

## Crews try to keep upper hand in LA fire

*Associated Press*

CASTAIC, Calif. — Firefighters battled Thursday to maintain the upper hand on a huge wildfire that swept through rugged mountains north of Los Angeles and left over 50,000 people under evacuation orders or warnings.

The Hughes Fire broke out late Wednesday morning and in less than a day had charred nearly 16 square miles of trees and brush near Castaic Lake, a popular recreation area about 40 miles from the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires that are burning for a third week.

The Hughes blaze didn't grow much overnight and crews hoped to increase containment before winds pick up again later in the day, fire spokesperson Jeremy Ruiz said Thursday morning.

"We had helicopters dropping water until around 3 a.m. That kept it in check," he said.

As of Wednesday night, the fire was about 14% contained.

Though the region was under a red flag warning for critical fire risk, winds were not as strong as they had been when the Palisades and Eaton fires broke out, allowing for firefighting aircraft to dump tens of thousands of gallons of fire retardant.

Red flag warnings were extended through Friday morning in LA and Ventura counties.

More than 31,000 people have been ordered to evacuate from the Hughes Fire, and another 23,000 are under evacuation warnings, LA County Sheriff Robert Luna said. There were no reports of homes or other structures burned.

Parts of Interstate 5 near the Hughes Fire that had been closed reopened Wednesday evening.

A 30-mile stretch of the major north-south artery had been closed for emergency vehicles, to move equipment and to prevent accidents due to smoke.

Winds in the area were gust-

ing at 42 mph in the afternoon. They had reached as high as 65 mph in some mountain pockets by Wednesday night, according to David Roth, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Kayla Amara drove to Castaic's Stonegate neighborhood to collect items from the home of a friend who had rushed to pick up her daughter at preschool. As Amara was packing the car, she learned the fire had exploded in size and decided to hose down the property.

"Other people are hosing down their houses, too. I hope there's a house here to return to," Amara said as police cars raced through the streets and flames engulfed trees on a hillside in the distance.

Amara, a nurse who lives in nearby Valencia, said she's been on edge for weeks as major blazes devastated Southern California.

"It's been stressful with those other fires, but now that this one

is close to home it's just super stressful," she said.

Closer to Los Angeles, residents in Sherman Oaks received an evacuation warning Wednesday night after a brush fire broke out on the Sepulveda Pass near the I-405 Freeway. The blaze was first reported just after 11 p.m., but the Los Angeles Fire Department said Thursday that forward progress had been stopped at about 40 acres and the evacuation warning was lifted. No structures were damaged and no injuries were reported, fire officials said, but firefighters remained at the scene.

The low humidity, bone-dry vegetation and strong winds came as firefighters continued battling the Palisades and Eaton fires. Officials remained concerned that those fires could break their containment lines as firefighters continue watching for hot spots. Containment of the Palisades Fire reached 70%, and the Eaton Fire was at 95%.

## House passes Laken Riley immigrant detention bill

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday gave final approval to a bill that requires the detainment of unauthorized migrants accused of theft and violent crimes, marking the first legislation that President Donald Trump can sign as Congress, with some bipartisan support, swiftly moved in line with his plans to crackdown on illegal immigration.

Passage of the Laken Riley Act, which was named after a Georgia nursing student who was murdered last year by a Venezuelan man, shows just how

sharply the political debate over immigration has shifted to the right following Trump's election victory.

Immigration policy has often been one of the most entrenched issues in Congress, but a crucial faction of 46 politically vulnerable Democrats joined with Republicans to lift the strict proposal to passage on a 263-156 vote tally.

"For decades, it has been almost impossible for our government to agree on solutions for the problems at our border and within our country," said Sen. Katie Britt, an Alabama Repu-

blican. She called the legislation "perhaps the most significant immigration enforcement bill" to be passed by Congress in nearly three decades.

Still, the bill would require a massive ramp up in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's capabilities, but does not include any new funding.

Meanwhile, the new president has launched a slew of executive orders intended to seal off the border of Mexico to immigration and ultimately deport millions of migrants without permanent legal status in the U.S.

On Wednesday, Trump also canceled refugee resettlement and his administration has signaled intentions to prosecute local law enforcement officials who do not enforce his new immigration policies.

Republican congressional leaders have made it clear they intend to follow suit, though their toughest challenge will be finding a way to approve the funding to actually implement Trump's hardline plans.

"What he's doing is kickstarting what will ultimately be our legislative agenda," said House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La.

# NATO chief warns of high price if Russia wins war

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte warned on Thursday that a Russian victory over Ukraine would undermine the dissuasive force of the world's biggest military alliance and that its credibility could cost trillions to restore.

NATO has been ramping up its forces along its eastern flank with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, deploying thousands of troops and equipment to deter Moscow from expanding its war into the territory of any of the organization's 32 member countries.

"If Ukraine loses then to restore the deterrence of the rest of NATO again, it will be a much, much higher price than what we are contemplating at this moment in terms of ramping up our spending and ramping up our industrial production," Rutte said.

