

Jordan strike drone possibly misidentified

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An enemy drone that killed three American troops and wounded dozens of others in Jordan may have been confused with an American drone returning to the U.S. installation, two U.S. officials said Monday.

As the enemy drone was flying in at a low altitude, a U.S. drone was returning to the small desert installation known as Tower 22 and may have been let pass by mistake, according to a preliminary report cited by the officials, who were not authorized to comment and insisted on anonymity,

As a result, there was no effort to shoot down the enemy drone that hit the outpost early Sunday morning. The U.S. troops at the outpost use trailers for their sleeping quarters.

Officials said that of the 34 wounded troops, most had cuts, bruises, traumatic brain injuries and similar wounds. Eight were medically evacuated and the most seriously hurt service member is in critical but stable condition.

Explanation for how the enemy drone evaded U.S. air defenses on the installation came as the White House said Monday it's not looking for war with Iran even as President Joe Biden vows retaliatory action. The Democratic administration believes Tehran was behind the strike.

Biden met with members of his national security team in the White House Situation Room to discuss the latest developments.

The brazen attack, which the Biden administration blames on

Iranian-based proxies, adds another layer of complexity to an already tense Mideast situation as the Biden administration tries to keep the Israel-Hamas war from expanding into a broader conflict.

"The president and I will not tolerate attacks on U.S. forces, and we will take all necessary actions to defend the U.S. and our troops," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Monday as he met at the Pentagon with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

Biden faces a difficult balancing act as he looks to strike back against Tehran in a forceful way without allowing the Gaza conflict to further metastasize. The drone attack was one of dozens on U.S. troops in the Middle East since Hamas launched attacks on Israel on Oct. 7, igniting

the war in Gaza. But it's the first in which American service members have been killed.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby reiterated a day after Biden promised to "hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner (of) our choosing" that the U.S. administration wasn't seeking to get into another conflict in the Middle East.

Iran on Monday denied it was behind the Jordan strike.

"These claims are made with specific political goals to reverse the realities of the region," Iran's state-run IRNA news agency quoted foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani as saying. Iran regularly denies involvement in attacks linked back to it through the militias it arms across the wider Mideast

Navy again lowers demands to meet recruitment goals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Navy is starting to enlist people who didn't graduate from high school or get a GED, marking the second time in about a year that the service has opened the door to lower-performing recruits as it struggles to meet enlistment goals.

The decision follows a move in December 2022 to bring in a larger number of recruits who score very low on the Armed Services Qualification Test. Both are fairly rare steps that the other military services largely avoid or limit, even though they are all finding it increasingly difficult to attract the dwindling number of young people who can meet the military's physical, mental and

moral standards.

Under the new plan, Navy recruits without an education credential will be able to join as long as they score 50 or above on the qualification test, which is out of 99. The last time the service took individuals without education credentials was in 2000.

"We get thousands of people into our recruiting stations every year that want to join the Navy but do not have an education credential. And we just turn them away," said Vice Adm. Rick Cheeseman, the Navy's chief of personnel, to The Associated Press.

He said that of the more than 2,400 who were turned away last year, as many as 500 of them could score high enough to get

in. He said he has already sent an order to his recruiters to start the new expanded effort, adding, "I'm hoping all my recruiters have called all 2,442 of them in the last 72 hours, and we'll see how it goes ... We'll try to get some test takers this weekend."

In the wake of the pandemic, the services have faced significant enlistment challenges. COVID-19 forced the military to shut down recruiting stations and they were closed out of high schools and many public fairs of events where they historically found success reaching prospective candidates.

But even as things opened up, the military struggled to compete with higher-paying businesses in the tight job market,

particularly as companies began to offer the types of benefits — such as college funding — that had often made the military a popular choice. Those economic problems were only exacerbated by the sharp political divide in the country and young people's fears of being killed or injured going to war.

Last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the Navy, Army and Air Force all failed to meet their recruitment goals, while the Marine Corps and the tiny Space Force met their targets.

Last year, the Navy's enlistment goal was 37,700, but the service brought in just 31,834. This year, Cheeseman said, he set the goal higher — at 40,600. The total size of the Navy for 2024 is set at 337,800.

Houthis claim they attacked US warship

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Yemen's Houthi rebels said they attacked a U.S. Navy mobile base at sea Monday without offering evidence, something immediately rejected by an American defense official.

Houthi military spokesperson Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree claimed the group fired a missile at the USS Lewis B. Puller in the Gulf of Aden. The Puller,

which serves as a floating landing base, had been earlier stationed in the Arabian Sea as part of American efforts to curtail Houthi attacks on commercial shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Houthi attacks will continue "until the aggression is stopped, and the siege is lifted on the people of Palestine in the Gaza Strip," Saree said in the statement.

A U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters, said there had been no reported attack on the Puller. However, the Houthis have previously launched missiles that did not reach their intended target, instead crashing onto the land or sea.

