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Destroyer makes 1st '24 Taiwan Strait trip

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A Navy guided-missile destroyer made a trip through the Taiwan Strait this week, the first reported transit by a U.S. warship this year and one China immediately labeled provocative.

The USS John Finn steamed southwest from the East China Sea to the South China Sea over about 13 hours Wednesday, U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Cmdr. Megan Greene told Stars and Stripes by email a day after the transit.

A Chinese military spokesman said the John Finn's passage was monitored.

"Recently, the U.S. military has frequently carried out provocative actions and malicious-

ly undermined regional peace and stability," an unnamed spokesman for China's Eastern Theater Command said in a Wednesday post on social media website Weibo.

Chinese troops "remain on high alert at all times," according to the post.

U.S. ships and aircraft routinely interact with foreign military forces, Greene said, but all interactions during the John Finn's transit were "consistent with international norms" and didn't impact the trip.

U.S. warships, and less frequently, aircraft, routinely pass through the strait in what the Navy says is an exercise of navigational freedom. China routinely criticizes those transits as provocative.

U.S. military ships and air-

craft transited the strait at least 11 times last year, a slight increase over the nine made in 2022.

The John Finn's passage was meant to demonstrate the United States' "commitment to upholding the lawful use of international waters for all nations as a principle" and to "oppose any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo and undermine the rules-based international order" in the region, Greene added.

"No member of the international community should be intimidated or coerced into giving up their rights and freedoms," she said. "The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows."

Beijing considers democratic

Taiwan a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland by force, if necessary.

The John Finn's voyage comes 11 days after Taiwan's presidential elections on Jan. 13. Lai Ching-Te, vice president and member of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, is scheduled to be sworn in as president on May 20.

It also comes two days after Taiwan reported tracking six Chinese balloons that flew over, or near, the island, according to Sunday posts by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense Ministry on X, formerly Twitter.

The last Navy transit of the strait, a P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft on Dec. 7, drew a similar response from Beijing.

Biden, Trump already in November mindset

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Barely 400,000 votes have been cast in two rural Republican primaries over the span of eight days. But both Donald Trump and Joe Biden are behaving like their parties' nominees already.

Trump's double-digit victory Tuesday in independent-minded New Hampshire, where he was considered more vulnerable than perhaps anywhere else, was a rhetorical tipping point for both Democrats and Republicans.

"It is now clear that Donald Trump will be the Republican nominee. And my message to the country is the stakes could not be higher," President Joe Biden said hours after Trump's victory Tuesday night.

Trump's team agreed, even as he raged about former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley's unwillingness to leave the race.

"I say the general election begins tonight," said Trump-adversary-turned-advocate Vivek Ramaswamy, who was standing at the former president's side during his New Hampshire victory speech. "And this

man will win it in a landslide."

The bluster is just a sliver of what's to come over the next 10 months. Both parties are building out sprawling political operations backed by billions of dollars in advertising to shape the all-but-certain general election rematch between the current president and his predecessor.

It is a matchup that many voters and some elected officials did not want. Both Biden and Trump have loud detractors within their parties and glaring political liabilities. Yet no other Republican presidential candidate in history has won the first two contests on the primary calendar, as Trump polished off Tuesday night, and failed to clinch his party's nomination. And Biden, who won New Hampshire's Democratic primary without even appearing on the ballot, is facing only token opposition in his bid for the Democratic nomination.

Hours before Biden's New Hampshire win was official, the president shifted two key aides from the White House to his Delaware-based campaign. On Wednesday, Bi-

den served as the keynote speaker at a United Auto Workers political convention in Washington, where he accepted the group's endorsement. The auto workers' decision marks a significant step in the president's push to win over blue-collar workers in critical Midwestern swing states.

Trump heads to Phoenix on Friday to address Republicans in a swing state that Biden won by 10,000 votes in 2020.

As much as Trump's team would like to shift its full focus toward Biden, one Republican rival is still standing. And at least for now, Haley is still consuming a significant amount of Trump's attention.

The former president's campaign unveiled a new anti-Haley website on Wednesday as Trump railed against her repeatedly on social media.

"Could somebody please explain to Nikki that she lost — and lost really badly," Trump wrote on his social media network. "She also lost Iowa, BIG, last week. They were, as certain non-fake media say, 'CRUSHING DEFEATS.'"

Austin: US, Iraq to talk on mission status

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. officials will begin talks with the Iraqi government in the coming days about the future of the U.S.-led mission to defeat Islamic State, including the presence of American troops in the country, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Thursday.

The two countries agreed to form a Higher Military Commission last August for discussions about the U.S.-led military coalition's next phase in its mission to defeat ISIS. Factors that will be considered include the threat from ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and the capability of Iraqi security forces, Austin said in a statement.

"Expert working groups of military and defense professionals will examine these three factors and advise the HMC on the most

effective evolution of the D-ISIS coalition mission, ensuring that ISIS can never resurge, in consultation with coalition partners at all stages of the process," he said.