"It will not be billions extra; it will be trillions extra," he said, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Rutte insisted that Ukraine's Western backers must "step up and not scale back the support" they are providing to the country, almost three years after Russia's full-fledged invasion began.

"We have to change the trajectory of the war," Rutte said, adding that the West "cannot allow in the 21st century that one country invades another country and tries to colonize it."

Anxiety in Europe is mounting that President Donald Trump might seek to quickly end the war in talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on terms that are unfavorable to Ukraine, but Rutte appeared wary about trying to do things in a hurry.

"If we got a bad deal, it would

only mean that we will see the president of Russia high-fiving with the leaders from North Korea, Iran and China and we cannot accept that," the former Dutch prime minister said. "That would be geopolitically a big, big mistake."

Trump's new envoy for special missions, Richard Grenell, criticized allies who talk of continuing the war but still won't increase their defense spending to NATO guidelines. He said Americans think it is "outrageous" that the Biden administration refused to talk to Putin.

NATO leaders have agreed that each member country should spend at least 2% of gross domestic product on their military budgets. The alliance estimates that 23 members will reach that level this year, although almost a third will still fall short. Poland and Estonia spend most in GDP terms.

"You cannot ask the American people to expand the umbrella of NATO when the current members aren't paying their fair share," Grenell said. The United States spends most within NATO on its own budget, in dollar terms, and allies rely on its military might for their defense.

"When we have leaders who are going to talk about more war, we need to make sure that those leaders are spending the right amount of money," Grenell said. "We need to be able to avoid war, and that means a credible threat from NATO."

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski warned that Putin should not be put at the center of the world stage over Ukraine.

"I would suggest that Putin has to earn the summit, that if he gets it early, it elevates him beyond his, significance and gives him the wrong idea about the trajectory of this," he said.

# Murkowski plans to vote against Hegseth

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sen. Lisa Murkowski announced Thursday that she will vote against confirming Pete Hegseth to lead the Pentagon, becoming the first Republican to oppose one of President Donald Trump's Cabinet picks ahead of a crucial test vote.

Murkowski, of Alaska, said in a statement that allegations of excessive drinking and aggressive actions toward women, which Hegseth has denied, show that his behaviors "starkly contrast" with what is expected of the U.S. military. She also noted his past statements that women should not fill military combat roles.

"I remain concerned about the message that confirming Mr. Hegseth sends to women current-

ly serving and those aspiring to join," Murkowski wrote on social media.

Murkowski said behavior that Hegseth has acknowledged, "including infidelity on multiple occasions," shows a lack of judgment. "These behaviors starkly contrast the values and discipline expected of service members," she said.

"Above all, I believe that character is the defining trait required of the Secretary of Defense, and must be prioritized without compromise," she said.

It will take a simple majority of senators to advance Hegseth's confirmation. Most Republicans, who hold a 53-seat majority in the chamber, have signaled they will back the nominee.

# NSA Naples to tear down former barracks building

By ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy is moving forward with demolition plans for a 130,000-square-foot building at Naval Support Activity Naples, as the installation faces a burgeoning need for office and operational space.

The \$5.7 million project will begin in May and is expected to take about a year, Lt. j.g. Valentine Mulango, a spokesperson for NSA Naples, said in an email.

It wasn't clear what is planned for the site of the old barracks building, built in 1996 at the base's Capodichino site.

It had not been in use as a barracks for years. Unaccompanied sailors now are housed at the base's Support Site, about 14 miles away.

A building project for the bar-

racks site is still in the design and planning development phase, and the structural details aren't yet known, said Mulango.

Previously, the Navy told Stars and Stripes in May 2022 that a four-story operations center, with two stories above ground and two below for offices, conference facilities and administrative spaces, was planned for the site.

U.S. 6th Fleet, which is headquartered at Capodichino, said at the time that the project would "support the future operational requirements of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa."

There are more than 50 tenant commands and about 8,500 personnel at NSA Naples, according to the base. Many of those are located at the installation's Capodichino site.

# Judge blocks birthright citizenship cancellation

Associated Press

SEATTLE — A federal judge temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's executive order redefining birthright citizenship Thursday, calling it "blatantly unconstitutional" during the first hearing in a multi-state effort challenging the order.

U.S. District Judge John Coughenour repeatedly interrupted a Justice Department lawyer during arguments to ask how he could consider the order constitutional. When the attorney, Brett Shumate, said he'd like a chance to explain it in a

full briefing, Coughenour told him the hearing was his chance.

The temporary restraining order sought by Arizona, Illinois, Oregon and Washington was the first to get a hearing before a judge and applies nationally.

The case is one of five lawsuits being brought by 22 states and a number of immigrants rights groups across the country. The suits include personal testimonies from attorneys general who are U.S. citizens by birthright and names pregnant women who are afraid their children won't become U.S. citizens.

Coughenour, a Ronald Reagan appointee, began the hearing by grilling the administration's attorneys, saying the order "boggles the mind."

"This is a blatantly unconstitutional order," Coughenour told Shumate. Coughenour said he's been on the bench for more than four decades, and he couldn't remember seeing another case where the action challenged was so clearly unconstitutional.

