

Black Hawk, jet collide near DC airport

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — All 64 people aboard an American Airlines jet that collided with an Army helicopter were feared dead in what was likely to be the worst U.S. aviation disaster in almost a quarter century, officials said Thursday.

At least 28 bodies were pulled from the icy waters of the Potomac River after the helicopter apparently flew into the path of the jet late Wednesday as it was landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, officials said. The plane carried 60 passengers and four crew. Three soldiers were aboard the helicopter.

“We don’t believe there are any survivors,” said John Donnelly, the fire chief in the nation’s capital. “We are now at the point where we are switching from a rescue operation to a

recovery operation.”

The plane was found upside-down in three sections in waist-deep water, and first responders were searching an area of the Potomac River as far south as the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, roughly 3 miles south of the airport, Donnelly said. The helicopter wreckage was also found.

If no one survived, the collision would be the deadliest U.S. air crash since 2001.

There was no immediate word on the cause of the collision, but officials said flight conditions were clear as the jet arrived from Wichita, Kan., with U.S. and Russian figure skaters and others aboard.

“On final approach into Reagan National, it collided with a military aircraft on an otherwise normal approach,” American Airlines CEO Robert Isom

said. “At this time, we don’t know why the military aircraft came into the path of the ... aircraft.”

President Donald Trump opened a White House news conference after the crash with a moment of silence honoring the victims, calling it an “hour of anguish” for the country.

But he spent most of his time casting political blame, lashing out at the Biden administration and diversity efforts at the Federal Aviation Administration, saying they had led to slipping standards — even as he acknowledged that the cause of the crash was unknown.

Images from the river showed boats around the partly submerged wing and the mangled wreckage of the plane’s fuselage.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Thursday that the Ar-

my’s 12th Aviation Battalion that includes the Black Hawk helicopter involved in the deadly crash near Ronald Reagan National Airport has been granted a 48-hour operational pause.

The Army described the helicopter as a UH-60 Black Hawk from Bravo Company of the 12th Aviation Battalion at Davisson Army Airfield, based at Fort Belvoir, Va. The helicopter was on a training flight. Military aircraft frequently conduct training flights in and around the congested and heavily restricted airspace of Washington for familiarization and continuity of government planning.

Hegseth said in a recorded video posted on X that the crew was “fairly experienced” and conducting an “annual proficiency training flight.” They had night vision goggles.

Hegseth memo sets paths to remove DEI in military

By CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Race and sex will no longer be considered in military promotions and academy admissions as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth moves to weed out diversity- and equity-based programs across the U.S. military.

“The [Defense Department] will strive to provide merit-based, color-blind, equal opportunities to service members but will not guarantee or strive for equal outcomes,” Hegseth wrote in a memo released Wednesday titled “Restoring America’s Fighting Force.”

According to the memo, the Defense Department will not take into account sex, race or

ethnicity when considering troops for promotions or special duty. Additionally, no department component will establish sex-, race- or ethnicity-based goals for academic admissions, career fields or organizational composition.

Hegseth’s memo also prohibits elements of the Defense Department from teaching people about critical race theory, DEI or gender ideology as part of a curriculum or workforce training. Advisory boards, councils and working groups will cease operations related to diversity, equality and inclusion.

DEI policies, Hegseth wrote in the memo, are incompatible with the values of the Defense Department.

“We will focus on lethality, meritocracy, accountability, standards and readiness,” Hegseth wrote. “Providing service members an equal opportunity to excel will help us remain the strongest and most lethal fighting force the world has ever known.”

The memo was released two days after President Donald Trump signed an executive order canceling DEI programs across the military. The order calls for the Defense Department and the Department of Homeland Security to provide detailed guidance for the implementation of this order to their respective agencies within 30 days of the order signing. Within 180 days, the secretaries must

submit a report through the White House deputy chief of staff for policy documenting the progress of implementing the order, along with any recommendations.

In line with this, the Pentagon is creating a task force to oversee the abolishment of DEI offices, as well as “any vestiges of such offices that subvert meritocracy, perpetuate unconstitutional discrimination and promote radical ideologies related to systemic racism and gender fluidity.”

The task force, which will report to the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, will provide an initial report by March 1 of actions taken by the Defense Department.

USCG pauses anti-harassment policy

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The Coast Guard is pausing a policy intended to eliminate harassment while it reevaluates guidance issued by the service's recently ousted top admiral.

The "Harassing Behavior Prevention, Response, and Accountability" instruction was suspended pending a 90-day comprehensive review, acting Commandant Adm. Kevin Lunday said in a message Monday to all Coast Guard members.

The policy defined "harassing behavior" to include harassment, sexual harassment, bullying, hazing, retaliation and reprisal. It consolidated reporting, investigation and other procedures related to harassment and outlined corrective action for substantiated incidents.

It allowed anyone, civilian or military, who witnessed or was subject to behavior believed to be harassing to make a complaint to any person of authority in the member's or employee's chain of command.

Lunday did not say why the policy was put on hold, but his message emphasized that harassment is still prohibited by military general order, and he directed leaders to "act promptly in response to any allegation of misconduct."

