

## Milley: There is possibility of Taliban win

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON—As the Taliban's strength grows amid the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, top defense officials on Wednesday said the Afghan government can prevail after American troops leave the country.

Though there's "clearly a narrative out there that the Taliban is winning," Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the group is far from overthrowing the Afghan government.

"They are propagating an inevitable victory on their behalf—they're dominating the airwaves," Milley told reporters at the Pentagon. "But I will tell you ... you've got 34 provincial capitals in Afghanistan, none of them have been seized."

Still, the "strategic momentum

appears to be with the Taliban" as they have seized "a significant amount of territory" over the past six to 10 months," he said. "[But] a negative outcome—a Taliban automatic military takeover—is not a foregone conclusion. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and make adjustments as necessary."

The U.S. on May 1 began withdrawing its troops and equipment from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of war there. While President Joe Biden has said the U.S. completed its mission in Afghanistan of preventing another attack on American soil after 9/11, critics have questioned whether the U.S. should leave Afghanistan with the Taliban at large and regaining territory.

Milley said Afghan security forces are "adjusting forces to

consolidate into the provincial capitals" to protect the population, most of whom live in those cities and the capital of Kabul.

With so many changing factors, it remains to be seen what will happen in Afghanistan after U.S. forces leave, the general said.

As Taliban insurgents continue fighting, leaders of the terrorist group continue to say they want to reach a political agreement with the Afghan government to end the country's civil war, The Associated Press reported Sunday.

"There's a possibility of a negotiated outcome that's still out there. There's a possibility of a complete Taliban takeover," Milley said. "There's a possibility of any number of other scenarios. I don't think an endgame is yet written."

The U.S. drawdown process is about 95% completed as of Wednesday, with 9,000 troops and civilians moved out of the country so far and all U.S. bases in Afghanistan turned over to the Afghan government, he said.

"The sheer volume of movement involved in this operation has been extraordinary, 984 airlifts over the last less than three months have enabled us to reach almost 95% completion on the retrograde," Milley said.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday reiterated the full drawdown will be complete by the end of August, shortly ahead of the original deadline of Sept. 11 that Biden set in April.

After August, the military will focus only "on those threats that present a threat to the United States," Austin told reporters at the Pentagon.

## Joint Chiefs chairman defends military as 'apolitical'

*The Washington Post*

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon's top officials on Wednesday defended the military's tradition of staying out of elections, after a new book reported that Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, feared former President Donald Trump would attempt a coup.

Milley repeatedly declined to confirm whether the comments attributed to him in the book "I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year," are accurate, but said he and other senior officers upheld their constitutional obligations throughout the chaotic presidential transition.

"The military did not, and will not, and should not ever get involved in domestic politics," Milley said, speaking at a Pentagon

news conference. "We don't arbitrate elections. That's the job of the judiciary and the legislature and the American people. It is not the job of the U.S. military. We stayed out of politics. We're an apolitical institution."

In the book, Milley compares Trump's frequent unfounded claims of widespread election fraud to behavior by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who insisted he was both a victim and savior.

"This is a Reichstag moment," Milley told aides, according to the book by Washington Post reporters Philip Rucker and Carol D. Leonnig. "The gospel of the Führer."

Another new book, "Frankly, We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost," describes Milley and Trump clashing over whether to use the

military to quash racial-justice protests in the U.S. Milley sought to stay close with Trump through the final months of his presidency out of concern that he might invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy active-duty troops on America's streets, according to the book by Wall Street Journal reporter Michael Bender.

Milley declined to address those accounts Wednesday, but said he and the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff provided their best military advice to Trump, and have continued to do so with President Joe Biden. They take an oath to the Constitution, not any individual, Milley said, repeating comments he has made before.

"Not one time did we violate that," Milley said. "The entire time, from time of commissioning to today, I can say with certainty

that every one of us maintained our oath of allegiance to that document, the Constitution, and everything that's contained within it."

Milley added that senior military leaders maintained "the tradition of civilian control of the military," and "we did that without fail" while remaining apolitical.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, the retired Army general whom Biden selected to run the Pentagon, said he has full faith and confidence in Milley.

"I'm not guessing at his character," Austin said, noting that they had served together in combat. "He doesn't have a political bone in his body."

Milley has come under attack by Trump, who issued a statement last week denying he spoke to anyone about a coup.