Shumate said that he respectfully disagreed and asked the judge for an opportunity to have a full briefing on the merits

of the case, rather than have a 14-day restraining order issued blocking its implementation.

Arguing for the states, Washington assistant attorney general Lane Polozola labeled as "absurd" the government's argument that the children of parents living in the country illegally are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States.

"Are they not subject to the decisions of the immigration courts?" he asked. "Must they not follow the law while they are here?"

## Senate panel advances Collins nomination to lead VA

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on Thursday almost unanimously advanced the nomination of Doug Collins to be the next secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, paving the way for a vote by the full Senate.

The committee voted 18-1 in support of Collins, a 58-year-old Air Force Reserve colonel and military chaplain from Georgia who served as a Republican in the House from 2013 to 2020. A Senate vote to confirm him will likely take place next week.

"I appreciate his firsthand experience," said Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., the panel's chairman. "I appreciate what he brings to the table as a veteran, as a military chaplain, a lawyer and a lawmaker. I also appreciate his commitment to putting veterans first and to being forthright and transparent with this committee."

The only opposition to Collins' nomination came from Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, who said she was worried Collins would further privatize VA care and overturn regulations that allow the VA to provide abortion care in cases of rape, incest or to protect the

life of the mother.

Collins told senators during his confirmation hearing this week that "we will be looking at that issue when I get in there to confirm that the VA is actually following the law."

He has been an outspoken critic of abortion and as a lawmaker in 2016 introduced a bill to ban federal funds for abortion services.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the committee, also expressed concern about Collins' "less than a completely explicit or clear answer" on abortion but said he supported his nomination.

## Justice Department orders freeze on civil rights cases

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's new Justice Department leadership has put a freeze on civil rights litigation and suggested it may reconsider police reform agreements negotiated by the Biden administration, according to two memos obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press.

Attorneys in the department's Civil Rights Division were ordered not to file any new complaints, amicus briefs or other certain court papers "until further notice," one of the memos said.

Another memo directed attorneys to notify leadership of any settlements or consent decrees — court-enforceable agreements to reform police agencies — that were finalized by the Biden administration within the last 90 days.

It said the new administration "may wish to reconsider" such agreements, raising the prospect that it may abandon two consent decrees finalized in the final weeks of the Biden administration in Louisville, Ky., and Minneapolis, Minn.

Those agreements, reached after investigations found po-

lice engaged in civil rights violations, still need to be approved by a judge.

They were among 12 investigations into law enforcement agencies launched by the Civil Rights Division under former Attorney General Merrick Garland.

The Minneapolis City Council earlier this month approved the agreement to overhaul the city's police training and use-of-force policies in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd.

The Justice Department announced last month it had reached the agreement with

Louisville to reform the city's police force after an investigation prompted by the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor in 2020 and police treatment of protesters.

The memos, sent by new chief of staff Chad Mizelle, is a sign of major changes expected in the Civil Rights Division under Trump. His pick to lead the division is Harmeet Dhillon, a well-known conservative attorney who last year made an unsuccessful bid for Republican National Committee chair.

It's unclear how long the "litigation freeze" may last.



# S. Korean leader's supporters rally

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

SEOUL, South Korea — Supporters of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol are using American symbols to voice their allegiance following his arrest due to a failed attempt to impose martial law.

For weeks, thousands of pro-Yoon demonstrators rejecting the insurrection charges against him have rallied outside the National Assembly, presidential residence and court-houses.

Many wave American flags, while others carry banners with conservative U.S. political slo-

gans, such as "Make Korea Great Again," linking Yoon's situation to the future of U.S.-South Korea relations.

Yoon was arrested Jan. 15 after a weekslong standoff between his security detail and investigators. The Seoul Western District Court extended his detention on Sunday for up to 20 days at prosecutors' request.

That decision stirred his supporters — many clutching U.S. flags — who stormed the building, broke windows and vandalized furniture and office equipment. Fifty-six had been arrested as of Wednesday, according to the court.

Yoon declared martial law briefly on Dec. 3, prompting more than 1,000 protesters outside the National Assembly to demand his ouster. However, demonstrations by Yoon's supporters now appear to outnumber those of his opponents.

Nearly 52% of 1,002 respondents to a poll released Monday by the Pen and Mike news agency said they believe Yoon's arrest was justified. Nearly 45% said they still support the president.

The day Yoon was taken into custody, hundreds of his supporters braved freezing temperatures outside the presiden-

tial residence, some equipped with sleeping bags and blankets. Scores of presidential security staff also gathered outside the residence, where Yoon had barricaded himself. More than 3,000 police officers arrived to arrest him, according to the Reuters news agency, but Yoon surrendered "to prevent unsavory bloodshed."

"We believe in politicians like Trump ... so that's why we're waving the American flag," said Shin Hee-chae, who traveled 200 miles from Ulsan to attend Monday's rally. His car bore an American flag mounted on the hood.

## Cold snap chills New York City's rats, boosts mitigation

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — This week's frigid weather has many New York City residents shivering, scurrying into cozy spots and feeling sapped. Including the rats.