Pending complaints made under the suspended policy should be resolved at "the lowest appropriate level," Lunday said.

He also directed leaders to defer action until the Coast Guard Investigative Service, which has the authority to conduct criminal investigations, declines or completes an investigation.

igation.

Investigation and resolution of sexual harassment complaints will still follow standard requirements, Lunday said, but "proof by preponderant evidence" is required for a complaint to be reported to the service's anti-harassment program and taken on by the chief prosecutor.

Commands should defer processing for separation until the chief prosecutor gets involved, he said.

Hate incidents will continue to be investigated per current rules, Lunday said, and Coast Guard personnel are still able to file other complaints, such as those pertaining to equal-opportunity protections.

The now-suspended instruction was issued in 2023 by Adm. Linda Fagan, who was relieved

of her post Jan. 20 by the new administration of President Donald Trump.

Fagan, the first female officer to lead a branch of the armed forces, was fired because she failed to address border security and meet recruiting and retention goals, mismanaged acquisitions and lost trust with the force in her handling of the cover-up of a sexual assault scandal at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a senior Homeland Security Department official said on condition of anonymity, Stars and Stripes reported at the time.

An internal investigation known as Operation Fouled Anchor, which was summarized in a January 2020 report, concluded that academy leaders hadn't ensured a safe environment for cadets, yet no one was held accountable.

N. Korea's failed launches may signal technology shift

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

North Korea's failure to deliver on its plans to put three spy satellites into orbit last year was unsurprising, experts say, but it indicates Pyongyang is pursuing a newer, efficient form of rocket technology.

The first and only attempt to launch a satellite last year ended in a mid-flight explosion on May 27, sending debris over the Yellow Sea, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Pyongyang attributed the failure to a rocket powered by a new "liquid oxygen" engine used to carry the satellite, according to the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency the next day.

Analysts described this purported shift in rocket propulsion technology as an evolution of

North Korea's space program and the reason for its failure to launch three satellites in 2024.

"If we're to believe [North Korea's] statement, then they're moving on from military-grade engines to civilian-application engines," Tianran Xu, an Open Nuclear Network analyst based in Austria, said Wednesday. "They are more energetic for sure, but that's a new line of technology they're pursuing. So, if that's true, it's no surprise that they ended in failure on their first try."

The communist regime vowed to launch three spy satellites into orbit in 2024.

North Korean rockets carrying satellites traditionally use "well-tested" engines that also power long-range missiles, such as the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile, Xu said.

Philippines offers deal to China on missile system

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. offered on Friday to remove a U.S. missile system from the Philippines if China halts what he called its "aggressive and coercive behavior" in the disputed South China Sea.

The U.S. Army installed the Typhon mid-range missile system in the northern Philippines in April last year to support what the longtime treaty allies described as training for joint combat readiness. China has repeatedly demanded that the Philippines remove the missile system, saying it was "inciting geopolitical confrontation and an arms race."

Asked by reporters about China's criticism of the missile system, Marcos said he did not

understand the Chinese position because the Philippines does not comment on China's missile systems which "are a thousand times more powerful than what we have."

"Let's make a deal with China: Stop claiming our territory, stop harassing our fishermen and let them have a living, stop ramming our boats, stop water cannoning our people, stop firing lasers at us and stop your aggressive and coercive behavior, and we'll return the typhoon missiles," Marcos told reporters in central Cebu province.

"Let them stop everything they're doing and I'll return all of those," he said.

Chinese officials did not immediately comment on the Philippine leader's remarks.

US plans to send migrants to base in Guantanamo Bay

Miami Herald

President Donald Trump signed a presidential memorandum Wednesday to ready a detention facility for migrants in the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that could hold as many as 30,000 people as his administration ramps up deportations.

The memo directs the secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security to take “all appropriate actions” to expand the Migrant Operations Center in Guantanamo Bay “to full capacity to provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens unlawfully present in the United States, and to address attendant immigration enforcement needs” identified by the agencies.

“We have 30,000 beds in Guantanamo to detain the worst criminal illegal aliens threatening the American people,” Trump said in remarks before signing the Laken Riley Act at the White House, a new law that allows for the detention of immigrants suspected of committing theft and other crimes.

“Some of them are so bad we don’t even trust the countries to

hold them because we don’t want them coming back, so we’re going to send them out to Guantanamo,” Trump added. “This will double our capacity immediately. It’s a tough place to get out of.”

The base is well known as the detention center for suspected terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. But the U.S. government also keeps a facility where some Cuban and Haitian migrants intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard await the result of their asylum cases. The State Department manages that facility, with assistance from the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon. The Guantanamo facility came under fire during the Biden administration for human rights violations, a claim that the State Department has vehemently denied.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and White House “border czar” Tom Homan told reporters Wednesday that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement will run the facility following “the highest standards” and that the White House was already working on the plan.

“What you probably don’t know, there’s already a migrant center there, it’s been there for decades,” Homan said. “So we’re just going to expand upon that existing migrant center.”

Noem said the White House was working on the plan “to use resources that we currently have.”

“We’re going after these guys,” she added. “We’re already doing it. We’re building it out.”