# Army's Paralympian reflects on journey

BY SARAH CAMMARATA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Lying in a hospital bed in Landstuhl, Germany, a 19-year-old combat medic had endured three operations to fix hip injuries suffered in Iraq and now faced the unthinkable: a medical discharge from the Army.

Neither she nor the Army will disclose what caused her injuries, but doctors told the young soldier that certain parts of her life might no longer be an option, including serving in the military.

Left feeling angry and discouraged at the constant reminder of all the things that she could no longer do, Sgt. 1st Class Elizabeth Marks was driven to become fit for duty again.

Eleven years later, the world record-holding Paralympic athlete laughed as she recalled thinking, "I could do anything, right?"

She became the Army's first Paralympic swimmer, the service said. Marks said she considers herself a soldier first, then an athlete.

Marks said participating in adaptive sports that are modified to allow athletes with disabilities to participate has led her to a new calling. She can no longer care for wounded soldiers on the battlefield, but be-

ing a world-class adaptive sports athlete has shown her another way to help fellow soldiers.

"The biggest gift that [it] has given me ... is the ability to help other people who are ill, sick, injured or wounded in the military to find a different outlet and to share the healing power of adaptive sports," said Marks, who now mentors other troops.

The 30-year-old from Prescott Valley, Ariz., is one of 17 soldiers who are traveling to Japan to compete in the Olympics. Twelve of them are part of the Army's World Class Athlete Program, a unit that allows participants to fulfill their military responsibilities while training with the goal to qualify for the Olympics and Paralympics.

The program includes active-duty, National Guard and Reserve troops who train for the Olympics or Paralympics who have just started in a sport or who have been training for many years.

"We currently have soldiers that participate in 17 different sports. They're located in six different areas around the U.S. Our No. 1 goal is to place soldiers on the national team so they can train with the national team," WCAP Program Director Willie Wilson said this month.

Soldiers must also stay up-to-date with

Army requirements, attend military schools, hold clinics, speak to high school and college audiences, talk with athletic teams and support Army recruiting efforts.

Marks is the Army's only athlete in the Paralympics, which begin Saturday. Three coaches in the Army will also be in Tokyo for the games, which start Friday.

Other soldiers will compete in a range of events including shooting, boxing, para-shooting, modern pentathlon, wrestling, steeplechase, shooting skeet, air rifle, smallbore rifle, pole vaulting, and track and field.

She has won four gold medals at the 2016 Invictus Games, an international sporting event for wounded, injured and sick service members, where she asked Prince Harry to present one of her medals to the doctors and nurses at Papworth Hospital who saved her life two years earlier.

Marks also won a gold medal in the 100-meter breaststroke and set a world record for the race. She also won a bronze medal in the 4x100 medley at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Marks said she does not define success in terms of how many accolades she has. Instead, she said success is measured by, "How did this make you feel? What did it give you? What did it give your life?"

## Japan officials to test Marine water for toxic chemicals

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE  
AND MARI HIGA  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japanese officials collected samples of treated wastewater this week at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma as the government weighs a U.S. military request to dispose of the potentially contaminated water through the public wastewater system.

The treated water is stored in underground tanks and may contain traces of the toxic, organic chemicals PFOS and PFOA left over from spilled firefighting foam captured on the air station.

Monday's sampling follows local media reports that the Marine Corps had asked Okinawa prefecture to release the treated water into the local system. That water meets Japanese drinking-water guidelines that exceed U.S. standards, according to Marine Corps Installations Pacific.

Okinawa prefecture sent a team of four, including environmental officials, to the base Monday, a prefectural spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday. Ginowan city and the Japanese government also sent officials.

Early this month, a spokesman for the Okinawa Prefecture-

ral Enterprise Bureau said that putting the treated water into the public wastewater system means it would eventually reach the sea. Completely removing the contaminants is impossible, he said.

The water has been treated using the Army's PFAS Effluent Treatment System, or PETS, which uses ion exchange and granular activated carbon to reduce PFAS levels in water, according to a Marine Corps Installations Pacific statement Thursday.

Okinawa prefecture has asked the U.S. military to dispose of the contaminants thermally, a spokesman from the

prefecture's Special Management Office of Military Installation Environmental Affairs told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday. Government officials in Japan customarily speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

The Marine Corps in its statement Thursday dismissed other disposal options.