The announcement comes as Middle East tensions heat up. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry issued a statement shortly after Austin's announcement that said these discussions have "a specific and clear timetable that ... begin the deliberate gradual reduction of its advisors on Iraqi soil."

A senior U.S. defense official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told reporters that the commission meeting is not a negotiation about the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani made headlines earlier this month calling for a drawdown of U.S. forces from the country. The calls have come in response to the U.S.

launching airstrikes inside Iraq targeting Iran-backed militants who have been attacking U.S. personnel stationed there.

U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked 153 times by Iran-linked militants since October, a military official said Thursday. That includes 61 attacks in Iraq and 92 in Syria.

"There is a need to reorganize this relationship so that it is not a target or justification for any party, internal or foreign, to tamper with stability in Iraq and the region," al-Sudani told Reuters on Jan. 10. "Let's agree on a time frame [for the coalition's exit] that is, honestly, quick, so that they don't remain long and the attacks keep happening."

After toppling Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, U.S. forces remained in Iraq fighting insurgent and terrorist groups until the U.S. withdrawal in De-

cember 2011, when a status-of-forces agreement with Iraq ran out. At the peak of the war in 2007, the Pentagon had committed some 170,000 troops to Iraq.

In 2014, a new terrorist organization — ISIS — launched a blitzkrieg across eastern Syria and into Iraq, capturing massive swaths of both countries, including about one-third of Iraq. Then-U.S. President Barack Obama amassed a U.S.-led coalition to launch an air campaign against ISIS. Later that year, the U.S. began sending forces back into Iraq to train and advise Iraqi military forces to fight ISIS. That campaign has continued, despite ISIS having lost almost all of its land in Iraq by 2017.

The U.S. declared an end to its combat portion of the anti-ISIS mission in 2021, but retained the about 2,500 troops in the country, saying they would remain indefinitely in a support role.

Mental health support for new military moms sought

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pregnant service members and new mothers in the military who are struggling with mental health issues could see additional support under a new Senate bill.

The legislation spearheaded by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., and co-sponsored by Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., aims to launch a pilot program within the Defense Department that would establish perinatal mental health prevention programs at military treatment facilities throughout the country.

Women in military service are more likely than civilians to experience a mental health diagnosis during pregnancy and the year after giving birth — a time span referred to as the perinatal peri-

od. "All too often, the mental health needs of new moms fall to the wayside as they adapt to life with a newborn — and this rings especially true for the brave women serving in our military," Shaheen said.

About 36% of the beneficiaries of Tricare, the military's health care program, received a mental health diagnosis during their perinatal periods, according to a 2022 study by the Government Accountability Office. Similar diagnoses are seen in about 20% of women in the general population.

Beneficiaries of Tricare, which include service members and their families, are believed to be at a higher risk for diagnosis due to isolation from social support networks and separation from deployed spouses.

Orban to fold on Sweden's bid for NATO membership

Bloomberg

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is preparing his lawmakers to ratify Sweden's accession to NATO after Turkey's parliamentary approval effectively left Budapest as the lone holdout to the military alliance's enlargement.

Under pressure to act after leaving the ratification protocol languishing in the Hungarian parliament for more than a year, Orban told NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Wednesday that he'll urge its approval "at the first possible opportunity," according to a post on the social media site X. Stoltenberg, for his part, said he was heartened by Orban's apparent commitment.

"I welcome the clear support of the Prime Minister and his gov-

ernment for #Sweden's #NATO membership," Stoltenberg said on X. "I look forward to the ratification as soon as parliament reconvenes."

On Tuesday, the Hungarian prime minister invited Swedish counterpart Ulf Kristersson to Budapest hours before the Turkish assembly ratified Sweden's bid, which was seen as a face-saving way out of yet another standoff he's created with European peers. Orban and his ministers have in the past accused Stockholm of undermining bilateral relations by repeatedly criticizing Hungary for democratic backsliding.

Hungary's parliament is expected to reconvene Feb. 26, Magyar Nemzet newspaper reported on Wednesday, citing the leadership of Orban's ruling party.

3.3% GDP annual pace growth in 4th quarter

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation's economy grew at an unexpectedly brisk 3.3% annual pace from October through December as Americans showed a continued willingness to spend freely despite high interest rates and price levels that have frustrated many households.

Thursday's report from the Commerce Department said the gross domestic product — the economy's total output of goods and services — decelerated from its sizzling 4.9% growth rate the previous quarter. But the latest figures still reflected the surprising durability of the world's largest economy, marking the sixth straight quarter in which GDP has grown at an annual pace of 2% or more.

Consumers, who account for about 70% of the total economy, drove the fourth-quarter growth. Their spending expanded at a 2.8% annual rate, for items ranging from clothing, furniture, recreational vehicles and other goods to services like hotels and restaurant meals.

The GDP report also showed that despite the robust pace of growth in the October-December quarter, inflationary measures continued to ease. Consumer prices rose at a 1.7% annual rate, down from 2.6% in the third quarter. And excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation came in at a 2% annual rate.