The Puller served as a mobile base for the U.S. Navy SEALs who conducted a Jan. 11 oper-

ation seizing Iranian-made ballistic missile and cruise missile components believed to be bound for Yemen. Two SEALs went missing in the operation and are presumed to have died.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea over Israel's offensive in Gaza against Hamas. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel.

Pentagon set to ease IVF access for service members

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department is expected to change its fertility assistance policies next month in response to a federal lawsuit that argued the military's health care coverage discriminated against single people and same-sex couples.

The planned revisions outlined in a motion filed in the lawsuit last month indicate the Pentagon will end a marriage requirement for service members seeking in vitro fertilization, or IVF, treatments through the Tricare health care program and allow the use of donor sperm and eggs in the procedure.

"This is a big win," said Sonia Ossorio, executive director of a women's organization

that filed the lawsuit on behalf of troops and veterans. "We are overjoyed for our military members who may now qualify for coverage and desperately need this care to build their family."

IVF is considered the most effective form of reproductive assistance and can cost tens of thousands of dollars without insurance.

The New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women, or NOW-NYC, sued the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs in August 2023 over their IVF access policies. An Air Force veteran, Ashley Sheffield, also sued the VA, alleging she was denied IVF coverage because of her marriage to a woman.

The VA is reviewing its IVF policy but has not yet agreed to make modifications, ac-

cording to a court document filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. The document states the Pentagon expects to finalize a signed memorandum by the end of February that formally directs its policy changes.

The Pentagon and VA did not respond Thursday to a request for comment.

The Pentagon's new IVF rules would expand access to fertility treatments to service members who are lesbians, unmarried or cannot produce their own eggs or sperm. But barriers will remain for service members whose infertility cannot be directly linked to service-related illness or injury.

The Defense Department and the VA currently require documentation of such health issues before granting access to IVF.

Veteran submariner takes reins of Naval Base Guam

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

A veteran submariner has taken command of U.S. Naval Base Guam as the island prepares for an influx of Marines and the development of new missile defenses.

Capt. John Frye relieved Capt. Michael Luckett on Friday during a ceremony at the Navy's Top o' the Mar ballroom in Asan, Guam.

The command change comes ahead of the start of a multiyear relocation of about 1,300 U.S. Ma-

riners from Okinawa to the recently constructed Camp Blaz.

It also comes amid plans to develop a 360-degree missile defense system intended to defend the heavily militarized, strategically critical island against ballistic, cruise and hypersonic missiles from potential adversaries such as China or North Korea.

Under Luckett, Naval Base Guam provided support to 52 Department of Defense activities and six non-DOD activities on four sites across 32,000 acres on Guam, according to a Navy ac-

count of the command change posted Monday on the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service.

The human element, however, is the most critical line of defense for Guam, said Rear Adm. Greg Huffman, commander of Joint Region Marianas.

"We must keep uppermost in our mind that leadership remains our most important task," he said, according to a video of the ceremony shared on the base's official Facebook page. "The strategic importance of the

work that we do here cannot be understated. This is the leading edge, and we are already in the thick of the fight."

Later, he added: "John, I look forward to fighting that fight with you and fighting that fight together."

This is Frye's third assignment on the island. He commanded the submarine tender USS Frank Cable, homeported on the island, until December, and in 2010 served as executive officer of the fast-attack submarine USS City of Corpus Christi.

Israel details claims against UN workers

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — An Israeli document obtained Monday spelled out allegations against a dozen U.N. employees the country says took part in Hamas' Oct. 7 assault — claiming seven stormed into Israeli territory, including one who participated in a kidnapping and another who helped to steal a soldier's body.

The allegations against staffers with the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees prompted Western countries to freeze funds vital for the body, which is a lifeline for desperate Palestinians in Gaza.

The U.N. condemned "the abhorrent alleged acts" and fired nine of the accused workers, who include teachers and a social worker. Two are reportedly dead, and the last is still being identified.

The accusations come after years of tensions between Israel and the agency known as UNRWA over its work in Gaza, where it employs roughly 13,000 people.

Despite the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the besieged territory — where Israel's war against Hamas has displaced the vast majority of the population and officials say a quarter of Palestinians are starving — major donors, including the U.S. and Britain, have cut funding. On Monday, Japan and Austria

joined them in pausing assistance.

With the majority of its budget in doubt, and because UNRWA spends donor contributions as they come in throughout the year, the agency says it will be forced to halt operations within weeks if funding isn't restored.

The threat to the U.N. agency came as Israel said cease-fire talks held Sunday were constructive but that "significant gaps" remained in any potential agreement. The talks are meant to bring about some respite to war-torn Gaza and secure the release of more than 100 hostages still held in the territory. Israeli forces are still battling Palestinian militants in different parts of Gaza, even in areas where the army has been operating for months.

