) and starting nickelback Taron Johnson (concussion) were hurt.

The onus will be on Allen to relieve the burden, as he did against the Steelers with a no-turnover, four-touchdown outing that included an electrifying 52-yard run, the longest in franchise playoff history.

## Packers thriving despite league's youngest roster

*Associated Press*

GREEN BAY, Wis. — This wasn't the typical formula for producing a title contender.

The Green Bay Packers followed up an 8-9 season by trading four-time MVP quarterback Aaron Rodgers to the New York Jets and letting plenty of other veterans walk away while assembling the league's youngest roster.

Green Bay has found a way to thrive in the postseason anyhow. The Packers (10-8) are the youngest team since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger to win a playoff game, at least according to one metric.

They're eager to keep it going as they visit the top-seeded San Francisco 49ers (12-5) in an NFC divisional playoff game

Saturday night.

“Our mindset is to win the Super Bowl,” said wide receiver Christian Watson, a 2022 second-round pick.

History suggested that was an unrealistic proposition.

The Elias Sports Bureau calculated the weighted age of each playoff roster since the AFL-NFL merger by factoring in how many games in which a player appeared. The Packers' oldest player — 32-year-old offensive tackle David Bakhtiari — suited up for only one game before going on injured reserve.

Green Bay's weighted age of 25.58 years made this the fourth-youngest playoff team, behind only the 1970 Cincinnati Bengals (25.22), 1970 Miami Dolphins (25.44) and 1974 Buf-

falo Bills (25.56).

None of those other three teams won a playoff game. The Packers stunned the Dallas Cowboys 48-32 to earn their fourth straight victory while showing experience isn't essential to playoff success.

“Obviously, yeah, experience is huge in these situations, but I think we're just confident in our whole team and what we got,” quarterback Jordan Love said. “And now it just comes down to execution, making the most of the plays we have, and I think that's what we are doing.”

Six of the Packers' 11 starters on offense Sunday were rookies or second-year pros. Fifteen of Love's 16 completions went to rookies or second-year players. The only offensive starters ol-

der than 25 were running back Aaron Jones (29), left guard Elgton Jenkins (28) and right guard Jon Runyan Jr. (26).

That young offense went through some growing pains and failed to score a single first-half touchdown for a five-game stretch earlier this season. But the Packers have produced at least 33 points in three of their past four games and set a franchise playoff scoring record against the Cowboys, rewarding the faith they always had in themselves.

The Packers are the first team since the AFL-NFL merger to have four rookies catch at least 30 passes: Jayden Reed (64), Dontayvion Wicks (39) and tight ends Luke Musgrave (34) and Tucker Kraft (31).



# Rookie coach Ryans transforms Texans

Associated Press

HOUSTON — DeMeco Ryans was in high school when a coach told him that if he wanted to make a career out of football, he'd have to show great energy on every single snap.

Ryans took that message to heart and now, in his first year as coach of the Houston Texans, he's demanded his team display the same relentless mindset. It's transformed the Texans (11-7) from one of the NFL's worst teams to a spot in the divisional playoffs Saturday at top-seeded Baltimore, where a win will put them in the AFC title game for the first time.

"That always resonated with me, like man, when you suit up, you got to do something that's different. Do something that others aren't willing to do," Ryans said. "A lot of people aren't willing to run, play with great effort, play as physical as they can play every single snap ... So, when you do it, and you have an entire team that does it, it jumps off the tape and people

all around the league truly respect what you do."

Ryans returned to Houston this season after being drafted by the Texans in the second round in 2006, winning AP Defensive Rookie of the Year and spending his first six seasons as a linebacker with the team. He's made the team relevant for the first time in years after the Texans had combined for just 11 wins in the previous three seasons under three different head coaches and an interim coach.

Bill O'Brien was fired after the Texans opened the 2020 season 0-4 and Romeo Crennel finished out the 4-12 campaign. David Culley came next and was let go after a 4-13 season in 2021 before Lovie Smith went 3-13-1 last season before being fired.

Though there was a buzz when Ryans, who was nicknamed "Cap" as the undisputed captain or leader of the team during his playing days in Houston, was hired last January, few outside of the building expected

the new coach to turn things around so soon.

The Texans, who won the AFC South, were predicted to finish last in the division and oddsmakers put their over/under on wins at 6½. But those inside NRG Stadium could already see brighter days ahead with the hiring of Ryans, who spent the previous two seasons as San Francisco's defensive coordinator.

The 39-year-old Ryans is often seen jumping around and screaming on the sideline after a big play is made, looking more like one of the players celebrating than a coach.