Both referred to Guantanamo Bay as being for “the worst of the worst.”

It is unclear if the 30,000-beds figure mentioned by Trump is a goal for an expansion plan.

In 2021, Immigration and Customs Enforcement under the Biden administration issued an open call for contractors to provide security services at the base’s Migrant Operations Center. The notice said the facility had a capacity for only 120 people and the administration wanted to expand that to house up to 400 migrants. At the time, the worsening situation in Haiti was raising concerns about a surge of migrants coming to the U.S.

Fed leaves rates as is

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve left its benchmark interest rate unchanged Wednesday after cutting it three times in a row last year, a sign of a more cautious approach as the Fed seeks to gauge where inflation is headed and what policies President Donald Trump may pursue.

In a statement, the Fed said the job market is “solid” and noted that the unemployment rate “has stabilized at a low level in recent months.” The Fed also appeared to toughen its assessment of inflation, saying that it “remains somewhat elevated.” Both a healthier job market and more stubborn inflation typically would imply fewer Fed rate cuts in the coming months.

In a news conference Wednesday, Fed Chair Jerome Powell largely deflected questions about recent comments from Trump, including one from last week, when Trump said he would lower oil prices and then “demand” lower rates. He also said he would speak with Powell about it.

“I’m not going to have any response or comment on whatever the president said,” Powell said. Asked if Trump had communicated his desire for lower rates directly to Powell, the Fed chair said he had “no contact.”

Former US Sen. Menendez gets 11 years in prison

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez was sentenced Wednesday to 11 years in prison for accepting bribes of gold and cash and acting as an agent of Egypt — crimes his lawyer said he’s been mocked for as “Gold Bar Bob.”

The judge delivered the sentence after Menendez tearfully addressed the court, saying he’d lost everything he cared about, except his family. The Democrat resigned last year after be-

coming one of only a handful of U.S. senators ever convicted while in office.

“You were successful, powerful, you stood at the apex of our political system,” U.S. District Judge Sidney H. Stein told Menendez in a packed Manhattan courtroom. “Somewhere along the way, and I don’t know when it was, you lost your way and working for the public good became working for your good.”

The ex-senator was convicted of selling his once-considerable

clout for bribes worth a fortune. FBI agents who searched his house found \$480,000, some of it stuffed inside boots and pockets of clothing, and gold bars worth an estimated \$150,000.

Prosecutors said that in exchange for the loot, which also included a luxury car, Menendez did corrupt favors for three New Jersey businessmen. They said he tried to protect associates from criminal investigations, helped two of them in business deals with foreign

powers and also met with Egyptian intelligence officials and took steps to help that country access millions of dollars in U.S. military aid.

Menendez, 71, portrayed himself to the judge as a sympathetic figure, stressing his decades of public service.

Afterward, talking to reporters with TV cameras and microphones outside, he turned defiant.

“I am innocent,” he proclaimed, vowing to appeal.

Hamas frees 8 as Israel starts prisoner release

Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Israel released 110 Palestinian prisoners Thursday after eight hostages in the Gaza Strip were freed by Hamas-led militants earlier in the day in a sometimes chaotic process that briefly called the exchange into question and underscored the fragility of a ceasefire that began this month.

Crowds of Palestinians — the relatives and friends of released prisoners but also scores of jubilant supporters — mobbed buses carrying the prisoners.

As soon as they stepped off the buses, the crowd hoisted the prisoners in the air.

The prisoners released in-

clude 30 who were serving life sentences for deadly attacks against Israelis. Seven were allowed to return to the occupied West Bank, but the rest were being transferred to Egypt before further deportation.

The prisoner releases began late Thursday after militants in Gaza freed three Israelis and five Thai nationals, who were working on farms in southern Israel when they were taken hostage more than 15 months ago.

The releases are part of a ceasefire aimed at ending the deadliest and most destructive war ever fought between Israel and Hamas, and securing the release of dozens more hostages

abducted in the Hamas-led attack Oct. 7, 2023, that ignited the war.

Scuffles erupted as the convoy of buses carrying the Palestinian prisoners departed from their Israeli prison in the West Bank.

Palestinian teenagers threw stones outside the complex and Israeli forces fired tear gas as they tried to clear the area.

Three Palestinians were wounded in the confrontations outside the prison, according to Palestinian Red Crescent, which said Israeli forces had used gunfire and stun grenades to disperse crowds.

As Red Cross buses approached, the families of Pales-

tinian prisoners caught their first glimpses of their loved ones through the bus windshields, some shattered in the melee of stone-throwing and tear gas-firing.

Zakaria Zubeidi — a prominent former militant leader and theater director who took part in a dramatic jailbreak in 2021 before being rearrested days later — wore a gray prison jumpsuit and flashed a victory sign from inside one of the buses.

The uproar came hours after a chaotic hostage handover in the Gaza Strip, where masked militants shuttled some captives through a rowdy crowd of thousands of Palestinians.

More antisemitic graffiti appears in Australia after explosives found

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Three more incidents of antisemitic graffiti were found across Sydney on Thursday morning, leading Australian political leaders to warn of an escalation in hatred and decry as terrorism explosives were found earlier in a trailer on the city's outskirts.