Israel issued an evacuation order to residents in the western part of Gaza City, urging them to head south. The military also said it had battled militants and carried out airstrikes in recent days in other parts of northern Gaza, which was pummeled in the first weeks of the war and where Israel has claimed to have largely dismantled Hamas.

Militants also fired a barrage of around 15 rockets at central Israel for the first time in weeks. There were no immediate

reports of casualties or damage.

The war was sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, which killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and saw some 250 people taken captive, according to Israeli authorities.

Israel responded with an intense air, sea and ground offensive that has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, most of them women and minors, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count.

The war has also threatened to set off a wider regional conflict. In the latest example of high tensions, the U.S. announced that three of its troops were killed in a strike blamed on Iran-backed militias in Jordan.

In other developments, at least five Palestinians were killed in confrontations with Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. In northern Israel, a motorist rammed his car into a man outside a military base and attacked soldiers with an ax before being shot, police said.

The Israeli document, which has been shared with U.S. officials and was obtained by The Associated Press, lists 12 people, their alleged roles in the attack, job descriptions and photos.

Illinois next to consider axing Trump from ballot

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Former President Donald Trump should be removed from Illinois' primary ballot, but the decision should be left to the courts, a retired judge recommended Sunday to the state's election board, arguing that it was clear Trump engaged in insurrection in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The Illinois State Board of Elections is expected to consider the recommendation Tuesday. Attorneys for Trump and citizens seeking to keep the Republican former president off the ballot presented their arguments Friday before the hearing officer, Clark Erickson. The retired longtime Kankakee

County judge is a Republican.

The Illinois effort to keep Trump off the March ballot is similar to those filed in several other states.

The U.S. Supreme Court is set to hear arguments next month in a historic Colorado Supreme Court ruling to remove Trump from that state's ballot. The case presents the high court with its first look at a provision of the 14th Amendment barring some people who "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office.

Erickson's 21-page recommendation concluded that a "preponderance of the evidence" presented proves that Trump engaged in insurrection.

Mayorkas articles of impeachment released

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans on Sunday released two articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas as they vowed to swiftly push forward with election-year efforts to oust him over what they call his failure to manage the U.S.-Mexico border.

The rare step against a Cabinet member drew outrage from Democrats and the agency as a politically motivated stunt lacking the constitutional basis to remove Mayorkas from office.

Republicans contend Mayorkas is guilty of "high crimes and misdemeanors" that amount to a "willful and systemic refusal

to comply with the law" on immigration and a "breach of the public trust." Impeachment, they say, is "Congress's only viable option."

Only once in American history has a Cabinet secretary been impeached: William Belknap, President Ulysses S. Grant's war secretary, in 1876, over kickbacks in government contracts. Going after an official for a policy dispute, in this instance over the claim that Mayorkas is not upholding immigration laws, is unprecedented.

Ever since taking control of the House in 2023, Republicans have pushed to impeach Mayorkas.

AI firms to send safety tests to government

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration will start implementing a new requirement for the developers of major artificial intelligence systems to disclose their safety test results to the government.

The White House AI Council is scheduled to meet Monday to review progress made on the executive order that President Joe Biden signed three months ago to manage the fast-evolving technology.

Chief among the 90-day goals from the order was a mandate under the Defense Production Act that AI companies share vital information with the Com-

merce Department, including safety tests.

Ben Buchanan, the White House special adviser on AI, said in an interview that the government wants “to know AI systems are safe before they’re released to the public — the president has been very clear that companies need to meet that bar.”

The software companies are committed to a set of categories for the safety tests, but companies do not yet have to comply with a common standard on the tests.

The government’s National Institute of Standards and Technology will develop a uniform framework for assessing safety,

as part of the order Biden signed in October.

AI has emerged as a leading economic and national security consideration for the federal government, given the investments and uncertainties caused by the launch of new AI tools such as ChatGPT that can generate text, images and sounds.

The Biden administration also is looking at congressional legislation and working with other countries and the European Union on rules for managing the technology.

The Commerce Department has developed a draft rule on U.S. cloud companies that provide servers to foreign AI devel-

opers.

Nine federal agencies, including the departments of Defense, Transportation, Treasury and Health and Human Services, have completed risk assessments regarding AI’s use in critical national infrastructure such as the electric grid.

The government also has scaled up the hiring of AI experts and data scientists at federal agencies.

“We know that AI has transformative effects and potential,” Buchanan said. “We’re not trying to upend the apple cart there, but we are trying to make sure the regulators are prepared to manage this technology.”

10 circus animals saved from truck fire in Indiana

Associated Press

MARION, Ind. — A truck hauling zebras and camels for a series of weekend circus performances caught fire early Saturday on a northeastern Indiana highway, prompting a police rescue of the animals, which roamed along the freeway, some munching on grass.