The state of the economy is sure to weigh on people's minds ahead of the November elections. After an extended period of gloom, Americans are starting to feel somewhat better about inflation and the economy — a trend that could sustain consumer spending, fuel economic growth and potentially affect voters' decisions. A measure of consumer sentiment by

the University of Michigan, for example, has jumped in the past two months by the most since 1991.

There is growing optimism that the Federal Reserve is on track to deliver a rare "soft landing" — raising borrowing rates enough to cool growth, hiring and inflation yet not so much as to send the economy into a tailspin. Inflation touched a four-decade high in 2022 but has since edged steadily lower without the painful layoffs that most economists had thought would be necessary to slow the acceleration of prices.

The economy has repeatedly defied predictions that the Fed's aggressive interest rate hikes would trigger a recession. Far from collapsing last year, the economy accelerated — 2.5%, up from 1.9% in 2022.

"We continue to forecast an ongoing expansion in economic activity over coming quarters, said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics.

Eventually, she cautioned, higher borrowing rates may dampen consumer spending and GDP. But she added that "there could be some upside to economic growth as the Fed starts to cut rates this year and financial and credit conditions ease.

The economy's outlook had looked far bleaker a year ago. As recently as April 2023, an economic model published by the Conference Board, a business group, had pegged the likelihood of a U.S. recession over the next 12 months at close to 99%.

Even as inflation in the United States has slowed significantly, overall prices remain nearly 17% above where they were before the pandemic erupted three years ago, which has exasperated many Americans.

Ban on gender-affirming care in Ohio despite veto

AP/Report for America

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio has banned gender-affirming care for minors and restricted transgender women's and girls' participation on sports teams, a move that has families of transgender children scrambling over how best to care for them.

The Republican-dominated Senate voted Wednesday to override GOP Gov. Mike DeWine's veto. The new law bans gender-affirming surgeries and hormone therapies, and restricts mental health care for transgender individuals under 18. The measure also bans transgender girls and women from girls and women's sports teams at both the K-12 and collegiate level.

The override cleared the chamber 24-8, save Sen. Nathan Manning, a Republican from Cuyahoga County who has consistently broken from his party on the issue.

Officials expect the law to take effect in roughly 90 days. The Republican-majority

House had voted to override the veto earlier this month.

DeWine reiterated Wednesday that he vetoed the legislation — to the chagrin of his party — to protect parents and children from government overreach on medical decisions. But the first week of January, he signed an executive order banning gender-affirming surgeries for people under 18 despite medical professionals maintaining that such surgeries aren't happening in the state.

At least 23 states have now enacted laws restricting or banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors, and many of those states face lawsuits. Courts have issued mixed rulings. The nation's first law, in Arkansas, was struck down by a federal judge who said the ban on care violated the due process rights of transgender youth and their families.

The care has been available in the United States for more than a decade and is endorsed by major medical associations.

Water service back for rural Tenn. town week after storm

Associated Press

MASON, Tenn. — The majority of residents in the rural Tennessee town of Mason had water services restored Wednesday, a week after freezing temperatures broke pipes and caused leaks in the decades-old, neglected water system.

Mayor Eddie Noeman told The Associated Press that 75% of the predominantly Black west Tennessee town of 1,300 people has had water restored, with the rest expected to be able to use their faucets by Thursday.

A winter storm brought subfreezing temperatures and snow to Mason and the rest of Tennessee last week. The cold caused the town's pipes to

freeze over and break, creating leaks that lowered water pressure and left many residents without running water. The cold exposed major problems with a water system that dates back to the 1950s, the mayor said.

Noeman said no money had been invested in the town's water system since 2010.

Residents filled up jugs and buckets at the homes of relatives and friends who live in the area but did not lose water service. Many either bought water or picked some up at giveaways by the fire department and local churches.

"Everybody came together for the town of Mason," Noeman said. "We've had these problems for a very long time."

Ukraine, Russia trade blame over crash

Associated Press

Russia and Ukraine traded accusations Thursday over the crash of a military transport plane that Moscow said was carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war and was shot down by Kyiv's forces, another heated episode in the information war that has been a feature of the conflict.

Though investigators reportedly found the flight recorders a day after Wednesday's crash, there was little hope that the circumstances would be clarified in a war where both sides have often used accusations to sway opinion at home and abroad.

The Il-76 crashed in a huge ball of fire in a rural area of Russia, and authorities there said all 74 people on board, including 65 POWs, six crew members and three Russian servicemen, were killed.

The crash triggered a spate of claims and counterclaims, but neither side offered evidence for their accusations, and The Associated Press could not independently confirm who was aboard or how the plane was downed.

Russia alleged that Kyiv shot down the plane with two missiles and said the prisoners of war were headed for an ex-

change. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described it as "a totally monstrous act."

Ukraine responded by casting doubt on the fact that POWs were aboard and putting forward their own theories, including implying that the plane may have posed a threat.