Law enforcement earlier this month found a list of Jewish targets together with a cache of

Powergel — an explosive used in the mining industry — in Sydney's outer suburb of Dural, state police said Wednesday. The amount uncovered could create a bomb with a blast zone of around 130 feet, officers said.

"This represents, undeniably, an escalation in race hatred, race-filled hatred and potential violence in New South Wales," the state's Premier Chris Minns told report-

ers on Thursday.

News of the discovery — which police chiefs said was leaked to a newspaper, compromising a clandestine investigation — followed months of antisemitic arson, window-smashing and graffiti in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's most populous cities, concentrated in the areas where many Jewish people live. Thursday's target included a Jewish school.

Russian drone hits Ukraine apartment; at least 4 killed

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian drone blasted a hole in an apartment building in northeastern Ukraine during a nighttime attack, killing at least four people and injuring nine others, officials said Thursday.

The Shahed drone blew out a wall and surrounding windows in the apartment block in Sumy, a major city, just after 1 a.m., the Sumy regional administration said. Four people were rescued from the rubble and a child was among the injured, it said, adding that 120 people were evacuated.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called it "a terrible tragedy, a terrible Russian crime."

A Russian artillery strike on the Donetsk city of Kramatorsk injured eight people, including two young children, Donetsk regional head Vadym Filashkin wrote on his Telegram channel Thursday.

Congo's leader calls for mobilization against Rwanda-backed rebel troops

Associated Press

GOMA, Congo — Congo's leader called for a massive military mobilization to help fight Rwanda-backed rebels who were attempting to seize more territory in the country's east, as a crucial meeting of neighbors asked the Congolese government to talk with the rebels. Rwanda's leader also threat-

ened to "deal" with any confrontation with South Africa regarding the conflict.

In his first public remarks since the M23 rebels advanced into eastern Congo's largest city, Goma, on Monday, President Félix Tshisekedi late Wednesday vowed "a vigorous and coordinated response" to push back the rebels while reaf-

firming his commitment to a peaceful resolution.

After capturing much of Goma, a humanitarian hub critical for more than 6 million people displaced by the conflict in eastern Congo, the rebels were advancing toward South Kivu's provincial capital, Bukavu, causing fear and panic, witnesses said Thursday.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Independently developed jet breaks sound barrier

CA MOJAVE — A sleek white aircraft became the first independently developed jet to break the sound barrier Tuesday, tearing through the air tens of thousands of feet above the Mojave Desert and a crowd of delighted onlookers.

The XB-1 aircraft accelerated to Mach 1.05 within about 11 minutes of taking off, according to Boom Supersonic and live video of the test flight.

The flight at the Mojave Air & Space Port in Mojave, Calif., took place as the company works to revive supersonic passenger travel, which died with the grounding of the Anglo-French Concorde more than two decades ago.

Boom plans to focus next on the Overture airliner, which it says will carry as many as 80 passengers while moving at about twice the speed of today's subsonic airliners.

The aircraft, which flew for the first time in March, is made almost completely from lightweight carbon fiber. It uses an augmented reality vision system to help with landing, since its long nose and high-angle approach can make it difficult for pilots to see.

Man sentenced in sexual assault at youth center

NH CONCORD — A former leader at a New Hampshire youth detention center who was convicted of holding down a teen while he was raped in 1998 was sentenced Monday to 20 to 40 years in prison.

Bradley Asbury, now 70, was

found guilty in November on two counts of being an accomplice to aggravated sexual assault. Asbury had pleaded not guilty.

"With due respect to the court, I'm maintaining my innocence of these charges and do intend to appeal the convictions," he said in the Manchester court before sentencing.

Asbury served as a house leader at the Sununu Youth Services Center in Manchester. He was accused of restraining 14-year-old Michael Gilpatrick on a staircase with help from a colleague, while a third staffer raped the teen and a fourth forced him to perform a sex act.

New Coca-Cola Orange Cream banks on nostalgia

GA ATLANTA — A year after the launch of the short-lived Coca-Cola Spiced, Coke is adding another new flavor to its lineup.

Coca-Cola Orange Cream is scheduled to go on sale Feb. 10 in the U.S. and Canada. It will be sold in regular and zero sugar varieties. Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. said Monday that it developed the soda, which mixes cola with orange and vanilla flavors, in response to growing consumer demand for the comforting, nostalgic flavor.

Orange cream — first introduced with the Creamsicle ice cream bar in 1937 — has enjoyed a recent renaissance. Olipop, a probiotic soda, introduced an orange cream flavor in 2021. Carvel reintroduced its Orange Dreamy Creamy ice cream last year for the first time since 1972. Wendy's also debuted an Orange Dreamsicle Frosty last spring.

Coke said Coca-Cola Orange

Cream won't be a permanent flavor but would remain on sale at least through the first quarter of 2026.

Key senator won't seek reelection, opening seat

MI LANSING — Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, who led the Democrats' Senate campaign efforts the past two election cycles, has announced he will not seek a third term in 2026, creating a highly contested battleground seat expected to be coveted by both major political parties.