The United States' most populous city has been spared the Upper Midwest's extreme wind chills in this week's Arctic blast. But temperatures peaked Monday around 26 degrees and roughly 20 degrees on Tuesday and Wednesday, well below average.

Such cold has, yes, a chilling effect on the Big Apple's notorious rodents. But it boosts efforts to get rid of them, says city "rat czar" Kathleen Corradi.

"It's stressing out rats. It's putting them in their burrows," she says. "So we kind of get to double down now while the rats are 'feeling the heat' from this cold snap."

New York City's wild rat species doesn't hibernate in winter but does become less active when the weather is freezing for prolonged periods.

At the same time, the rodent's food source tends to shrivel because people are out less and therefore discarding few food wrappers and other rat snacks on the streets, Corradi said. All that makes for stressed rats and suppresses breeding.

Jason Munshi-South, a Drexel University ecology professor who has researched New York City's rats, said those that are already holed up in subway tunnels, sewers, crawlspaces or other nooks can weather the cold fairly well.

Rats that haven't secured a hideaway might venture to unusual places, such as car engine blocks. Or a tempting basement? Perhaps, if building owners haven't diligently blocked them out.

But Munshi-South said some of them likely will freeze to death, especially if they're already sick, malnourished or otherwise weakened.

There's no official count of New York City's rats, but no one disputes that they have long been legion.

## Saudi Arabia says it intends to invest \$600 billion in US

*Associated Press*

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia's crown prince said Thursday the kingdom wants to invest \$600 billion in the United States over the next four years, comments that came after President Donald Trump earlier put a price tag on returning to the kingdom as his first foreign trip.

Trump's 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia upended a tradition of U.S. presidents heading to the

United Kingdom as their first trip abroad. It also underscored his administration's close ties to the rulers of the oil-rich Gulf states as his eponymous real estate company has pursued deals across the region as well.

The comments from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman came in a phone call with Trump. It marked Trump's first call with a foreign leader since his inauguration Monday.

"The crown prince affirmed

the kingdom's intention to broaden its investments and trade with the United States over the next four years, in the amount of \$600 billion, and potentially beyond that," the report said.

The readout did not elaborate on where those investments and trade could be placed. The U.S. in recent years has increasingly pulled away from relying on Saudi oil exports, which once was the bedrock of their relationship for decades. Saudi sov-

ereign wealth funds have taken large stakes in American businesses while also looking at sports as well.

Saudi Arabia does, however, rely predominantly on U.S.-made weapons and defense systems, which could be a part of the investment.

The crown prince, the de facto ruler of the oil-rich kingdom, also spoke with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio early Thursday.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Murder charge upheld for suspect in Tupac killing**

**NV** LAS VEGAS — The only suspect ever to be charged in the 1990s killing of rap icon Tupac Shakur in Las Vegas has lost a bid to have his murder case dismissed.

Clark County District Court Judge Carli Kierny said in a decision issued Tuesday that Duane “Keffe D” Davis had provided no proof of any immunity deals.

Davis and his lawyer had argued that he never should have been charged with murder because of immunity agreements he says he reached years ago with federal and local authorities. Attorney Carl Arnold said the indictment against his 61-year-old client is an “egregious” violation of his constitutional rights because of a 27-year delay in prosecution.

Davis’ trial in Las Vegas is currently scheduled for March 17. He has pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder.

Prosecutors have said the evidence against Davis is strong, including his own accounts of the 1996 shooting in his tell-all memoir. Davis, an ex-gang leader, is accused of orchestrating the shooting near the Las Vegas Strip.

Shakur died a week later. He was 25.

**Roller derby league loses bid to keep trans athletes**

**NY** NEW YORK — A New York roller derby league has lost its bid to temporarily block a local ban on transgender female athletes.

Nassau County Supreme Court Judge Bruce Cozzens on Tuesday denied a request by the

Long Island Roller Rebels to prevent Nassau County from enforcing its ban while its lawsuit is considered by the court.

In July, local lawmakers banned transgender women and girls from playing on female sports teams at the county’s roughly 100 parks and recreational facilities.

The judge determined the new law does not exclude transgender women and girls from public facilities based on their gender identities as they can still play in coed sports leagues. He said allowing transgender women to play in female sports creates additional risk of injury and potential liability for the local government.

The league and the New York Civil Liberties Union intend to appeal the ruling.

**Pastor guilty of violating fire code with shelter**

**OH** BRYAN — A judge in northwestern Ohio found a pastor guilty on criminal charges Tuesday for failing to comply with the city fire code after he opened his church to let homeless people and others stay inside overnight to escape the winter chill.

Chris Avell, pastor of Dad’s Place Church in Bryan, could face a \$200 fine and up to 60 days in jail if he continues to let people stay inside his church around the clock without state approval that the building is up to code.

The temperature in Bryan was in the single digits Tuesday.

Bryan Municipal Court Judge Kent North stayed the sentence, allowing Jeremy Dys, an attorney representing Avell, to appeal. Dys confirmed he plans to do so.