The public wastewater system "is the quickest method available to safely dispose of PFAS-contaminated water and does not entail the risks associated with either keeping it on-hand or transporting the water to the mainland for disposal," according to the Marines' statement.

# Biden pushes vaccine amid US virus surge

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — President Joe Biden expressed pointed frustration over the slowing COVID-19 vaccination rate in the United States and pleaded that it's "gigantically important" for Americans to step up and get inoculated against the virus as it surges once again.

Biden, speaking Wednesday night at a televised town hall in Cincinnati, said the public health crisis has turned largely into a plight of the unvaccinated as the spread of the delta variant has led to a surge in infections around the country.

"We have a pandemic for those who haven't gotten the vaccination — it's that basic, that simple," he said on the

CNN town hall.

The president also expressed optimism that children under 12 will be approved for vaccination in the coming months. But he displayed exasperation that so many eligible Americans are still reluctant to get a shot.

"If you're vaccinated, you're not going to be hospitalized, you're not going to be in the IC unit and you're not going to die," Biden said at the forum at Mount St. Joseph University. "So it's gigantically important that ... we all act like Americans who care about our fellow Americans."

U.S. hospitalizations and deaths are nearly all among the unvaccinated. But COVID-19

cases nearly tripled in the U.S. over two weeks amid an onslaught of vaccine misinformation that is straining hospitals, exhausting doctors and pushing clergy into the fray.

Across the U.S., the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases rose over the past two weeks to more than 37,000 on Tuesday, up from less than 13,700 on July 6, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Just 56.2% of Americans have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Democratic president noted that the rise has become so concerning that even his critics are pushing back

against vaccine disinformation.

Biden made an indirect reference to high-profile conservative personalities at Fox News Channel who have "had an altar call" and are now more openly speaking to their skeptical guests about the benefits of getting vaccinated. Sean Hannity recently told viewers, "I believe in the science of vaccination" and urged them to take the disease seriously. Steve Doocy, who co-hosts "Fox & Friends," this week told viewers the vaccination "will save your life."

Before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington, Biden told reporters he was "glad they had the courage to say what they've said."

## US jobless claims rise to 419K from pandemic low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits rose last week from the lowest point of the pandemic, even as the job market appears to be rebounding on the strength of a reopened economy.

The Labor Department said Thursday that jobless claims increased last week to 419,000 from 368,000 the previous week. The weekly number of first-time applications for benefits, which generally tracks layoffs, has fallen steadily since topping 900,000 in early January.

Americans are shopping, traveling and eating out more as the pandemic has waned, boosting the economy and forcing businesses to scramble for more workers. Companies have posted the highest number of available jobs in the two decades that the data has been tracked. Hiring has picked up, though businesses say they often can't find enough employees

at the wages they're willing to pay.

At the same time, analysts are becoming concerned about the potential economic consequences of an uptick in confirmed viral infections as the highly contagious delta variant spreads, especially among the unvaccinated. The seven-day rolling U.S. average for daily new cases accelerated over the past two weeks to more than 37,000 as of Tuesday, from fewer than 13,700, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Complaints by companies that they can't find enough workers have led 22 states to prematurely end a \$300-a-week federal unemployment benefit, which comes on top of state jobless aid. Twenty states have ended their participation in two other federal programs — one of which provides benefits to the self-employed and gig workers, and another that serves people who have been out of work for six months or longer.

## China rebuffs WHO's terms for further COVID-19 origins study

Associated Press

BEIJING — China cannot accept the World Health Organization's plan for the second phase of a study into the origins of COVID-19, a senior Chinese health official said Thursday.

Zeng Yixin, the vice minister of the National Health Commission, said he was "rather taken aback" that the plan includes further investigation of the theory that the virus might have leaked from a Chinese lab.

He dismissed the lab leak idea as a rumor that runs counter to common sense and science.

"It is impossible for us to accept such an origin-tracing plan," he said at a news conference called to address the COVID-19 origins issue.

The search for where the virus came from has become a diplomatic issue that has fueled China's deteriorating relations with the United States and many American allies. The U.S. and others say that China has not been transparent about what happened in the early days

of the pandemic. China accuses critics of seeking to blame it for the pandemic and politicizing an issue that should be left to scientists.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of WHO, acknowledged last week that there had been a "pre-mature push" after the first phase of the study to rule out the theory that the virus might have escaped from a Chinese government lab in Wuhan, the city where the disease was first detected in late 2019.