When Steven Nelson returned an interception 82 yards for a touchdown in Houston's wild-card win over Cleveland on Saturday, highlights showed Ryans running down the sideline behind Nelson before dropping into a crouch and raising his arms high above his head when he crossed the goal line.

That energy, players have said, is infectious.

Defensive back Kareem Jackson also spent two years playing alongside Ryans in Houston and has enjoyed seeing how players react to him as a coach after rejoining the Texans last month.

"When he was a player, he was a guy that you wanted to play with, you wanted to go out and do your job for him because he came with so much energy," Jackson said. "And it's the same way now with him being a coach, the energy that he brings, his positivity, his aura, you want to play for a coach like that. It makes it easy to come in and execute and want to be here."

Of course, his success has also been inextricably linked to the performance of rookie quarterback C.J. Stroud, the second overall pick in the draft. Stroud threw for 4,108 yards with 23 touchdowns and just five interceptions in the regular season to help the Texans return to the playoffs for the first time since 2019.

## Bucs' playoff path lined with familiar opponents

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The NFL playoffs are shaping up as a redemption tour of sorts for Baker Mayfield and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The NFC South champions pummeled Jalen Hurts and the Philadelphia Eagles 32-9 in a wild-card matchup, advancing to next weekend's divisional round against the Detroit Lions, another team that beat the Bucs handily during the regular season.

Coach Todd Bowles reiterated Monday that the Bucs, who have gone from having one of the oldest rosters in the league to one of the youngest following the retirement of Tom Brady, have embraced the role of being underdogs all season long.

The Eagles, who collapsed after a 10-1 start to the season, beat Tampa Bay by two touchdowns in Week 3. Three weeks later, the Lions (13-5) traveled to Florida and shut down Mayfield and a sputtering Bucs offense 20-6.

Sunday offers another opportunity to re-

deem themselves.

"It is what it is, man. They are just the team that's in our way right now, and we're in the way," linebacker Lavonte David said. "We're all trying to get to the same goal, so we're just going to go up there and play the best game we (can) play."

A victory at Detroit would set up a possible rematch with No. 1 seed San Francisco in the NFC championship game. The 49ers, who face the Green Bay Packers on Saturday, also defeated Tampa Bay earlier this season.

"I think back about the Lions game ... we just didn't play our best game offensively. We'll look back at the tape once we get into the game plan, but we're very different than we were early on in the year," Mayfield said. "That's something to be proud of, that we've continued to improve. We haven't reinvented the wheel. We just stuck with it and gotten better at the little things."

Bowles made a number of adjustments to counter what the Eagles were able to do successfully against the Bucs in the regular sea-

son, at times employing a six-man defensive front to stop Philadelphia's running game.

Hurts threw for 250 yards and one touchdown, but a relentless Tampa Bay pass rush created three sacks and a safety that put the Bucs up by nine points in the third quarter. Two plays later, rookie Trey Palmer turned a short reception into a 56-yard TD to break the game open.

The Bucs have now won six of seven following a stretch in which they lost six of seven to damage their playoff hopes.

"It says a lot about the growth of our team from where we were in the beginning to the middle, toward the end and now — playing with confidence, playing team football," Bowles said.

"We have a great locker room. ... We lean on each other. We trust each other. Just doing your job and knowing the guy next to you is going to do his," Mayfield added. "That's accountability for yourself and for your teammates. It's just amazing to see the growth."

# Blinkova upsets Rybakina in Australia

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Her hand and her legs were shaking, she'd missed nine match points but also saved six, and Anna Blinkova was 41 points into a wild tiebreaker that was the longest ever in a women's Grand Slam event.

Elena Rybakina, last year's Australian Open runner-up, was just as anxious on the other side of the net.

When Blinkova lunged to retrieve a backhand, aiming just to keep the rally alive, and Rybakina's next backhand sailed wide, it finished off a 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 (20) second-round victory Thursday that she'll never forget.

"It took me courage," she said. "It took me some certain calmness to stay in the present moment and to play point by point no matter what happens."

Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion who was runner-

up here last year to Aryna Sabalenka, saved two match points in a third set that contained six service breaks.

Blinkova twice served for the match but couldn't finish off, and a double-fault in the 12th game sent it to a 10-point tiebreaker. Once there, 13 minutes after her first match points, Blinkova had two more points at 9-7 but again Rybakina saved them, and so it went on.

Blinkova, smiling, later described it as the "endless tiebreaker." It went on for 32 minutes until Rybakina's backhand error ended it.

In terms of points — 42 — it was the longest tiebreaker ever in a women's major.

It was a long, tough night for the tournament's No. 3 seeds on Melbourne Park's main court.