Last year police filed 18 criminal charges against Avell over allegations that the rented church building next to a homeless shelter was in violation of the zoning ordinance, lacked proper kitchen and laundry facilities, and had unsafe exits and inadequate ventilation.

**Governor prioritizes reducing violent crime**

**NM** SANTA FE — Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham is tasking lawmakers to come up with public safety solutions amid a persistently high violent crime rate that is twice the national average and has left many communities on edge.

She delivered her State of the State address Tuesday, kicking off a 60-day legislative session in which curbing crime and boosting child wellbeing will be top priorities.

“Everyone in this room knows that crime is out of control in New Mexico,” Lujan Grisham said. “Even our public safety professionals agree — we’re in a state of crisis. Too many of us simply don’t feel safe in our communities, and that is, frankly, unacceptable.”

**Forest Service authorizes controversial land swap**

**MT** NYE — The Custer Gallatin National Forest on Friday authorized a controversial land swap involving more than 15 square miles of land in two different south-central Montana mountain ranges.

With the decision, consultants hired by the Yellowstone Club to facilitate the exchange can officially begin the title transfer process, which the Forest Service estimates will be

complete “in the near future.”

Under the multi-part agreement, the Forest Service will transfer 3,855 acres to landowners in the Crazy Mountains and Gallatin Range. In exchange, 6,110 acres of private land will become public land that the Forest Service will administer.

The Forest Service’s decision drew a mixed reception from groups in the conservation, recreation and public land space. Some expressed appreciation for the inclusion of conservation easements and deed restrictions to limit residential and industrial development. Others argued that some of the lower-elevation properties the Forest Service is trading into private ownership will become more vulnerable to development and that the recreating public will be excluded from more accessible and desirable portions of the range.

**Suit alleging excessive force at protests settled**

**OR** PORTLAND — A lawsuit alleging that law enforcement agents sent by President Donald Trump to protect a federal courthouse in 2020 used excessive force against racial justice protesters has been settled, the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon said Tuesday.

The settlement requires the federal government to compensate the individuals who filed the lawsuit for the injuries that federal law enforcement caused them, in exchange for the individuals’ agreement to dismiss the lawsuit, according to a news release from the ACLU.

The plaintiffs included three military veterans.

— From wire reports

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# Mahomes defends refs 'doing their best'

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Patrick Mahomes doesn't believe NFL officials are doing the Kansas City Chiefs quarterback any favors.

Nor do the statistics support that assumption.

In last week's divisional-round win over Houston, the Texans were twice penalized for hits on Mahomes, and one of them came on third down to extend a drive that ended in points. And that led many fans — to say nothing of some members of the Houston defense — to believe the league's officials were blatantly favoring one of its biggest stars.

"I don't feel that way," Mahomes said Wednesday in his first media availability ahead of Sunday's AFC title game against Buffalo, where the two-time defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs will try to earn a chance at a three-peat.

"I just try to play football at the end of the day. The referees are doing their best to call the game as fair and proper as best they can," Mahomes said. "For me, it's go out there, play hard, try to do whatever I can to win the football game, and then live with the results based on my effort and how I play the game, and that's what we preach here in Kansas City."

While it may seem as though one of the NFL's most visible franchises gets more than its share of calls, the Chiefs have in fact been penalized 147 yards more than their opponents over the past three seasons, including the playoffs.

And lest some think Kansas City benefits more in moments that matter most, opponents have gained 20 more first downs via penalties on third or fourth down since 2018, which is when Mahomes became the starter. In the fourth quarter or over-

time of games decided by one score, the Chiefs have the seventh-worst penalty differential over that same time period.

Still, it appears the narrative that officials are helping Kansas City to win had reached the Texans' locker room before Houston ever reached Arrowhead Stadium last Saturday, where they lost 23-14 in the divisional round of the playoffs.

"We knew it was going to be us versus the refs going into this game," Texans defensive end Will Anderson Jr. said afterward.

Then again, Mahomes didn't earn any latitude among fans by appearing to flop in an attempt to draw another flag. That came as he was scrambling toward the sideline, and when touched by Houston linebacker Henry To'oTo'o, the two-time NFL MVP dramatically threw himself to the ground — but failed to fool the officials.

It certainly drew the ire of former NFL quarterback Troy Aikman, who was calling the game for ESPN.

"He's trying to draw the penalty. Rather than just run out of bounds, he slows down," Aikman said. "That's been the frustration, and I get it. I understand it. That's been the frustration for these defensive players around the league."

Mahomes didn't seem perturbed by the sudden national discourse into penalties and flopping when he addressed the media Wednesday. Instead, he methodically answered questions about them and then turned his attention to the Bills.

"You get new referees every year. You get new circumstances," Mahomes said, "and you never can really tell because every play is different, and that's what makes the NFL so special. I feel like I just continue to play the game. I just try to win."

## No. 5 Florida overcomes 14-point deficit to beat South Carolina

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Will Richard scored on a driving layup with 4.8 seconds remaining to lift No. 5 Florida — down 14 points in the second half — past South Carolina, 70-69 on Wednesday night.