The 66-year-old's unexpected decision Tuesday to step aside after just two terms comes as a surprise. Having lost Michigan in the presidential race, Peters' decision forces Democrats to defend a critical Senate seat in Michigan without the advantage of an incumbent, complicating their efforts to regain control of the chamber, where Republicans hold a 53-47 majority. Expected to be among the names most circulated for the position is Pete Buttigieg, the former U.S. transportation secretary, who moved to Michigan in recent years.

McMaster now state's longest serving governor

SC COLUMBIA — Wednesday was a big day for South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster. Yes, he gave his eighth State of the State address. And he became the Palmetto State's longest serving governor at 2,927 days, thanks in large part to his evolving political instincts over 40 years in politics and a boost from President Donald Trump.

It's another bit of history for the 77-year-old Republican who

also is the oldest governor in South Carolina's 249 years as a state.

South Carolina originally had two-year terms for governor, and they could not seek reelection. That was later extended to four-year terms and not until 1980 did the state allow a governor to serve two consecutive terms. Since then, three governors have made it all eight years, and thanks to the quirk of the calendar and inauguration dates Democrat Dick Riley served eight years plus four days from 1979 to 1987.

McMaster should blow well past the Riley record because he took over for Gov. Nikki Haley in 2017 when Trump appointed her U.N. ambassador during his first term. His final term runs out in January 2027.

A DNC in crisis is set to elect its new chairman

NY NEW YORK — The Democratic National Committee will elect a new chair on Saturday as the party seeks new leadership to guide Democrats through Donald Trump's second presidency.

Eight candidates have lined up to replace outgoing Chair Jaime Harrison. The contest will be decided at the DNC's winter meeting in suburban Washington.

The leading candidates, Minnesota's Ken Martin and Wisconsin's Ben Wikler, are low-profile state party chairs with few obvious differences in how they would lead. Neither candidate is promising radical change, but they largely agree changes are needed to improve the party's brand — especially among working-class voters.

— From wire reports

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Houston's defense fuels 13-game streak

Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — West Virginia's Javon Small gestured and yelled for a teammate — any teammate — to get open closer to the basket. When that didn't work, the Big 12's leading scorer forced up a 3-pointer just before the shot clock expired.

Clank.

Small was the latest star stifled by No. 6 Houston, which has been making a habit out of sapping opponents' strengths.

The Cougars (17-3, 9-0 Big 12) are riding a 13-game winning streak behind the nation's stingiest defense and priding themselves in slowing down the other team's top scorers.

"We're a defensive-minded team," Houston guard L.J. Cryer said after a 63-49 win over the Mountaineers on Wednesday night. "We go to practice and we emphasize defense a lot. You achieve what you work on and what you emphasize. When the ball's not going in, you've got to rely on your defense. And on

the nights that the ball isn't going in, we're going to win because of that."

Opponents have to find a Plan B when the Cougars throw double and triple teams at them. Cryer, Joseph Tugler, J'Wan Roberts and Terrance Arce-neaux took turns harassing Small, who attempted just seven shots and was held to eight points, nearly 12 below his league-leading average.

It's happened quite often this month.

UCF's Keyshawn Hall, who scored a career-high 40 points in his previous game, was held to six points against Houston on 2-for-12 shooting.

Utah's Gabe Madsen was limited to eight points on 3-of-10 shooting against the Cougars. The Utes, who have scored at least 80 points 10 times this season, were held to 36 points, their lowest scoring output since 2011.

BYU's Richie Saunders managed just nine points against Houston one game after scoring a career-high 30 against Arizona

State.

The Cougars, whose 18-game league winning streak dating to last season is the second-longest in Big 12 history, are allowing 55.6 points per game, 2.4 points fewer than the next best defensive team, Drake. Opponents are shooting a national-worst 36% from the field against Houston.

The Cougars started the season ranked at No. 4, but started 4-3 with overtime losses to San Diego State and No. 4 Alabama in Las Vegas and a five-point loss to top-ranked Auburn.

They haven't lost since.

Kelvin Sampson, who has been Houston's coach since 2014, said defense has been the Cougars' bread and butter for nearly a decade. He's especially proud that in this era of the transfer portal and name, image and likeness opportunities, he's able to teach the same players. Eight of the Cougars' top 10 players returned this season, including four starters.

"And that does make a differ-

ence," Sampson said. "Part of our secret sauce is our program. And then having great kids. Character matters. Having kids you don't mind losing with. There's some teams, whether it's bad attitudes or wrong attitudes or what, you're always having to coach that. I never have to worry about effort or attitude. I'm blessed that way. I've got a great staff. That's buoyed us here for a long time."

Cryer is Houston's top scorer averaging 13.5 points per game — which is 18th in the Big 12 — followed closely by Emanuel Sharp at 13.4. But the Cougars are filling the basket enough that their average 21-point scoring margin leads the country, and Houston is forcing 6.1 more turnovers than it commits, good for fourth-best.

"Defensively, they're just well connected," West Virginia coach Darian DeVries said. "They're very aggressive. They really load to the ball. It's hard to really crack them.

"Not many teams have."

No. 1 Auburn handles LSU for 12th straight victory

Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — Johni Broome scored 20 of his 26 points in the second half and had 16 rebounds to help top-ranked Auburn beat LSU 87-74 on Wednesday night for its 12th straight victory.