Daniil Medvedev had to rally from two sets down to beat Emil Ruusuvuori 3-6, 6-7 (1), 6-4, 7-6

(1), 6-0 in a 4-hour, 23-minute match that ended at 3:39 a.m. local time.

Day 5 started with top-ranked Iga Swiatek narrowly escaping when she rallied from 4-1 down in the third set to beat 2022 runner-up Danielle Collins 6-4, 3-6, 6-4.

Collins announced soon after that 2024 would be her last season on tour.

Swiatek, a four-time major winner, next faces No. 50-ranked Linda Noskova, who beat U.S. qualifier McCartney Kessler 6-3, 1-6, 6-4.

Fifth-ranked Jessica Pegula's run of three consecutive quarterfinals in Australia was ended in a 6-4, 6-2 loss to Clara Burel. Her fellow American, 2017 U.S. Open winner Sloane Stephens, took out No. 14 seed Daria Kasatkina 4-6, 6-3, 6-3 and advanced along with No. 11 Jelena Ostapenko, No. 12 Zheng Qinwen, No.

19 Elina Svitolina and No. 27 Emma Navarro.

The 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu's comeback major ended in a 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 loss to Wang Yafan.

Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz dropped a set for the first time in the tournament before recovering to beat Lorenzo Sonego 6-4, 6-7 (3), 6-3, 7-6 (3).

Arthur Cazaux upset No. 8 Holger Rune 7-6 (4), 6-4, 4-6, 6-3 but No. 13 Grigor Dimitrov, No. 14 Tommy Paul, No. 19 Cameron Norrie, No. 21 Ugo Humbert and No. 27 Felix Auger-Aliassime all advanced.

Two earlier matches went the distance before being decided in 10-point tiebreakers: Olympic champion Alexander Zverev fended off Lukas Klein 7-5, 3-6, 4-6, 7-6 (5), 7-6 (7) in 4½ hours and No. 11 Casper Ruud edged Max Purcell 6-3, 6-7 (5), 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7).

## Pacers get Siakam from Raptors for 3 first-rounders

Associated Press

Pascal Siakam was traded to the Indiana Pacers on Wednesday night, ending a run of nearly eight years with the Toronto Raptors during which he was a two-time All-NBA selection, two-time All-Star and part of the team that won the 2019 NBA title.

His next chapter: teaming up with All-Star guard Tyrese Haliburton on a Pacers team that started the day as the highest-scoring club in the NBA and now has even more offensive firepower for the second half of the season.

It took Indiana a sizable amount of draft capital — three first-round picks — to get the deal done, but the Pacers also managed to hang on to their four leading scorers this season and add another star to the mix.

"We're incredibly excited to

welcome Pascal to Indiana," Pacers President Kevin Pritchard said. "As a two-time All-NBA selection and two-time NBA All Star, Pascal is a player that our organization has long admired and respected. We feel that his unique offensive skillset will complement our style of play, while his defensive versatility will be a valuable asset to our team."

Siakam leaves Toronto fifth on the team's career list in games and points, plus third in rebounds and 10th in steals.

"Pascal is a champion, an integral part of winning teams and an example of what can be achieved with dedication, perseverance, hard work and tenacity," Raptors President Masai Ujiri said. "We're lucky to have seen Pascal develop into the man and player that he is today — and we are grateful for everything he has done for our

city and for our franchise."

Indiana sent a pair of players with NBA championship rings, guard Bruce Brown and forward Jordan Nwora, to Toronto. Guard Kira Lewis, who was acquired earlier Wednesday by Indiana from New Orleans in a deal that helped make the Siakam trade possible, also went to the Raptors.

"Pascal is just a pure basketball junkie," Toronto coach Darko Rajakovic said Wednesday night before his team topped the Miami Heat. "He is the first one to show up in the gym, the last one to leave. He was always coachable, always professional since Day 1. ... I can only be thankful and grateful for all of his contributions to our team this season."

New Orleans also gave up a second-round pick and got a sizable prize back for its involvement: The Pelicans are now

below the luxury tax threshold.

"We wish him the best," Pelicans coach Willie Green said about Lewis. "Unfortunately, it didn't work out the way we wanted it to here."

The deal is a huge move for Indiana, the NBA's highest-scoring team this season. The Pacers entered Wednesday at No. 6 in the Eastern Conference and soon will get to pair Siakam alongside Haliburton, who has been out with a hamstring issue but could return as early as Thursday. He's listed as questionable for Indiana's game at Sacramento.

Siakam, 29, is in the final year of his contract, which pays him nearly \$38 million this season, and becomes eligible this summer to sign a five-year deal that could be worth as much as \$247 million. The Pacers are expected to at least consider giving Siakam such a deal.