Most experts don't think a lab leak is the likely cause. The question is whether the possibility is so remote that it should be dropped, or whether it merits further study.

Zeng said the Wuhan lab has no virus that can directly infect humans and noted that the WHO team concluded that a lab leak was highly unlikely. He added that speculation that staff and graduate students at the lab had been infected and might have started the spread of the virus in the city was untrue.



# Infrastructure bill fails 1st vote in Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans rejected an effort to begin debate on the big infrastructure deal that a bipartisan group of senators brokered with President Joe Biden, but pressure was mounting as supporters insisted they just needed more time before another vote possibly next week.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., had scheduled the procedural vote Wednesday to nudge along negotiations that have dragged for weeks. But Republicans mounted a filibuster, saying the bipartisan group still had a few unresolved issues and needed to review the final details. They sought a delay until Monday.

"We have made significant progress and are close to a final agreement," the bipartisan group of senators, 11 Republicans and

11 Democrats, said in a joint statement after the vote. The senators said they were optimistic they could finish up "in the coming days."

The nearly \$1 trillion measure over five years includes about \$579 billion in new spending on roads, broadband and other public works projects — a first phase of Biden's infrastructure agenda, to be followed by a much broader \$3.5 trillion measure from Democrats next month.

Biden's top priority is at a critical juncture, posing a test of his ability to forge bipartisan cooperation in Washington and make investments the White House views as crucial to the nation's ability to pull out of the COVID-19 crisis and spur economic growth.

The president traveled to Ohio later Wednesday to promote his economic pol-

icies, and was calling his infrastructure agenda a "blue-collar blueprint for building an American economy back." He has said that Americans overwhelmingly support his plan.

In a CNN town hall, Biden also talked up the benefits of the bipartisan framework, saying, "It's a good thing and I think we're going to get it done." He also made passing reference to the dangerously outdated Brent Spence Bridge across the Ohio River, saying they'll "fix that damn bridge of yours."

At another point, Biden was asked by a union electrician if it was possible to bring Congress together to pass an infrastructure bill that would help the region replace the bridge.

"The answer is, absolutely, positively, yes," the president said.

## Pelosi bars 2 Trump allies from Jan. 6 investigation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi rejected two Republicans tapped by House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy to sit on a committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, a decision the Republican denounced as "an egregious abuse of power."

McCarthy said the GOP won't participate in the investigation if Democrats won't accept the members he appointed.

Pelosi cited the "integrity" of the probe in refusing Wednesday to accept the appointments of Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, picked by McCarthy to be the top Republican on the panel, or Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan. The two men are outspoken allies of former President Donald Trump, whose supporters laid siege to the Capitol that day and interrupted the cer-

tification of President Joe Biden's win. Both of them voted to overturn the election results in the hours after the siege.

Democrats have said the investigation will go on whether the Republicans participate or not, as Pelosi has already appointed eight of the 13 members — including Republican Rep. Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, a Trump critic — and that gives them a bipartisan quorum to proceed, according to committee rules.

Pelosi said she had spoken with McCarthy and told him that she would reject the two names.

"With respect for the integrity of the investigation, with an insistence on the truth and with concern about statements made and actions taken by these members, I must reject the recommendations of Representatives

Banks and Jordan to the Select Committee," Pelosi said in a statement.

Pelosi has the authority to approve or reject members, per committee rules, though she acknowledged her move was unusual. She said "the unprecedented nature of January 6th demands this unprecedented decision."

McCarthy said Pelosi's move will damage the institution of Congress.

"Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts," McCarthy said.

It is unclear how McCarthy would lead a separate investigation, as the minority does not have the power to set up committees.

## Northern California wildfire has crossed into Nevada

Associated Press

GARDNERVILLE, Nev. — A Northern California wildfire crossed into Nevada, prompting new evacuations, but better weather has been helping crews battling the nation's largest blaze in southern Oregon.

The Tamarack Fire south of Lake Tahoe had burned more than 68 square miles of timber and head-high chaparral in national forest land. It erupted on July 4 and was one of nearly two dozen blazes sparked by

lightning strikes.