Richard finished with 22 points for the Gators (17-2, 4-2 Southeastern Conference). He drove left from the top of the key and banked in the go-ahead layup.

Jacobi Wright's desperation 3-pointer was off the mark as the Gamecocks (10-9, 0-6) continued their worst start in SEC play since the 2013-14 season.

Walter Clayton Jr. had 16 points for Florida — which trailed 52-38 with 12:46 to play — and set the program record with a 3-pointer in his 42nd straight game.

**No. 7 Houston 70, Utah 36:** Milos Uzan scored 14 points, L.J. Cryer added 13 points and the host Cougars routed the Utes for their 11th straight win.

J'Wan Roberts had 11 points and Terrance Arceneaux scored 10 points for Houston (15-3, 7-0 Big 12). The Cougars won their 33rd consecutive home game, which is the longest active streak in the nation.

Houston shot 43% from the field and was 5

of 18 on 3-pointers.

Gabe Madsen scored eight points and Keanu Dawes added seven points and nine rebounds for Utah (11-7, 3-4), which had its three-game winning streak snapped. The Utes shot 30% from the field and were 5 of 17 on 3-pointers.

**No. 12 Kansas 74, TCU 61:** Hunter Dickinson had 16 points to lead five Jayhawks players scoring in double figures as visiting Kansas beat the Horned Frogs after trailing by 14 points in the first half.

AJ Storr scored 10 of his 12 points after halftime for the Jayhawks (14-4, 5-2 Big 12). His stepback jumper with 11:30 left put them ahead to stay, right after the junior guard had turnovers on consecutive possessions, and ignited a 14-2 run he ended with a jumper.

Zeke Mayo added 13 points and Shakeel Moore had 11. Flory Bidunga had 10 points and 10 rebounds, giving the 6-foot-9 freshman his first career double-double, along with four blocked shots.

Noah Reynolds had 14 points to lead TCU (10-8, 3-4), which has alternated wins and losses the past eight games. Vasean Allette had 13 points and Brendan Wenzel had 11.

**No. 13 Texas A&M 63, No. 16 Mississip-**

**pi 62:** Manny Obaseki hit a go-ahead 3-pointer with 13 seconds left to cap an 11-2 closing run in the visiting Aggies' victory over the Rebels.

Obaseki's contested shot from the corner gave Texas A&M (15-4, 3-2 Southeastern Conference) its only lead of the game. Jaemyn Brakefield missed a shot for Ole Miss (15-4, 4-2) with two seconds remaining.

Zhuric Phelps led the Aggies with 14 points. Obaseki added 12 in 18 minutes in a reserve role, and Pharrel Payne had 10 points.

**No. 20 St. John's 78, Xavier 71:** Zuby Ejiofor scored six of his 16 points in overtime and the host Red Storm erased a 16-point deficit in the second half to rally past the Musketeers.

Kadary Richmond had a season-high 19 points for St. John's (17-3, 8-1 Big East). The Red Storm have won six straight and 12 of 13 in their second season under Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino.

Returning to the AP Top 25 this week with its highest ranking in a decade, St. John's moved back into first place in the conference standings, a half-game ahead of No. 10 Marquette.



# Keys upsets Swiatek in Australian Open semis

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — When Madison Keys finally finished off her 5-7, 6-1, 7-6 (10-8) upset of No. 2 Iga Swiatek in a high-intensity, high-quality Australian Open semifinal Thursday night, saving a match point along the way, the 29-year-old American crouched on the court and placed a hand on her white hat.

She had a hard time believing it all. The comeback. What Keys called an “extra dramatic finish.” The victory over five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek, who’d been on the most dominant run at Melbourne Park in a dozen years. And now the chance to play in her second Grand Slam final, a long wait after being the 2017 U.S. Open runner-up.

“I’m still trying to catch up to everything that’s happening,” said the 19th-seeded Keys, who will face No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka, the two-time defending champion, for the trophy Saturday. “I felt like I was just fighting to stay

in it. ... It was so up and down and so many big points.”

Just to be sure, Keys asked whether Swiatek was, indeed, one point from victory. Yes, Madison, she was, while serving at 6-5, 40-30, but missed a backhand into the net, then eventually getting broken by double-faulting, sending the contest to a first-to-10, win-by-two tiebreaker.

“I felt like I blacked out there at some point,” Keys said, “and was out there running around.”

Whatever she was doing, it worked. Keys claimed more games in the semifinal than the 14 total that Swiatek dropped in her five previous matches over the past two weeks.

Sabalenka beat good friend Paula Badosa 6-4, 6-2 earlier Thursday. Sabalenka, a 26-year-old from Belarus, can become the first woman since 1999 to complete a threepeat.

“If she plays like this,” the 11th-seeded Badosa said, “I mean, we can already give her

the trophy.”

Keys might have something to say about that.

Still, Sabalenka won her first major trophy at Melbourne Park in 2023, and she since has added two more — in Australia a year ago and at the U.S. Open last September.