Without mentioning the crash, the general staff of the Ukrainian military said the country would target any Russian military transport plane believed to be delivering missiles, especially near the border.

Ukrainian officials have noted that Moscow did not ask for

any specific airspace to be kept safe for a certain length of time, as it has in past prisoner exchanges.

Mykola Oleshchuk, Ukraine's air force commander, alleged that "rampant Russian propaganda is directing a fake stream of information to the international audience, attempting to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the global community."

Ukrainian officials confirmed that a prisoner exchange was due to happen Wednesday. But they said it was called off. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine would push for an international investigation.

Official says US warned Iran ahead of ISIS-K attack

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government privately warned Iran that the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan was preparing to carry out a terrorist attack before bombings in Kerman earlier this month that killed 95 people, a U.S. official said Thursday.

The official, who was not authorized to comment and insisted on anonymity to discuss the intelligence, said the U.S. was following its longstanding policy of a "duty to warn" other governments against potential lethal

threats.

The official did not detail how the U.S., which does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, conveyed the warning about its intelligence on ISIS-Khorasan, known as ISIS-K, but noted that government officials "provide these warnings in part because we do not want to see innocent lives lost in terror attacks."

Iranian state media did not acknowledge the U.S. giving Tehran the information, and Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a re-

quest for comment.

The ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility for the Jan. 3 attack on Kerman, about 510 miles southeast of Iran's capital, Tehran.

The dual suicide bombing killed at least 95 people and wounded dozens of others attending a commemoration for the late Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Revolutionary Guard's expeditionary Quds Force, who had been killed in a 2020 U.S. drone strike in Baghdad.

In the time since, Iran has been trying to blame the U.S. and Israel for the attack amid Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It has launched missile attacks on Iraq and Syria. It then launched strikes on nuclear-armed Pakistan, which responded with its own strikes on Iran, further raising tensions in a region inflamed by the Israel-Hamas war.

The Wall Street Journal was the first to report that the U.S. had provided the warning to Iran.

US congressional delegation affirms Taiwan support

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — A bipartisan delegation from the United States Congress reaffirmed support for Taiwan during a visit Thursday following its election of a new president. The delegation's visit is the first by U.S. lawmakers to the island since the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party won a third-straight term in the Jan. 13 election.

China, America's chief competitor for global influence,

claims Taiwan as its own territory and threatens to use force to bring the self-governed island under its control. Beijing strongly condemned Lai Ching-te's election and appears set to continue its policy of refusing to engage with the island's government—a practice that's been in place since outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen's election in 2016.

"The support of the United States for Taiwan is firm. It's real, and it is 100% bipartisan," U.S. Representative Mario Díaz Ba-

lart said.

Balart, a Florida Republican, was joined by California Democrat Ami Bera. "In the 21st century, there's no place for aggressive action. We have to learn to live together, to trade together, to work together, to solve problems together," Bera said.

"Just know that we are proud of the people of Taiwan. We are proud of the relationship, and as strong as that relationship has always been. That is assured. It will even be stronger," Balart said.

"So, we look forward to working together to continue to protect the peace, prosperity (and) the future of Taiwan. It's up to the people of Taiwan," Bera said.

President-elect Lai thanked the visiting co-chairs of the U.S. Congressional Taiwan Caucus for their visit, saying that "today's Taiwan is a Taiwan of the world."

Lai also touched on continued military assistance from the U.S. and a proposed agreement to avoid mutual taxation of companies.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ethics panel dismisses filing against governor

RI PROVIDENCE — The Rhode Island Ethics Commission has dismissed a complaint filed by the state Republican party against Democratic Gov. Dan McKee alleging he violated state campaign finance laws after a lobbyist picked up a tab for lunch.

An investigative report submitted to the commission found McKee “acted reasonably and in good faith relative to payment for the January 2023 lunch at the Capital Grille restaurant.”

The commission voted 6-0 Tuesday to dismiss the complaint.

The GOP complaint filed last year alleged that McKee violated state law by allowing Jeff Britt, a lobbyist representing the urban development firm Scout Ltd., to pay for the \$228 meal. Scout Ltd. was hoping to move ahead with a plan to redevelop the Cranston Street Armory in Providence.

The governor’s campaign said last June that they reimbursed Britt for the lunch.

Serial killer’s last known victim’s remains are ID’d

WA SEATTLE — The last known set of remains linked to the Green River serial killer in Washington state belonged to a teenage girl who had previously been identified as a victim, authorities confirmed on Monday.

The remains were identified as those of 16-year-old Tammie Liles, the King County Sheriff’s Office said in a news release. She was from Everett, Wash., north of Seattle, according to local media reports.

Authorities had previously identified another set of partial remains as also belonging to Liles.

There are no other unidentified remains believed to be connected to Gary Ridgway, known as the Green River killer, according to the sheriff’s office. Ridgway preyed on girls and young women in the Seattle area in the 1980s and 1990s.