More than 1,200 firefighters were battling the Alpine County blaze, which has destroyed at least 10 buildings, forced evacuations in several communities and had closed parts of U.S. 395 in Nevada and California. Fire officials expected active or extreme fire behavior on Thursday, which could see 14-mph winds and temperatures approaching 90 degrees.

A request for voluntary evacuations was also issued for portions of Douglas County,

Nev. An evacuation center was set up at a community center in Gardnerville, Nev.

Meanwhile, Oregon on Wednesday banned all campfires on state-managed lands and in state campgrounds east of Interstate 5, the major highway that is commonly considered the dividing line between the wet western part of the state and the dry eastern half.

The nation's largest wildfire, Oregon's Bootleg Fire, grew to 618 square miles — just over half the size of Rhode Island.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Pilot, 18, safely lands banner plane on bridge**

**NJ** OCEAN CITY — The 18-year old pilot of a banner plane made an emergency landing Monday on a bridge in southern New Jersey, snarling traffic but causing no injuries, authorities said.

Landon Lucas reported that his plane started having engine trouble around 12:30 p.m. as he was flying near Steel Pier in Atlantic City, officials said. Lucas released his banner into the ocean and was trying to fly to a nearby municipal airport in Ocean City when he spotted a gap in traffic in the westbound lanes of the Route 52 causeway, which connects Ocean City and Somers Point.

Lucas landed the plane without incident, witnesses said, and officials said the aircraft was not damaged.

**Man arrested after rocks thrown on freeway**

**WA** SEATTLE — Washington state troopers on Tuesday arrested a man in Seattle they believe was throwing rocks and debris at cars on the freeway — a recent trend officials say has become a growing problem in the Seattle area.

The Seattle Times reported authorities arrested the 31-year-old man from Seattle for allegedly throwing rocks and debris at seven vehicles going west on Interstate 90 around 4 p.m.

Trooper Chase Van Cleave said one of the three drivers who remained on scene reportedly started chasing the suspect after their vehicle was hit.

The man stopped fleeing after a state trooper arrived on scene.

No one was injured, although Van Cleave said several of the ve-

hicles suffered “pretty good damage.”

**Child finds gun in parents' car, dies of gunshot wound**

**MS** MERIDIAN — A 3-year-old child found a gun in his parents' car and was killed when it discharged, authorities said.

The child died Saturday in Newton County, south of Hickory, The Meridian Star reported.

Sheriff's deputies performed CPR on the child before paramedics arrived, but the child was later pronounced dead, Newton County Sheriff Joedy Pennington said.

The child's parents were going door-to-door for a revival and briefly left the child in the vehicle, Pennington said. The child found the gun in the glove compartment, he said.

The parents are not being charged in the case.

**Covered bridge damaged in excavator accident**

**CT** CORNWALL — A historic covered bridge in Connecticut was damaged Tuesday when the boom of an excavator being towed over the span crashed into wooden support structures for the roof.

State police said the West Cornwall Bridge sustained “significant non-structural damage,” but expected the repair work to take only a few hours. The state Department of Transportation performed a safety inspection and determined there was no impact on the integrity of the bridge, troopers said.

The driver of the pickup truck that was towing the excavator “did not heed” the height limit of 10 feet, 11 inches, and was charged with motor vehicle violations, state police said.

The bridge, painted schoolhouse red, was built in 1841 and spans 172 feet over the Housatonic River.

**County to pay \$1.25M to crash victim's family**

**NC** SMITHFIELD — The family of a woman killed in a crash with a North Carolina sheriff's deputy earlier this year will receive \$1.25 million in a settlement agreement.

The News & Observer of Raleigh reported the settlement was approved by the Johnston County Board of Commissioners on Monday, said Adam Carroll, a spokesman for the county. No lawsuit was filed by the family, and claims against Johnston County sheriff's deputy Quinton Rhue and the sheriff's office were settled without admitting liability, Carroll said.

In January, Shirley Ann James, 63, was killed in a crash with a patrol car driven by Rhue, 24, The News & Observer reported. Rhue had been driving with his lights and siren on when he began to pass traffic on U.S. Highway 301 as James was traveling in the same direction. She was turning when she was struck by Rhue's patrol car.

Rhue was injured in the crash.