Auburn (19-1, 7-0 Southeastern Conference) matched the best 20-game start in school history. Kelly Miles added 13 points, Chad-Baker Mazara had 11 and Tahaad Petiford 10.

Cam Carter led LSU (12-8, 1-6) with 24 points. Dji Bailey had 13, and Jordan Sears finished with 11.

No. 4 Alabama 88, No. 14 Mississippi St. 84: Chris Youngblood had a season-high 23 points, including two free throws with 10.9 seconds remaining, to lead the visiting

Crimson Tide to a win over the Bulldogs.

Youngblood made a career-best seven 3 pointers while Alabama made 15-for-31 from beyond the arc.

Mark Sears had 17 points for Alabama (18-3, 7-1 Southeastern Conference) and Grant Nelson scored 15.

Josh Hubbard had a career-high 38 points for Mississippi State (16-5, 4-4) and made a season-high six 3 pointers. KeShawn Murphy scored 18 points for the Bulldogs.

Maryland 76, No. 17 Wisconsin 68: Rodney Rice and Ja'Kobi Gillespie scored 16 points apiece, and the host Terps won their fourth straight game, over the Badgers.

Maryland (17-5, 7-4 Big Ten) trailed 48-43 in the second half

before taking the lead for good with a 14-2 run. Julian Reese scored 14 points for the Terps, and Derik Queen contributed 12 points and 12 rebounds.

Maryland has won six of its last seven, with the only defeat an overtime loss at Northwestern.

No. 22 Texas Tech 71, TCU 57: JT Toppin had 18 points and 14 rebounds, Chance McMillian scored 16 points and the host Red Raiders beat the Horned Frogs in their first game as a ranked team this season.

Elijah Hawkins added 13 points to help Texas Tech (16-4, 7-2 Big 12) win its fifth consecutive game in what is its best start in conference since 2004-05, when Bob Knight was the coach.

No. 23 Mississippi 72, Texas 68: Davon Barnes made two

free throws with eight seconds remaining and the host Rebels got two defensive stops in the final 10 seconds to hold off the Longhorns.

Sean Pedulla had 19 points and five assists to help Ole Miss (16-5, 5-3 Southeastern) end a three-game losing streak. Jaemyn Brakefield scored nine of his 18 points in the final six minutes, and Dre Davis added 17.

No. 25 UConn 72, DePaul 61: Solo Ball scored 14 of his 16 points in the second half and the host Huskies rallied from a 14-point deficit to defeat the Blue Demons.

Tarris Reed Jr. had 16 points and eight rebounds for UConn (15-6, 7-3 Big East). Jaylin Stewart finished with 15 points before leaving following an awkward fall.

No front-runners for top NBA rookie yet

Associated Press

At this point, there is no Victor Wembanyama in this season's NBA rookie class. There is no Paolo Banchero. And there's no Luka Dončić, Ja Morant, Karl-Anthony Towns, Damian Lillard, Kyrie Irving, Blake Griffin, Brandon Roy, Derrick Rose or Chris Paul, either.

They were all unanimous, or just about unanimous, rookie of the year selections. Everybody knew long before the ballots were cast who was going to win the award that season. There was no mystery.

If this season's voting was held today, good luck figuring out what would happen.

No rookie has emerged as the leader of this year's class. There isn't a single first-year player on pace to average 15 points and appear in enough games to qualify for the league's leaderboard; the last time that happened was 2016-17. And right now, according to BetMGM Sportsbook, the favorite to win rookie of the year is someone who has started four

games all season, all of them in the last week or so—Miami's Kellie Ware.

"It means I'm doing something right on the court," Ware said.

He's not wrong, but it also speaks to how nobody in this rookie group has stepped to the front of the class, either — especially considering Tuesday's news that Ware was not picked by the NBA for the Rising Stars event at All-Star weekend.

Here were the current leaders in terms of rookie of the year odds, according to BetMGM, as of Monday night: Ware (+200) tops the list, San Antonio's Stephon Castle (+275) is second, and Memphis' Jaylen Wells and Washington's Alexandre Sarr (both +350) are tied for third.

Grizzlies center Zach Edey (+1400) is fifth. After that, everybody is at least 40-1 at this point.

If Castle wins the award, the Spurs would have done something that's been managed only once in the past half-century — having back-to-back rookies of

the year. It happened in 2015 and 2016 when Andrew Wiggins and Towns won for Minnesota.

"He really has a chance to be special," Paul said of Castle, his San Antonio teammate.

Ware is clearly developing as the season goes along. The center out of Indiana didn't have his first double-figure scoring game for the Heat until Jan. 1. He had three consecutive 20-point games last week for Miami — the push that vaulted him into the favorite spot on the BetMGM rookie board — but still wasn't on the initial list for All-Star weekend in San Francisco for the Rising Stars games (and potentially the All-Star Game itself, which the Rising Stars winning team will be part of).

It's all happened very quickly for Ware. A couple weeks ago, he wasn't even seeming like a legit rookie of the year candidate — much less the favorite.