The tractor-trailer caught fire about 2 a.m. along Interstate 69 in Grant County and a state trooper, a Grant County Sheriff’s deputy and a third person rescued the five zebras, four camels and a miniature horse by leading them off the smoked-filled trailer, said Sgt. Steven Glass with Indiana State Police.

Both officers were treated at a hospital for smoke inhalation and later released, but none of the animals were injured, he said. The truck driver, a 57-year-old Sarasota, Fla., man, was not injured. All northbound lanes of I-69 were closed until about 6:30 a.m. once the area was cleaned up and the animals were taken away by another truck.

The Grant County Sheriff’s Office posted photos and videos on

Facebook of camels walking on the highway and later standing along its shoulder and its median with zebras and law enforcement officers. The posting included the message, “No harm to our furry friends.”

One video shows some of the zebras munching on grass in a surreal scene.

“It’s not something we see every day,” said Deputy Brent Ressett with the Grant County Sheriff’s Office.

The truck was bringing the animals from Florida to Fort Wayne for four weekend circus performances in the northeastern Indiana city benefiting the Mizpah Shrine Circus, said Steve Trump, its circus director.

He said the performances are annual fundraisers for the circus to help pay for the upkeep of the Shrine Center in Fort Wayne to “allow us to use our other fundraisers for what we’re known best for, taking care of kids.”

Trump said the truck’s crew stopped the vehicle along the highway to check a problem with the vehicle and discovered a fire that quickly spread.

Prison time unlikely for man who stole ‘Oz’ ruby slippers

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A dying thief who confessed to stealing a pair of ruby slippers that Judy Garland wore in “The Wizard of Oz” because he wanted to pull off “one last score” is expected to stay out of prison after he’s sentenced Monday.

Terry Jon Martin, 76, stole the slippers in 2005 from the Judy Garland Museum in the late actor’s hometown of Grand Rapids, Minn. He gave into temptation after an old mob associate told him the shoes had to be adorned with real jewels to justify their \$1 million insured value, his attorney revealed in a memo to the federal court ahead of his sentencing in Duluth.

The FBI recovered the shoes in 2018 when someone else tried to claim a reward. Martin wasn’t charged with stealing them until last year.

He pleaded guilty in October to theft of a major artwork, admitting to using a hammer to smash the glass of the museum door and display case to take the slippers. But his motivation remained mostly a mystery until defense attorney Dane DeKrey revealed it

this month.

Martin, who lives near Grand Rapids, said at the October hearing that he hoped to remove what he thought were real rubies from the shoes and sell them.

But a person who deals in stolen goods, known as a fence, informed him the rubies were glass, Martin said. So he got rid of the slippers.

DeKrey wrote in his memo that Martin’s unidentified former mob associate persuaded him to steal the slippers as “one last score,” even though Martin had seemed to have “finally put his demons to rest” after finishing his last prison term nearly 10 years ago.

“At first, Terry declined the invitation to participate in the heist. But old habits die hard, and the thought of a ‘final score’ kept him up at night,” DeKrey wrote. “After much contemplation, Terry had a criminal relapse and decided to participate in the theft.”

Both sides are recommending that Chief U.S. District Judge Patrick Schiltz sentence Martin to time served because he is housebound in hospice care and is expected to die within six months.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Chinese student convicted over leaflet harassment

MA BOSTON — A citizen of China who is a student at the Berklee College of Music was convicted of threatening a person who posted a flyer in support of democracy in the Asian country, authorities said.

The flyer that was posted near the Berklee College of Music campus in Boston read, “Stand with Chinese People,” and other statements including, “We Want Freedom” and “We Want Democracy,” the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Boston said in a news release. In response, Xiaolei Wu, 26, threatened to chop off the person’s hands; reported their family to China’s public security agency; asked others to find out where the person was living, and publicly posted the person’s email address, the release said.

The person who posted the flyer is a permanent U.S. resident originally from China who has family members still living there, the Attorney’s Office said.

Snowboarder survives 15 hours trapped in gondola

CA SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — A snowboarder spent 15 hours trapped overnight inside a ski lift gondola amid freezing temperatures at a Lake Tahoe resort, according to officials and media reports.

Monica Laso boarded the gondola around 5 p.m. Thursday at Heavenly Ski Resort to ride down the mountain because she was too tired to snowboard. But it stopped just minutes later while she was still in the sky, she told KCRA, which

first reported the news.

Laso yelled for help, but no one on the ground heard her, the TV station reported. She didn’t have her cellphone, so she couldn’t call for help either.

“I screamed desperately until I lost my voice,” Laso told KCRA in an interview in Spanish.

She spent the night rubbing her hands and feet together to fight off the cold. The overnight low temperature was 23 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

Laso’s friends reported her missing to the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office on Thursday, but she wasn’t found until Friday morning when the gondola started up again for the day and crews realized she’d been there overnight, the TV station reported.

The ski resort, located on the southeastern side of the lake near the California-Nevada border, is investigating “with the utmost seriousness” how Laso got trapped.