Law enforcement identified Liles as a victim of the Green River killer in 1988 by matching her dental records to remains discovered near Tigard, Ore. Ridgway led authorities to the second set of Liles’ remains in southern King County in 2003.

Ridgway has pleaded guilty to 49 slayings. He is serving life without the possibility of parole.

Police officer pleads guilty to wounding 6 bystanders

CO DENVER — A Denver police officer pleaded guilty Tuesday to wounding six bystanders in a crowd while firing at an armed man as bars let out.

Brandon Ramos, 30, pleaded guilty to third-degree assault, a misdemeanor, in the 2022 shooting. He was sentenced to 18 months of probation.

Ramos was working in a gun violence prevention team in Denver’s Lower Downtown neighborhood when he and two other officers, who were not charged, shot at Jordan Waddy after he pulled a gun from his pocket. The other officers were standing in front of Waddy when he pulled out the gun. The grand jury found the other officers were legally justified in shooting at Waddy. But it found that Ramos, who shot Waddy from the side, was not in danger

because Waddy did not turn and face him, and Ramos disregarded the risk posed to the people behind Waddy.

Waddy, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit possession of a weapon by a previous offender, has not yet been sentenced.

Jury awards \$85M to victims of 2020 wildfires

OR PORTLAND — An Oregon jury awarded \$85 million Tuesday to nine victims of wildfires that ravaged the state in 2020, the latest verdict in a series of legal proceedings that are expected to put the utility PacifiCorp on the hook for billions of dollars over its liability for the deadly blazes.

The fires were among the worst natural disasters in Oregon’s history, killing nine people, burning more than 1,875 square miles and destroying upward of 5,000 homes and other structures.

Last June a jury found PacifiCorp liable for damages for negligently failing to cut power to its 600,000 customers despite warnings from top fire officials, saying its power lines were responsible for multiple blazes. PacifiCorp has appealed.

Felons first must get gun rights, then voting rights

TN NASHVILLE — The state’s toughened voting rights restoration policy requires people convicted of a felony to get their gun rights restored before they can become eligible to cast a ballot again, Tennessee’s elections office said Tuesday, confirming a mandate that officials had been debating internally.

Last summer, election offi-

cial interpreted a state Supreme Court ruling as requiring that all convicted felons applying for reinstated voting rights first get their full citizenship rights restored by a judge or show they were pardoned.

The change, instituted by elections officials in July, has since halted almost all voting rights restorations: More than 60 people were denied and just one person approved, according to data from the secretary of state’s office.

State Elections Coordinator Mark Goins revealed the gun rights decision Tuesday when asked about it by The Associated Press.

Tribes, environmentalists seek to block project

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A federal judge is being asked to issue a stop-work order on a \$10 billion transmission line being built through a remote southeastern Arizona valley to carry wind-powered electricity to customers as far away as California.

A 32-page lawsuit filed on Jan. 17 in U.S. District Court in Tucson, Ariz., accuses the U.S. Interior Department and Bureau of Land Management of refusing for nearly 15 years to recognize “overwhelming evidence of the cultural significance” of the remote San Pedro Valley to Native American tribes.

The suit was filed shortly after Pattern Energy received approval to transmit electricity generated by its SunZia Transmission wind farm in central New Mexico through the San Pedro Valley east of Tucson and north of Interstate 10.

— From wire reports



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49ers look to clear NFC title game hurdle

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The most taxing part of getting to the precipice of the Super Bowl only to fall short might be the long journey just to return to that stage for another shot.

Offseason workouts, followed by training camp, a 17-game season and then the early rounds of the playoffs.

The San Francisco 49ers once again got through all that and earned another chance at winning the NFC championship game after losing in frustrating fashion the previous two seasons.

“When you lose the NFC championship, you want to snap your fingers and be there again.

But you can’t,” All-Pro fullback Kyle Juszczyk said after beating Green Bay 24-21 on Saturday night to return to this stage.

“There’s so much that has to happen between that last loss and getting back there again. And to finally be back there again, you don’t take it for granted. You know how hard it is and you know how much it means to these guys here that have gone through that. I get emotional thinking about it. We’re back here, and it’s time to take care of business. It’s time.”

The 49ers (13-5) get that opportunity Sunday when they host the Detroit Lions (14-5) for a spot in the Super Bowl.

San Francisco lost at this exact stage of the playoffs the past two seasons, blowing a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter on the road against the Los Angeles Rams in the 2021 season and then losing again last year at Philadelphia when the Niners were forced to play much of the game without a functioning quarterback.

Starter Brock Purdy got hit hard on San Francisco’s opening drive and tore a ligament in his throwing elbow. That forced into action fourth-stringer Josh Johnson, who joined the team late in the season, and he tried to keep the game competitive.

But the Niners fell behind by two touchdowns before Johnson

left with a concussion early in the third quarter, forcing Purdy to finish the game even though he couldn’t throw the ball more than a few yards.

Now they are back with a healthy Purdy and the confidence that this time will be different, that they won’t become the fifth team ever to lose in the conference title game in three straight seasons.