"Believe it or not, he's been ready since he came here," Heat teammate Tyler Herro said. "When he wasn't in the rotation,

he was just overly communicative about how he wants to be in the rotation and how he feels like he can help. I always felt like he could help. And now, him just getting his opportunity, I think everybody is starting to see what he's capable of."

The NBA picked 10 rookies for the Rising Stars games: Wells, Sarr, Castle, Edey, the Wizards' Bub Carrington, Orlando's Tristan da Silva, the Los Angeles Lakers' Dalton Knecht, Philadelphia's Jared McCain, New Orleans' Yves Missi and Atlanta's Zaccharie Risacher — the No. 1 pick in last year's draft. McCain is injured and is out for the rest of the season, which could open a spot for Ware or another rookie to be picked in his place.

The lack of a standout candidate is a rarity, as nearly every top rookie over the last 20 years has gotten at least 60% of the first-place votes. An exception was in 2022, when Toronto's Scottie Barnes won by getting 48 first-place votes to Evan Mobley's 43.

Wild hand Maple Leafs third straight regulation loss

Associated Press

TORONTO — Jared Spurgeon and Marat Khushnutdinov scored in the first period, Filip Gustavsson stopped 31 shots, and the Minnesota Wild beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-1 on Wednesday night.

Marcus Foligno added an empty-netter in the final minute as Minnesota won its second straight to improve to 3-5-0 in its last eight games.

William Nylander scored for Toronto, which has lost three straight in regulation. Joseph Woll had 22 saves.

Khushnutdinov scored 7:07 into the game and Spurgeon made it 2-0 with 4:25 to go in the opening period.

Panthers 3, Kings 0: Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and two assists, Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 30 shots for his second shutout of the season, and host Florida beat Los Angeles.

Aleksander Barkov and Sam Bennett also scored for the Panthers, who entered the game a point back of Toronto for the top spot in the Atlantic Division. Bobrovsky got

his 46th career shutout.

It was the second time in eight days the teams played each other. The Kings beat Florida 2-1 in Los Angeles last Wednesday.

Darcy Kuemper made 36 saves for the Kings, who have lost three straight and seven of their last 10 games. Eight of those games have been played on the road.

Devils 5, Flyers 0: Host New Jersey scored four times in the second period and Jake Allen made 24 saves as the Devils defeated Philadelphia.

Ondrej Palat, Luke Hughes, Nathan Bastian and Dawson Mercer scored for New Jersey in a 13-minute span as the Devils won for the third time in four games. Jack Hughes scored early in the third, his 20th goal of the season.

The shutout was Allen's third this season and the 27th of his career. New Jersey's starter Jacob Markstrom is out four to six weeks after suffering a knee injury against Boston on Jan. 22.

Palat beat Flyers goaltender Samuel Ers-

son on the power play 54 seconds into the middle period. Luke Hughes made it 2-0 at 6:27. Bastian added another power play goal at 12:41 followed by Mercer at 13:43.

Canucks 3, Predators 1: Linus Karlsson scored his first NHL goal and visiting Vancouver beat Nashville.

Nils Hoglander and Pius Suter also scored, and Quinn Hughes had two assists for the Canucks, who have won three straight. Thatcher Demko made 31 saves.

Tommy Novak scored and Juuse Saros had 19 saves for the Predators, losers of two straight.

Penguins 3, Utah 2 (OT): Sidney Crosby scored at 3:54 of overtime and visiting Pittsburgh beat Utah.

Marcus Pettersson and Erik Karlsson scored in regulation as the Penguins snapped a three-game losing streak. Alex Nedeljkovic made 27 saves.

Mikhail Sergachev and Michael Carcone scored for Utah, and Connor Ingram had 26 saves.

Nets beat Hornets, end 7-game skid

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Keon Johnson led a balanced Brooklyn attack with 18 points, and the Nets snapped a seven-game losing streak with a 104-83 victory over the Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday night.

Jalen Wilson added 15 points and Tosan Evbuomwan had 14 for the Nets, who never trailed.

Ben Simmons returned after missing the last five games with an illness and a back injury and had 10 points and six rebounds off the bench for the Nets.

Miles Bridges had 23 points and 13 rebounds for the Hornets, who played without regular starters LaMelo Ball, Mark Williams, Brandon Miller and Josh Green. Vasa Micic overcame an early chest injury and returned to finish with 15 points and seven rebounds.

The Hornets had limited options offensively, and were held to 34% shooting from the floor and 29% from 3-point range.

Pacers 133, Pistons 119: Pascal Siakam scored 37 points, Tyrese Haliburton had 30 points and eight assists, and Indiana beat visiting Detroit.

Indiana scored 40 first-quarter points on 16-for-20 shooting, including 7 of 10 from 3. The Pacers finished 46 of 81 overall (56.8%), 19 of 38 on 3-pointers.

Myles Turner had 24 points for Indiana.

Cade Cunningham led the Pistons with 32 points and nine assists. Malik Beasley had 20 points with six 3-pointers.

Raptors 106, Wizards 82: Scottie Barnes scored 24 points and visiting Toronto beat NBA-worst Washington for its fifth straight victory and the Wizards' 15th loss in a row.