House passes crime bill with tougher sentences

KY FRANKFORT — The Kentucky House passed sweeping criminal justice legislation that would impose tougher sentences, including a “three-strikes” penalty to lock up felons for the rest of their lives after committing a third violent offense.

The legislation — a priority for the Republican-dominated chamber — would bring a multitude of changes to the Bluegrass State’s criminal code. Another key section aims to crack down on the prevalence of fentanyl with harsher penalties

when its distribution results in fatal overdoses.

Other parts of the bill would create a standalone carjacking law with enhanced penalties and make killing a first responder in the line of duty eligible for the death penalty. It would require violent offenders to serve most of their sentences before becoming eligible for release. And it would ban street camping and give local governments power to designate temporary camping locations.

Senate approves bills for e-vehicle charging stations

WI MADISON — Wisconsin lawmakers have taken another step toward creating a network of electric vehicle charging stations across the state, passing a pair of bills that would make it easier for businesses to operate the stations and free up nearly \$80 million in federal construction aid.

The Senate passed both Republican-authored bills 30-2 with no debate. The legislation now goes to the Assembly.

A host of groups have registered in favor of the bills, including 7-Eleven Inc., the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, Kwik Trip Inc., and environmental group Clean Wisconsin. No organizations have registered against the bills.

Court favors right to carry guns in some public parks

NM SANTA FE — A U.S. District Court judge is standing by her decision to block portions of a public health order from New Mexico’s governor that would suspend the right to carry firearms in many public parks in the Al-

buquerque area, with appeals pending before a higher court.

The order from Albuquerque-based Judge Kea Riggs denied a request from the governor to leave in place a temporary ban on firearms in some public places in greater Albuquerque, including most public parks.

Riggs earlier concluded that Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham has not yet demonstrated a historical tradition of banning firearms in public parks or similar areas in the past, in response to a lawsuit by Torrance County resident James Springer — a plaintiff in one of several lawsuits filed against the governor by gun rights advocates.

Ex-agent sentenced for illegal painkiller trafficking

FL MIAMI — A former federal agent has been sentenced to over eight years in prison for his role in an illegal prescription painkiller operation in South Florida.

Alberico Ahas Crespo, 48, was sentenced in Miami federal court, according to court records. He was previously convicted at trial of witness tampering, conspiracy to commit witness tampering and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Crespo had formerly served as a special agent with the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General until his arrest in 2020.

According to evidence introduced at trial, Crespo worked as part of a task force involved in health care fraud in South Florida and used his position to protect an oxycodone trafficking scheme and impede related fraud investigations.

— From wire reports

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49ers rally from 17 down to beat Lions

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Brock Purdy and the San Francisco 49ers were on the brink, needing a spark to overcome a big deficit and avoid a third straight loss in the conference title game.

Brandon Aiyuk delivered with an improbable catch that helped save San Francisco's season.

Purdy's 51-yard pass that deflected off a defender's facemask into Aiyuk's hands helped the Niners rally from 17 points down at halftime to beat the Detroit Lions 34-31 on Sunday and reach the Super Bowl.

The 49ers (14-5) scored 17 points in an eight-minute span of the third quarter to tie the NFC championship game and then pulled away in the fourth quarter to earn a rematch against Kansas City after losing to the Chiefs in the Super Bowl four years ago.

"No one was rah-rah," Purdy said. "No one was freaking out. It's football. There's a lot of experienced guys on this team, veteran guys who have been in crazy situations. We were just

like, 'We have to do our job.'"

San Francisco mounted the fourth comeback ever from 17 points down or more in a conference title game thanks to some big plays by Purdy and bad mistakes from the Lions (14-6), including two failed fourth downs in field-goal range. Detroit fell short of reaching its first Super Bowl in franchise history.

"We're not going out like this," coach Kyle Shanahan said of the mindset at halftime. "Guys didn't want today to be the last day. We put ourselves in a hole. They played like it in the second half and we were able to get the ball to bounce the right way, and we made up for what we did in the first half."

After being questioned about whether he could lead a comeback, Purdy has now done it twice in as many weeks. He engineered a game-winning drive in the fourth quarter to beat Green Bay last week and then had an even bigger comeback against the Lions.

He finished with 267 yards passing and a touchdown, along with 48 yards rushing thanks to a pair of 21-yard scrambles.

Now the last pick of the 2022 draft will be starting in the Super Bowl against Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs.

"All he's done since he's been here is play at an elite level," running back Christian McCaffrey said. "Everything starts with him. We're lucky he's our quarterback. He takes a lot of heat for absolutely no reason."

McCaffrey had two TD runs and little-used backup Elijah Mitchell scored on a 3-yard run to make it 34-24 with 3:02 to play as the Niners got over the conference title game hump after losing the past two seasons.