**New owners plan to rebuild iconic movie set**

**AZ** BENSON — The Mescal Movie Set once made Benson one of the most recognizable western cinematic towns on the big screen.

The set was built in 1939 by Columbia Pictures for a movie called “Arizona.” Some 215 films followed — such as “Tombstone” and “The Quick and the Dead” in the early 1990s — and 28 television series also were shot on the

location.

The last movie filmed at Mescal was in 2014 and the deteriorating set was saved from destruction by local ranchers.

Now, the new owners of the iconic set plan to rebuild it into an 1860-1920 era Western frontier town that is compatible with a production company's filming needs.

Tucson TV station KVOA reported Tuesday that Kartchner Ventures plans to renovate 27 buildings and construct new buildings such as a church, blacksmith shop and stage depot.

While the ultimate goal is to get the Mescal set back on the big screen, the new owners say the rebuilt frontier town can also be used for public tours, special events, historic reenactments and western heritage education opportunities.

**Region sees record sockeye salmon run**

**AK** FAIRBANKS — It has been a record-breaking year for sockeye salmon catches in Alaska's Bristol Bay Nushagak District this year, an official said.

“We're approaching 27 million total run,” said Tim Sands, a state Department of Fish and Game area management biologist. “Our average run would be 9 million, so to be triple the average is amazing.”

The region has experienced numerous record-breaking days, Fairbanks television station KTVF reported. The all-time record for catch in the Nushagak District on one day was more than 1.7 million set on June 30. “Then the very next day we broke it again at 1.8 million,” Sands said.

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# Tokyo Olympic Games boast equal gender participation

Associated Press

Grace Luczak had left competitive rowing and taken a job in the private sector when a move toward gender equity at the Tokyo Games lured her back into a boat.

A women's rowing event was added to create a more inclusive Olympics, which meant four additional seats on the U.S. team and a spot for Luczak.

"It's really hard to make the decision to come back, to plan financially to be out of work for a year," Luczak said. She thought a second consecutive Games wasn't possible for a veteran until the seats were added.

"There are four more seats. Four. And it's the first gender-equal Olympics. How can you not try?"

Most of the public attention goes to the big sports — gymnastics, swimming, track and field — but away from the spotlight, women from niche sports are being recognized and given an Olympics chance.

The International Olympic Committee added 18 new events to the Tokyo Games in a push toward gender equity. There are an equal number of women and men for every sport, excluding baseball and softball because of differing roster sizes.

The IOC said women's participation in Tokyo will be 49%, up from 45% at Rio, a nearly even split with the men. The committee also noted that when women made their Olympic debut at the Paris Games in 1900, there were only 22 females out of 997 total athletes. Those pioneers competed across five sports, among them croquet and equestrian.

"Tokyo 2020 is predicted to be the most gender equal yet with female participation," the IOC said.

The new opportunities come in several sports and several sizes: Great Britain, for example, is sending more women than men to the Olympics for the first time. In water polo, two additional teams were added, for a total of 10. It's still two shy of the men's tournament, but a win for the women's movement.

Gains for women in many cases meant fewer opportunities for men. Boxing will feature 100 women in five classes, up from 36 fighters over three classes in Rio. But two men's classes were dropped.

Weightlifting this year is equal at seven teams for both men and women, but reached the mark by dropping a men's team. Women's canoeing was added, but the men's 200 and men's kayak double 200 were dropped — a

decision met with unfavorable reactions from male athletes when it was announced in 2016.

Erik Vlcek, who took silver with Slovakia in Rio, argued when women's canoe was added that females should only kayak because females canoeing "doesn't look good." A Czech paddler joked canoeing is harmful to a woman's posture.

The changes went through, to multiple sports, with rifle probably undergoing the most change. The sport lost men's prone rifle, men's free pistol and men's double trap, all replaced by mixed team events in air rifle, air pistol and trap.

Luczak, now 32, knows she benefited at the expense of male teammates. The women's coxless four returns to competition for the first time since 1992, but it replaces the men's lightweight coxless four.

"It's not great when you have to take something away from the men's side to add to the women's. It's never fun seeing people find out their opportunity is gone," Luczak said. "But in creating an equal number of opportunities, it shows there is a pathway for female athletes."