The last woman to reach three finals in a row at the year’s first Grand Slam tournament was Serena Williams, who won two from 2015-17. Martina Hingis was the most recent woman with a threepeat, doing it from 1997-1999.

“I have goosebumps. I’m so proud of myself,” Sabalenka said.

Swiatek had not lost a single service game since the first round, but was broken three times by Keys in the first set alone and eight times in all.

That included each of Swiatek’s first two times serving, making clear right from the get-go this would not be her usual sort of day. And while Swiatek

did eke out the opening set, she was overwhelmed in the second, trailing 5-0 before getting a game.

This was the big-hitting Keys at her very best. She turns 30 next month and, at the suggestion of her coach, former player Bjorn Fratangelo — who also happens to be her husband — decided to try a new racket this season, an effort both to help her with generating easy power but also to relieve some strain on her right shoulder.

It’s certainly paid immediate dividends. Keys is now on an 11-match winning streak, including taking the title at a tuneup event in Adelaide.

She was good enough to get through this one, which was as tight as can be down the stretch.

“At the end, I feel like we were both kind of battling some nerves. ... It just became who can get that final point and who can be a little bit better than the other one,” Keys said. “And I’m happy it was me.”

## Mercer scores 2 as Devils beat Bruins to snap 4-game skid

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Dawson Mercer scored twice during New Jersey’s four-goal second period, and the Devils beat the Boston Bruins 5-1 on Wednesday night.

Nico Hischier had a goal and two assists, Dougie Hamilton had a goal and an assist, and Stefan Noesen also scored, and Timo Meier had two assists to help the Devils snap a four-game skid. Jacob Markstrom had six saves before leaving early in the second period after a collision, and Jake Allen stopped all 16 shots he faced.

Morgan Geekie scored for the Bruins. Jeremy Swayman had 25 saves through two periods, and Joonas Korpi also stopped five shots in the third.

Markstrom left the game after colliding with Boston forward Justin Brazeau in the crease at 3:09.

Before the game, the New Jersey honored former coach Jacques Lemaire, who led the team to its first Stanley Cup championship in 1995, by inducting him into the team’s Ring of Honor.

**Blue Jackets 5, Maple Leafs 1:** Adam Fantilli scored three goals for his first career hat trick, Elvis Merzlikins stopped 29 shots, and visiting Columbus beat Toronto.

Luca Del Bel Belluz had a goal and an assist, and James van Riemsdyk also scored for the Blue Jackets. Columbus improved to 7-1-1 in its last nine games and moved into the Eastern Conference’s first wild card spot.

Auston Matthews scored for the Maple Leafs, and Dennis Hildeby had 14 saves. Toronto snapped a three-game winning streak.

Fantilli, a native of nearby Nobleton, Ontario, with 70 family and friends in attendance, pushed the Blue Jackets ahead 3-0 with 4:39 left in the second period with his second of the night.

**Jets 3, Avalanche 2 (OT):** Neal Pionk scored 17 seconds into overtime, and visiting Winnipeg beat Colorado.

Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck started the winning play when he sent the puck to Vladislav Namestnikov, who fed Pionk skating down the right side. Pionk’s slap shot beat

Mackenzie Blackwood to end Winnipeg’s two-game skid.

Morgan Barron and Gabriel Vilardi also scored for the Jets, and Hellebuyck stopped 25 shots.

Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar scored for the Avalanche, and Blackwood had 22 saves.

**Kings 2, Panthers 1:** Samuel Helenius and Adrian Kempe scored in the third period, and host Los Angeles rallied to beat Florida.

Darcy Kuemper stopped 26 shots for the Kings, who were held to two goals or fewer for the seventh time in eight games and snapped a two-game skid.

Evan Rodrigues scored a power-play goal and Spencer Knight made 26 saves for the Panthers, who were coming off a 5-2 win at Anaheim on Tuesday night.

Helenius got his first NHL goal at 6:41 of the third to tie the score. Kempe then scored for the fourth straight game when he tipped in Kevin Fiala’s shot with 6:48 left to put Los Angeles ahead.

# Butler draws 2nd suspension from Heat

Associated Press

Jimmy Butler was suspended by the Miami Heat for the second time in three weeks, a move that adds to the possibility he has already played his final game for the franchise.

Butler drew the latest suspension — this one will last two games — for what the team in a statement Wednesday night called a “continued pattern of disregard of team rules, insubordinate conduct and conduct

detrimental to the team,” including missing the Heat’s flight to Milwaukee earlier in the day. Miami was scheduled to play the Bucks on Thursday and at Brooklyn on Saturday.

The earliest he could play for the Heat again is Monday, at home against Orlando.

And that would hinge on him still being on the roster, which seems far from guaranteed.

Butler told Miami in recent weeks that he wants a trade, a

demand he has not made publicly because league rules do not allow players to do so. Any player who makes such a demand known is risking a fine of up to \$150,000.

The Heat ultimately revealed that request when suspending him in early January for what they called conduct detrimental to the team, and said at that time that they will work to accommodate his trade request.

The NBA’s trade deadline is

Feb. 6.