"There's been unfinished business for a while, man. Our team was set out for this for a long time," Shanahan said. "It's been a long year to get to this point, and we got it done today. It was hard at the beginning, but the character we have in our team, the type of guys we have, we can't wait to get to Vegas, man."

The Niners blew a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter of the NFC championship game against the Los Angeles Rams two years ago and then were

forced to play much of last year's title game loss at Philadelphia without a functioning quarterback after Purdy injured his elbow on the opening drive and fourth-stringer Josh Johnson left with a concussion early in the third quarter.

But San Francisco managed to make the long journey back to this stage, and is now in position to deliver the franchise its record-tying sixth Super Bowl title and first since the 1994 season.

A magical season for the Lions ended in heartbreak. Detroit remains the only team to play every season of the Super Bowl era without reaching the ultimate game. This looked like it could be the year to end that drought when Detroit won back-to-back playoff games after winning just one in the previous 56 seasons.

But the Lions couldn't finish the job despite holding a 24-7 halftime lead.

"When you lose that way, it's hard," coach Dan Campbell said. "You feel like you get your heart ripped out. But I'm proud of that group and I'll go anywhere with that group."

Chiefs back in Super Bowl after shutting down Ravens

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The first quarter was vintage Patrick Mahomes, picking apart the Baltimore defense with quick passes, with Travis Kelce on the other end of several of them.

Then the Kansas City defense — now elite after some shaky seasons in the past — took over.

Finally, when Mahomes needed one more completion to send the Chiefs back to the Super Bowl, he went deep to Marquez Valdes-Scantling, whose struggles this season were emblematic of the team's maligned receiving group.

Complete for 32 yards. Ballgame.

"The Chiefs are still the Chiefs," Kelce said emphatically.

After all the moments this season when they looked disjointed and vulnerable, the Chiefs are headed back to the Super Bowl

for the fourth time in five years.

Mahomes and Kelce were at their magnificent best in the first half, and Kansas City's defense delivered another masterpiece against Lamar Jackson and the Ravens, leading the Chiefs to a 17-10 victory in the AFC championship game Sunday.

Kelce caught 11 passes for 116 yards and a touchdown, and now a big question at next month's Super Bowl in Las Vegas is whether his girlfriend, Taylor Swift, will be able to make it there in the middle of her tour. The pop star was on hand again Sunday, and it was a milestone day for the 34-year-old Kelce, who surpassed Jerry Rice's career record for postseason receptions.

Kansas City (14-6) will face San Francisco on Feb. 11, and a victory would make the Chiefs the first team to win it all in back-to-back seasons since the New England Patriots 19 years ago.

Swift's presence has turned the Chiefs into even more of a glamour team than they already were, but it's been more of a blue-collar performance on the field this season. Aside from Kelce, Mahomes' playmakers haven't been as threatening as in years past.

Only once this season has Kansas City scored more than 31 points, and a home loss on Christmas to the Las Vegas Raiders — on the same day Baltimore made a statement with a win at San Francisco — seemed to indicate that the Chiefs' days atop the AFC were numbered.

Not so fast.

Playing on the road in the playoffs for the first time with Mahomes, the Chiefs beat Buffalo and Baltimore in back-to-back weeks to win the conference.

"I've never doubted, no," coach Andy Reid said. "That's not how we roll."

Russian skater disqualified for doping

Associated Press

GENEVA — Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva was disqualified from the 2022 Olympics on Monday, almost two years after the teenager's doping case caused turmoil at the Beijing Games.

The verdict from the Court of Arbitration for Sport means the Russians are set to be stripped of the gold medal in figure skating's team event. The United States finished second and is set to be named Olympic champion instead.

The International Olympic Committee decided not to present any medals for the event in Beijing, where the then-15-year-old Valieva was the star performer hours before her positive test for a banned heart medicine was revealed.

The case provoked legal chaos at the Beijing Olympics because Valieva's sample, taken six weeks earlier at the Russian national championships, was not notified as a positive test until Feb. 7, 2022, by a laboratory in Sweden which had staffing issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CAS said it upheld appeals led by the World Anti-Doping Agency, which asked the court to disqualify Valieva from the Olympics and ban her. A Russian sports tribunal had cleared her of any blame, citing that she was a minor.

The CAS judges banned her for four years, until December

25, 2025 — about seven weeks before the next Winter Olympics in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy.

The U.S. team took silver in Beijing and should be upgraded to gold. Japan took bronze and Canada placed fourth.

"We now anticipate the day when we can wholeheartedly celebrate these athletes, along with their peers from around the world," the U.S. Olympic body's CEO, Sarah Hirshland, said in a statement Monday.

The likely new Olympic champions are Evan Bates, Karen Chen, Nathan Chen, Madison Chock, Zachary Donohue, Brandon Frazier, Madison Hubbell, Alexa Knierim and Vincent Zhou.

Valieva's lawyers had argued she was contaminated by traces of the trimetazidine medication they said her grandfather used.