“We’ve been thinking about it, it’s been sort of in the back of our minds, like, last year we had a team to do it, and we feel like we didn’t have a real opportunity at it after the quarterbacks got hurt in that game,” Purdy said. “So I think we’re really excited for it.”

Chiefs’ formula is to match star power with draft steals

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Kansas City Chiefs had not even made it through two plays against Buffalo in the divisional round of the playoffs when Mike Edwards, already playing in place of injured safety Bryan Cook, clashed helmets with Bills wide receiver Stefon Diggs and had to leave their game with a concussion.

With the entire game still to go, and Bills quarterback Josh Allen on the other side, the Chiefs should have been concerned.

But in the latest example of how they’ve struck gold on Day 3 of the NFL Draft, fourth-round pick Chamarri Conner took Edwards’ place and the league’s second-ranked defense never missed a beat. Kansas City held the Bills to 24 points — the 18th time in 19 games limiting an opponent to that many or fewer — and hung on for the 27-24 victory Sunday night.

“Chamarri did a heck of a job,” Chiefs coach Andy Reid said this week. “He’s been working in nickel and dime situations, but to come in and have that extended time in there, and make the plays he made — he sure did a nice job in there.”

The Chiefs, who now head to Baltimore on Sunday for their sixth consecutive AFC championship game, will always be known for their star power. They have the NFL’s reigning MVP, and arguably the face of the entire league, in quarterback Patrick Mahomes, and Travis Kelce has become just as omnipresent not only for his talent, but for

his pop superstar girlfriend as well.

Throw in All-Pro defensive tackle Chris Jones, and there is no shortage of big names carrying the Chiefs deep into the playoffs.

But it takes more than a handful of high-priced stars to win in the NFL. The salary cap demands it. So the teams that are able to hit on late-round draft picks and undrafted free agents, and surround their stars with talented players on relatively paltry rookie contracts, are the ones that are best positioned to make a run at the Super Bowl.

The Chiefs have quietly done that as well as anyone.

In this past year’s draft, their Day 2 picks of Rashee Rice and Wanya Morris have been crucial to winning their eighth straight AFC West title. Rice was second among rookie wide receivers in receptions and yards receiving, giving defenses a reason to pay attention to someone other than Kelce, and Morris has appeared in 14 games on the offensive line due to injuries.

Throw in Conner and that’s quite a late-round draft haul.

It goes beyond this past year, though. In the previous draft, the Chiefs landed Joshua Williams in the fourth round and fellow cornerback Jaylen Watson and starting running back Isiah Pacheco in the seventh. Tight end Noah Gray and stalwart right guard Trey Smith were Day 3 picks in 2021, and cornerback L’Jarius Sneed and defensive end Mike Danna the year before that.

Not a bad job by Chiefs general manager

Brett Veach, who was largely responsible for picking Mahomes seven years ago.

“I’m a big Brett Veach fan,” Reid said. “I told him after the game Sunday, that’s on him. This game is him. It’s a reflection of all the time and effort his guys have put in. That’s sort of what it comes down to. They’ve given us good football players to coach.”

There is a lot that goes into making those draft steals work.

First and foremost, scouting must be on point, and the Chiefs have a group of scouts that is the envy of the league. They’ve been able to unearth overlooked talent while also identifying players that fit well in their offensive and defensive schemes.

There’s the coaching, of course, and the credentials of Reid and defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo can be put against anybody. And then there’s the locker room, in this case led by Mahomes and Kelce, that breeds confidence in young players that they can contribute in a significant way no matter where they played college ball or when they were drafted.

“If somebody is getting drafted lower and assuming the whole NFL world is accurate — that he’s a lower-round pick — and that player becomes something we didn’t think, somebody is doing something right,” Spagnuolo said. “I’m talking about the coaching and the development, so our assistant coaches I think are doing a great job. But it began with Brett Veach and his staff.”

Sabalenka defeats Gauff in semifinals

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Aryna Sabalenka avenged a U.S. Open final loss to Coco Gauff and will defend her Australian Open title as the overwhelming favorite against first-time finalist Zheng Qinwen.

Sabalenka attacked Gauff's serve with her powerful returns and unloaded 33 winners in the 7-6 (2), 6-4 semifinal victory on Thursday night.

After her breakthrough sequence in 2023 that started with a first major title in Australia and ended in the U.S. final loss to Gauff, Sabalenka is the first to reach consecutive finals at Melbourne Park since Serena Williams in 2015, '16 and '17.

"The key was that I was able to stay focused no matter what, no matter what the score was ... keep fighting for it," Sabalenka said of the difference between her last two Grand Slam encounters against Gauff. "I'm super happy to be in another final of a Grand Slam. Hopefully I can do a little bit better than

the last time."

No. 12-seeded Zheng had a 6-4, 6-4 win over No. 93-ranked Dayana Yastremska, ending the Ukrainian player's bid to become just the second qualifier to reach a Grand Slam final in the Open era after 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu.

Zheng lost in the U.S. Open quarterfinals to Sabalenka last year in her best previous run at a major.