Butler was banished for seven games earlier this month, costing him about \$2.4 million in salary. He returned last week and has played in each of the last three Miami games, averaging 13.0 points in 29.3 minutes.

The Heat left for Milwaukee around 2:15 p.m. Wednesday. That departure time is earlier than Miami leaves for most of its trips, and it’s unclear if that was a factor for Butler.

## Cunningham scores 29, leads Pistons past Hawks

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Cade Cunningham had 29 points and 11 assists and the Detroit Pistons won for the seventh time it their last eight road games, 114-104 over the Atlanta Hawks on Wednesday night.

Malik Beasley had 19 points off the bench and Ausar Thompson had 16 points for Detroit.

Dyson Daniels led the Hawks with 20 points and 10 rebounds and Trae Young had 13 points and nine assists. Jalen Johnson had 17 points and nine rebounds.

The Hawks shot a season-low 16% from 3-point range, hitting only 6 of 38 attempts.

The Pistons led 69-51 at the half, their biggest halftime lead of the season.

**Suns 108, Nets 84:** Devin Booker scored 32 points in his 200th career 30-point performance, Kevin Durant added 24 against his former team and visiting Phoenix eased to a victory over short-handed Brooklyn.

Booker shot 14-for-24 from the field to quickly get back on track after getting held to 15 points Monday in a loss to Cleveland that snapped his five-game streak with 30 or more.

Keon Johnson scored 20 points for the Nets, who lost their fifth straight. Jalen Wilson added 15.

The Nets were missing key

players such as former Sun Cam Johnson, Cam Thomas, D’Angelo Russell and Ben Simmons in their ninth straight home loss.

**Timberwolves 115, Mavericks 114:** Jaden McDaniels scored a career-high 27 points, including the clinching free throw with 3 seconds to play, and Anthony Edwards added 21 as visiting Minnesota outlasted short-handed Dallas.

Two free throws by Mike Conley gave Minnesota a 114-111 lead with 11.8 seconds left. After Kyrie Irving missed a 3-pointer, McDaniels grabbed the rebound and made one of two free throws for a four-point lead. Irving hit a running 3 at the buzzer.

Irving scored 36 points and P.J. Washington Jr. added a season-high 30 points for the Mavericks, who are 4-11 since superstar Luka Dončić was sidelined with a calf strain early in their Christmas Day loss to the Timberwolves.

**Rockets 109, Cavaliers 108:** Alperen Sengun made two free throws with 4.5 seconds left and Darius Garland missed two of three free throws after that to allow Houston to hold on for a victory over visiting Cleveland.

The Cavaliers had a chance to win it at the buzzer, but Donovan Mitchell’s 3-point attempt was off.

**Grizzlies 132, Hornets 120:** Desmond Bane scored 24

points, Luke Kennard added 23 on a season-high seven 3-pointers and host Memphis built an early lead and beat Charlotte.

Jaren Jackson Jr. added 22 points, and Ja Morant had 16 points and 13 assists to help Memphis win its fourth straight. Bane was 10-for-15 from the field, Kennard 8-for-12 and the Grizzlies shot 50% overall.

Mark Williams led the Hornets with a career-high 38 points, connecting on 14 of 18 shots. LaMelo Ball added 22 points, eight rebounds and six assists. Miles Bridges scored 17 points as the Hornets’ three-game winning streak came to an end.

**Thunder 123, Jazz 114:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored a career-high 54 points as Oklahoma City beat visiting Utah.

Gilgeous-Alexander made 17 of 35 field goals and 17 of 18 free throws to surpass his previous career best of 45 points. He also had eight rebounds, five assists and three steals.

Jalen Williams added 25 points for the Thunder (36-7), who are tied with Cleveland for the league’s best record.

John Collins had 22 points and 12 rebounds, Collin Sexton had 18 points and nine assists, and Walker Kessler had 17 points and 15 rebounds for the Jazz, who lost their fourth straight.

**Kings 123, Warriors 117:** DeMar DeRozan scored 32 points, Domantas Sabonis had 26 points and 18 rebounds and host Sacramento overcame an 18-point deficit to beat Golden State.

Malik Monk added 20 points and nine assists and De’Aaron Fox had 14 points for Sacramento, which made 30 of 32 free throws. The Kings have won three in a row overall, seven straight at home and are 10-2 under interim coach Doug Christie.

Andrew Wiggins had 25 points and Buddy Hield added 17 points for the Warriors. Steph Curry finished with 14 points and 12 assists.

**Celtics 117 Clippers 113 (OT):** Jaylen Brown scored 25 points, Jayson Tatum added 24 and Boston rallied past host Los Angeles in overtime.

Derrick White added 20 points and Sam Hauser had 15, tying his season high with five 3-pointers. The defending NBA champion played without Jrue Holiday and Kristaps Porzingis.

Derrick Jones Jr. scored a career-high 29 points, 17 in the first quarter, to lead the Clippers.

**Bucks at Pelicans, ppd.:** The NBA postponed the game after a historic winter storm dumped about a foot of snow in New Orleans on Tuesday.