"Having carefully considered all the evidence put before it," the court said in a statement, "the CAS panel concluded that Ms. Valieva was not able to establish, on the balance of probabilities and on the basis of the evidence before the panel, that she had not committed the (doping violation) intentionally."

The judges decided that, according to Russian anti-doping rules, Valieva could not benefit from having been a minor at the time of the positive test.

There was "no basis under the rules to treat them any differently from an adult athlete," said

the court, which did not publish its detailed verdict pending a review of confidentiality issues.

Valieva was able to continue to skate at the Olympics after rulings by a Russian tribunal and a separate CAS panel in Beijing did not hold her responsible because she was a minor.

The intense scrutiny on Valieva led to an error-filled skate in the individual event, where she had been favored for gold but dropped to fourth place.

The drama continued when she left the ice. The reaction of her coach, Eteri Tutberidze, was fiercely criticized by skating experts and International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach.

Bach said in Beijing one day later he had been "very, very disturbed" to watch the "tremendous coldness" of Valieva's entourage.

At that news conference, Bach gave an untypically direct reply apportioning blame when a Russian journalist seemed to suggest Olympic authorities and global media were bullying a 15-year-old.

"The ones who have administered this drug in her body, these are the ones who are guilty," the IOC president said in Beijing.

World anti-doping rules require investigations of an entourage when an athlete 16 or younger tests positive. Both the Russian anti-doping body and WADA were expected to look into the case but neither has pub-

lished any findings and there is no indication anyone else is facing anti-doping charges in the case.

"The doping of children is unforgivable," the Montreal-based WADA said Monday. "Doctors, coaches or other support personnel who are found to have provided performance-enhancing substances to minors should face the full force of the World Anti-Doping Code."

The appeal case came to CAS to challenge a Russian anti-doping tribunal verdict in late 2022 that Valieva was not at fault. That ruling suggested disqualifying her only from the national championships and letting her keep her Olympic results and gold medal.

WADA asked CAS to impose a four-year ban and to disqualify Valieva from the Olympics. The International Skating Union requested a two-year ban and disqualification.

"WADA took this appeal to CAS in the interests of fairness for athletes and clean sport and we believe that has been delivered through this decision," the agency said.

Valieva, who turns 18 in April, has not competed internationally since the Beijing Olympics.

Four days after the closing ceremony, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and five days after that, the International Skating Union banned Russian skaters from its events. That ban is still in place.

Blues get past Wild in OT for fifth straight victory

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Brayden Schenn scored 1:04 into overtime to help the St. Louis Blues beat the Los Angeles Kings 4-3 on Sunday for their season-best fifth consecutive win.

Jordan Kyrou had a goal and two assists for St. Louis, which surrendered at least four goals in each of its previous four

games against Los Angeles. Pavel Buchnevich and Nick Leddy also scored, and Joel Hofer made 30 saves.

Buchnevich intercepted a pass from Phillip Danault and then set up Schenn.

"You just take off whenever you see a turnover in overtime," Schenn said. "Whether he gets you the puck or not, you just cre-

ate space for him if he is going to carry it up. He's got great vision and he found me."

The Blues have won four straight games by a score of 4-3.

"We'll take them since we've been on the right side," defenseman Colton Parayko said.

Danault, Adrian Kempe and Jaret Anderson-Dolan scored for Los Angeles, which dropped

its fourth consecutive game.

Kraken 4, Blue Jackets 2: Jordan Eberle had two goals and an assist in host Seattle's three-goal first period.

Jared McCann had a goal and an assist as the Kraken extended their point streak to three games (2-0-1).

Yegor Chinakhov scored twice for Columbus.

UConn buries Xavier under 3-pointers

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — The return of 7-foot-2 Donovan Clingan to UConn's lineup was expected to help the Huskies near the basket.

It has also, however, impacted the outside game of the nation's top-ranked team.

The sophomore star had 18 points, Tristen Newton scored 22 and UConn extended its winning streak to eight, rolling over Xavier 99-56 on Sunday.

Clingan was one of 10 Huskies to hit a 3-pointer and added eight rebounds and two blocks in his third game back from a December foot injury. The Huskies were 17-for-29 from beyond the arc.

"It's not coincidental that we made more 3s with him back, because we got better 3s because of the paint and the rim pressure," coach Dan Hurley said.

Stephon Castle and Solomon Ball each added 12 points for UConn (18-2, 8-1 Big East) which has not lost at home in

more than a calendar year. It was UConn's largest margin of victory in a Big East game since beating Cincinnati 96-51 on March 9, 2008.

Dayvion McKnight had 18 points and Quincy Olivari added 14 for Xavier (10-10, 4-5), which had won three of its previous four games, but falls to 1-5 on the road this season.