She said reaching the final a decade after Chinese compatriot Li Na won the Australian title almost completes a dream. One more win will finish it.

"It feels unbelievable. I'm super excited to have such a great performance today and arrive in the final," said Zheng, who hasn't faced a player ranked in the top 50 in six rounds. "I haven't faced big-seeded (players) all the past rounds ... but, you know, it's a match, so let's see what's going to happen in the final."

Taking on No. 2-seeded Sabalenka will certainly be a big

step up for the 21-year-old Zheng, who is playing in a major for only the ninth time.

Sabalenka said she'd been "ready for anything" against Gauff, and was happy to have some support after facing the 19-year-old American in New York last September.

Gauff went into the semifinals unbeaten in 2024 after winning the title in Auckland, New Zealand.

She was on a 12-match winning streak in majors and attempting to be the first player since Naomi Osaka in 2020-21 to win the U.S. Open and Australian Open back to back.

The first set contained six service breaks. Sabalenka led 5-2 and missed a set point as Gauff went on a four-game roll to take a 6-5 lead. Gauff also couldn't serve out, with Sabalenka's booming returns causing her trouble.

In the tiebreaker, Sabalenka raced to 5-1. Chants of "Coco, Coco" went up around Rod Laver Arena but they didn't help Gauff.

Almost a half-hour after her first set point, Sabalenka got five more. She clinched it with a big serve out wide.

Gauff won points on just three of her 17 second serves in the first set. That made her push harder and led to six double-faults.

The second set was tight again, until Sabalenka broke in the ninth game.

Yastremska, who won three matches in qualifying and five matches in the main draw, said she was proud of her performance and giving herself the chance to fly the flag for Ukraine.

"It was a great tournament for me. Usually (you) get in Grand Slams seven matches to play, and I have played nine matches, so I'm very proud of myself," she said.

In doubles, 43-year-old Rohan Bopanna and Matthew Ebden advanced to their second consecutive Grand Slam men's final by beating Zhang Zhizhen and Tomas Machac 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7).

Harbaugh going back to NFL as Chargers' coach

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Jim Harbaugh was hired as head coach of the Los Angeles Chargers on Wednesday, leaving Michigan after capping his ninth season as coach of college football's winningest program with the school's first national championship since 1997.

Harbaugh signed a five-year deal a person close to the negotiations told The Associated Press. The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the Chargers did not announce the terms.

Harbaugh made the highly anticipated decision to go back to the NFL after a second interview and resume his chase for a Super Bowl that eluded him as a quarterback and coach.

He will be the first former Chargers player to return to the team as head coach. He played for the Bolts in 1999-2000 before retiring following the 2001 season.

"My love for Michigan, playing there and coming back to coach there leaves a lasting impact. I'll always be a loyal Wolverine," Harbaugh said in a statement. "I'm remarkably fortunate to have been afforded the privilege of coaching at places where life's journey has created strong personal connections for me. When I played for the Chargers, the Spanos family could not have been more gracious or more welcoming."

"Being back here feels like home, and it's great to see that

those things haven't changed."

Harbaugh is the first coach in 26 seasons to win a national title and not return to the school the following season. Nebraska's Tom Osborne retired following the 1997 season after the Cornhuskers split the national title with Michigan.

Los Angeles was looking for a new coach and general manager after Brandon Staley and Tom Telesco were fired on Dec. 15, a day after a 63-21 loss in Las Vegas to the Raiders.

"Jim Harbaugh is football personified, and I can think of no one better to lead the Chargers forward," owner Dean Spanos said in a statement while also borrowing from one of Harbaugh's catch phrases. "Who has it better than us?"

Harbaugh called Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel to inform him he was leaving to lead the Chargers. Michigan tried to keep Harbaugh, offering him a new six-year contract for \$11.5 million per season, according to a person familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to share details of the deal.

Harbaugh was 86-25 at Michigan and restored college football's winningest program to relevance after it slipped over several seasons.

Harbaugh's alma mater could not offer the one thing he desperately wants — a Super Bowl title.

Sanctions for harassment in US Biathlon

Associated Press

U.S. Biathlon national champion Joanne Reid was sexually harassed and abused for years by a ski-wax technician while racing on the elite World Cup circuit, a watchdog group that oversees sex-abuse allegations in Olympic sports found. When the two-time Olympian complained, she said she was told his behavior was just part of the male European culture.

Teammate Deedra Irwin said she repeatedly had to step in to protect Reid. Outraged by what she called “a culture of harassment and misogyny,” Irwin, a biathlete with the Army National Guard, notified her military superiors, who immediately demanded action.

Only then, in April 2021, did U.S. Biathlon officials alert the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

Its 18-month investigation found that Petr “Gara” Garabik had engaged in repeated sexual harassment and unwanted sexual contact with Reid. The Czech citizen was suspended for six months and put on probation until December 2024.