Jakub Poeltl added 12 points, eight rebounds and six assists to help the Raptors to their first five-game winning streak since April 1, 2022. They have won seven of eight games.

Toronto allowed its fewest points of the season and forced a

season-high 27 turnovers.

Kyle Kuzma had 19 points and 10 rebounds for Washington. The Wizards had their worst scoring and turnover numbers of the season.

Celtics 122, Bulls 100: Kristaps Porzingis scored 26 of his season-high 34 points in the first half, and Boston coasted to a victory over visiting Chicago.

The 7-foot-2 Porzingis made a season-best eight 3-point shots in 14 attempts with 11 rebounds over 33 minutes, helping Boston bounce back from a rough home loss to the Rockets on Monday.

Jaylen Brown added 28 points, Derrick White had 22 and Jayson Tatum 16 for the Celtics, who are just 7-6 in their past 13 games.

Coby White led Chicago with 16 points in 31 minutes in his first game after missing four straight with an ankle injury. The Bulls have dropped eight of nine.

Cavaliers 126, Heat 106: Donovan Mitchell scored 34 points, Ty Jerome added 20 off the bench and Cleveland never trailed in a win at Miami.

It was Mitchell's 14th 30-point game of the season and his fifth in his last seven outings.

Evan Mobley had 22 points and 15 rebounds for Cleveland, which got 13 points from Georges Niang and 12 points and 10 rebounds from Jarrett Allen.

Tyler Herro and Terry Rozier each scored 22 points for Miami. Bam Adebayo had 21 points and Duncan Robinson finished with 13 for the Heat, who were outrebounded 47-35.

Knicks 122, Nuggets 112: Jalen Brunson had 30 points and 15 assists, OG Anunoby scored 23 points and New York beat visiting Denver for its fifth straight victory.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 14 points, 10 rebounds and five assists for New York. The Knicks, who had a strong start aided by Nikola Jokic's early foul trou-

ble, then used a late spurt to pull away for good.

Jamal Murray scored 33 points for the Nuggets, who fell to 0-3 on their five-game trip. Jokic finished with 17 points, six rebounds and six assists, and Russell Westbrook had 14 points and 14 rebounds.

76ers 117, Kings 104: Tyrese Maxey scored 30 points to lead host Philadelphia past Sacramento for its fourth straight victory.

Maxey, who had his 12th consecutive game with 25 or more points, added eight assists. Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 15 points, Eric Gordon added 14 and Ricky Council IV 13 for the 76ers, who have rebounded from a seven-game skid.

Malik Monk scored 16 of his 21 points in the first half for the Kings. Domantas Sabonis had his second straight triple-double and eighth of the season with 13 points, 14 rebounds and 11 assists.

Clippers 128, Spurs 116: Kawhi Leonard and Norman Powell had 27 points each and Los Angeles rallied to a victory at San Antonio.

Clippers center Ivica Zubac added 21 points and 22 rebounds in an intense battle with Spurs star Victor Wembanyama, who had 23 points and 12 rebounds.

The Spurs have lost five of six.

Wembanyama and Zubac battled throughout with one exchange nearly leading to a skirmish with 4:45 remaining in the third quarter following a 3-pointer by Harrison Barnes and a Clippers timeout.

San Antonio rookie guard Stephon Castle had 20 points and Devin Vassell added 19.

Mavericks 137, Pelicans 126: P.J. Washington scored 25 points, making all four of his 3-point attempts in the fourth quarter, and Kyrie Irving added 25 points and six assists as visiting Dallas edged New Orleans.

Washington had missed all

three of his long-range tries until he hit three in the first 4:16 of the final period. Daniel Gafford had 22 points, going 9-for-9 from the field, and added 12 rebounds and five blocks.

Klay Thompson had 20 points for Dallas, making 6 of 11 from deep. Washington grabbed 14 rebounds for his 12th double-double of the season.

Dallas scored 80 points in the second half, shooting 65.9% from the field.

Trey Murphy led New Orleans with 32 points, and Zion Williamson had 29 points in 28 minutes.

Timberwolves 121, Suns 113: Anthony Edwards scored 33 points, Julius Randle added 28 and Minnesota won at Phoenix for its fourth straight win.

The Timberwolves trailed for much of the night, but rallied near the end of the third quarter for an 81-77 advantage. Nickeil Alexander-Walker made three 3-pointers early in the fourth to help Minnesota push to a 10-point lead.

Alexander-Walker scored 23 points, making 5 of 10 shots behind the arc. The Timberwolves — who swept the Suns out of the playoffs last season in the first round — shot 56% from the field.

Phoenix had its three-game winning streak snapped. Kevin Durant led the team with 33 points while Devin Booker added 28 and Bradley Beal had 17.

Warriors 116, Thunder 109: Stephen Curry hit a long 3-pointer with 1:52 left on the way to 21 points, Andrew Wiggins scored 27 and host Golden State beat Western Conference-leading Oklahoma City.

The Thunder got 52 points from Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, two short of his career high set against the Utah Jazz a week earlier.

Kevon Looney scored 18 off the bench and Gary Payton II had 15 points and nine rebounds for the Warriors.