"We were really overwhelmed today from the opening tip to the final buzzer," Xavier coach Sean Miller said. "It's up to us now to get back. We have a home game in a few days and we're gonna be as ready as we can be for the next challenge."

No. 2 Purdue 68, Rutgers 60: Zach Edey had 26 points and 12 rebounds, powering the Boilermakers to the road win.

The 7-foot-4 Edey became the sixth player in Big Ten Conference history to score 2,000 points and grab 1,000 boards.

Braden Smith scored 19 points to help Purdue (19-2, 8-2) to its fifth straight victory.

Aundre Hyatt had 15 points for the Scarlet Knights (10-9, 2-6), and Cliff Omoruyi finished with 13.

UAB 97, No. 19 Memphis 88: Yaxel Lendeborg had 23 points and 16 rebounds, and the host Blazers handed the Tigers their third straight loss.

Hot-shooting UAB (13-7, 5-2 American Athletic Conference) upended a reeling Memphis team that had won 18 of the last 19 meetings as Conference USA rivals.

The Blazers' Eric Gaines broke out of a 3-point slump while scoring 20 points.

David Jones led the Tigers with 24 points, nine rebounds and seven steals. He also committed nine turnovers.

No. 22 Florida Atlantic 66, North Texas 63: Johnell Davis scored 28 points, including a 3-pointer with 0.4 seconds left, and the host Owls earned their sixth consecutive win.

Vladislav Goldin had 13 points and eight rebounds for Florida Atlantic (17-4, 7-1

American Athletic Conference), which trailed for the overwhelming majority of the game. But Davis — who scored more points than anyone has managed against the Mean Green this season — delivered with the game on the line, from just in front of the Owls bench.

Robert Allen scored 15 points for North Texas (12-7, 5-2), and CJ Noland had 14. The Mean Green were bidding for their first road win in 37 tries against an AP Top 25 team since 1971 — and nearly got it.

No. 25 New Mexico State 89, Nevada 55: Jaelen House scored 21 points and the Lobos routed the Wolf Pack to snap a nine-game losing streak against Nevada.

New Mexico (18-3, 6-2 Mountain West) has won five straight, all by 13 points or more.

Jamal Mashburn Jr. added 14 points, Nelly Joseph finished with 12 points and 10 rebounds, and Donovan Dent and Mustapha Amzil each had 11 points.

Banchero, Magic top Suns despite Booker's 44 points

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Paolo Banchero scored 26 points and the Orlando Magic beat the Phoenix Suns 113-98 on Sunday night, overcoming Devin Booker's 44-point effort two days after he had 62 in a loss at Indiana.

Phoenix went more than eight minutes without a field goal in the fourth quarter, losing its second straight after a seven-game winning streak.

The Magic's defensive shutdown was accomplished with a lineup that included the 6-10 Banchero, 6-10 Franz Wagner, 6-11 Moritz Wagner and 6-11 Jonathan Isaac.

Booker was 17-for-26 from the field and hit 9 of 11 free throws. But he had only two points in the fourth quarter.

The Suns shot 5-for-18 with seven turnovers in a 13-point fourth quarter. Moritz Wagner added 16 points and 12 rebounds for Orlando. Markelle Fultz had 14 points and five steals, and Franz Wagner finished with 11 points, eight rebounds and seven assists.

Kevin Durant had 15 points for the Suns.

Hawks 126, Raptors 125: Saddiq Bey dunked off Trae Young's miss with 1.1 seconds left to lift Atlanta past visiting Toronto.

Bey finished with a season-high 26 points and had 13 rebounds. Young had 30 points and 12 assists, and Clint Capela finished with 19 points and 14 rebounds.

Jordan Nwora had 24 points

and nine rebounds for Toronto. The short-handed Raptors have lost five straight.

Pistons 120, Thunder 104: Jalen Duren had 22 points and a career-high 21 rebounds and host Detroit ended Oklahoma City's winning streak at five.

Jaden Ivey added 19 points to help the NBA-worst Pistons improve to 6-40. Detroit played without leading scorer Cade Cunningham because of what the team termed "injury management." Cunningham returned from a knee injury Saturday.

Duren had a career-high nine of Detroit's 15 offensive rebounds.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Thunder with 31 points.

Bulls 104, Trail Blazers 96: DeMar DeRozan had 20 points

and visiting Chicago beat Portland to snap a two-game losing streak.

Coby White added 15 points and 10 assists, and Andre Drummond also had 15 points.

Jerami Grant led Portland with 24 points, and Deandre Ayton had 22 and 12 rebounds. The Blazers have lost four of their last five.

Pacers 116, Grizzlies 110: Benedict Mathurin scored 24 points, Jalen Smith made the go-ahead 3-pointer and host Indiana beat Memphis.

Smith made it 110-107 with his 3-pointer with 3:10 remaining. He finished with 19 points and 10 rebounds. Pascal Siakam also had 19 points.

Jaren Jackson Jr. led Memphis with 25 points.