Wax technicians play a critical role in biathlon, which combines cross-country skiing with precision-rifle shooting, preparing skis for the day’s snow conditions so racers glide over the trails with ease. It was a power dynamic that left Reid vulnerable.

To protect Reid from Garabik, Irwin told the AP she would get between Reid and the wax tech. The women became “battle buddies,” she said — a military term meaning soldiers take care of each other.

“You never go anywhere without your battle buddy so there’s always two against one and there’s always someone to corroborate your story,” she told the AP in December while racing in Austria.

An athlete sexually harassed by a wax tech would have trouble making him stop, “out of concern it would jeopardize the

athlete’s performance,” said confidential SafeSport reports on its investigation obtained by The Associated Press.

It was an argument Reid had made in complaints to U.S. Biathlon officials since 2019.

Still, it would take two years for U.S. Biathlon to bring the case to SafeSport, created to investigate and punish abuse in Olympic sports in the aftermath of the Larry Nassar USA Gymnastics sexual molestation scandal that revealed flaws in U.S. sports leaders’ handling of sex-abuse cases.

SafeSport’s investigation found that Garabik “engaged in a pattern of sexualized behavior” involving Reid, “including sexualized commentary and inappropriate sexualized touching, over the course of six years.”

Garabik’s behavior was well-known and team officials acted like it was normal, or “European,” said Reid, 31, the daughter of Olympic speed-skater Beth (Heiden) Reid and niece of Olympic speed-skate superstar Eric Heiden.

“New women on the team were warned about him,” Reid told the AP. For years she refrained from complaining, she said, as she tried to find her footing as a new team member and for fear the ski-wax techs would quit, leaving the team in trouble.

Garabik told the AP in an email that the case against him was “complete nonsense from the start.” But he acknowledged to SafeSport investigators and the AP that his comments were sexual in nature.

“I have never done anything to anyone without their consent, and the fact that I had some jokes and hints was never sexual pressure,” he told the AP. “We always laughed about it. By that I mean other team members.”

Last May, six months after SafeSport concluded its investigation, U.S. Biathlon retroactively changed the criteria for being

pre-qualified for the World Cup team — and Reid was bumped off. Reid had to start over, competing in qualifying races. The change didn’t affect the status of anyone else on the team.

Reid said she believed the move was retaliation for calling attention to how U.S. Biathlon handled the problem. She turned down a spot on the U.S. national team and stopped going to trainings.

“There was no way I was going to put on my uniform and represent them on a world stage,” Reid told the AP.

U.S. Biathlon CEO Jack Gierhart denied the World Cup rule change was retaliation, saying in an interview that it was developed and approved by a committee that includes athletes to set standards to help the organization reach its goals.

Asked about Reid’s SafeSport case at U.S. Biathlon’s annual meeting in December, he said policies were implemented to address the issues.

“Athlete safety is a critical issue for us,” Gierhart told the biathletes and officials attending the Zoom session. “We’re always working to improve how we address that, how we educate our athletes ... how we educate our staff, and the safeguards we put in place.”

Reid told investigators the sexual harassment started in 2016, with constant touching, unwelcomed hugs, lewd jokes and pats on the buttocks. She was in her early 20s and Garabik in his late 40s.

He grabbed, touched and hugged her whenever they were in the wax cabin together, made inappropriate jokes when she bent over to put on her skis and sent a stream of flirtatious emojis over WhatsApp, she said.

In March 2017, Garabik showed up drunk at her hotel room, pushed his way inside, held her down and tried to kiss her as she fought back, the SafeSport report said. Her roommate arrived and pulled him

off, it said.

In 2019, with Irwin’s support, Reid reported the abuse to then-coach Bernd Eisenbichler. He took Reid off Garabik’s wax rotation and reprimanded him, but the behavior didn’t stop, the report said, and two days later Garabik grabbed Reid’s buttocks while giving her a good-luck hug before a race.

Garabik’s “inappropriate conduct” even after being reprimanded by a coach suggests “an ongoing potential risk to safety of others, particularly women in sport,” the SafeSport findings said.

In 2020, Reid and Irwin went to U.S. Biathlon High Performance Director Lowell Bailey with their concerns and, they told the AP, he responded that you can’t teach sexual harassment rules to a European.

In February 2021, a year after the athletes complained to Bailey, Garabik told Reid at an event in Slovenia that a package on a high shelf was hers — then grabbed her between the legs and lifted her up by the crotch to reach it, the SafeSport findings said.

In a statement two months later to U.S. Biathlon, Irwin said female athletes were treated with disrespect, “and then everyone refuses to address it and calls it ‘part of European culture’ or ‘just a joke.’”

U.S. Biathlon removed Garabik from working with its teams in November 2021.

This past November, after years of silence, Reid went public with her SafeSport story on her popular Instagram and Facebook pages, and was encouraged by the outpouring of support.

“I am absolutely floored, actually, by the amount of people coming out of the woodwork on behalf of me and the safety of our women’s team and biathletes in general,” Reid told the AP.

“Though it sucks right now it’s an amazing, inspiring thing.”