Luczak left her fiancé behind at home and moved in with a host family in Princeton, N.J., while she trained. She also traded a paycheck for a stipend, simply because the four additional seats were too tantalizing for her to not even try.

Not every addition was a blow to men's sports. Swimming added the 1,500-meter freestyle for women for the first time, while the men's 800 free was returned to competition for the first time since 1904. The mixed gender relay makes its Olympic debut.

Five new sports were added this year — baseball/softball, karate, skateboarding, sport climbing and surfing — and the IOC demanded they have equal numbers of men and women.

There are still large gaps to close, particularly in funding and prize money outside of the Olympics. Former Stanford water polo player Maggie Steffens — a two-time Olympic gold medalist, two-time Olympic MVP and captain of the U.S. women's team — this year saw a long push for equal pay at one particular tournament come to fruition and posted a photo of the triumph labeled #equalpay. Pioneer women's water polo player Maureen O'Toole commented, "Wait what. You get paid!! That must be nice!!!" on the social media post.

## US soccer women regroup after 3-0 loss to Sweden

Associated Press

TOKYO — While it certainly wasn't the Olympic start the U.S. women's soccer team had anticipated, a rare loss didn't skewer the squad's hopes for gold.

The United States fell to Sweden 3-0 Wednesday night in the team's opener in Tokyo, snapping a 44-match unbeaten streak. It was a surprising result for the favorites in the field.

In fact, it may have lit a fire.

Defender Tierna Davidson said Thursday that veteran Kelley O'Hara was rallying the squad ahead of Saturday's match against New Zealand.

"She was like: 'We don't have a choice. We have to come out the next game and we have to be absolutely ruthless.'" Davidson said. "So I think that's what everyone has on their mind right now."

There's still a good chance that the world's top-ranked team makes it to the knockout round and even a medal match. At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the United States fell 2-0 to Norway in the first match, then went on to win gold — a fact U.S. forward Christen Press pointed to after the game.

"We've had a long string of wins and I think we haven't had a lot of games where we had to come back," Press said. "I think it was actually really good to have this match. In 2008 we lost our first match and team won gold. So I think now we're seeing this as a learning opportunity. And the message is already, 'Heads up, put it behind us, next game.' There's no time in a tournament like this to dwell."

It was the first loss for the United States since January 2019, when the team fell to France 3-1 in Le Havre. The U.S. went on to win the World Cup that summer.

The Americans are vying for their fifth overall gold medal, more than any other nation, in a sport that joined the Olympics only in 1996. They're aiming to be the first women's team to win an Olympic title following a World Cup.

"I think we just got a little bit in our head," Megan Rapinoe admitted. "We'll obviously watch film and all that, but you drop points in the beginning of a tournament and now you're in sort of a do-or-die mode. So you've got to pick up points, otherwise we're going home quick, and you don't want to do that."

The United States moves on to Saitama, where they'll play the Ferns on Saturday as the group stage continues. Sweden will play Australia in the group.



# Stroman pitches Mets past Reds

Associated Press

Marcus Stroman pitched one-hit ball for eight innings, Dominic Smith launched a grand slam and the New York Mets cruised to a 7-0 win over the Cincinnati Reds on Wednesday.

Stroman (7-8) gave up a leadoff single to Aristides Aquino in the third inning and little else. He struck out seven and walked one while giving New York's beleaguered bullpen precious rest going into Thursday's day off. Jeurys Familia struck out three in a hitless ninth.

Luis Guillorme hit his first homer of the season and Jonathan Villar also connected for the NL East leaders.

Jeff Hoffman (3-5) came off the 10-day injured list to make his first start since May 26 and lasted four innings, allowing seven hits — including Smith's slam — and five runs with three walks.

**Giants 4, Dodgers 2:** Wilmer Flores hit a go-ahead, two-run homer off closer Kenley Jansen in the ninth inning and San Francisco rallied to a win at Los Angeles.

Mike Yastrzemski homered early to help the Giants regain a two-game lead in the NL West over the defending World Series champions. San Francisco has won two of three in a four-game series. The Giants had just four hits before Flores' drive. Buster Posey delivered a pinch-hit single to start the ninth, and Flores followed with a two-run shot to left field that put San Francisco in front 3-2. Victor Gonzalez walked Curt Casali with the bases loaded, making it 4-2.

**Red Sox 7, Blue Jays 4:** J.D. Martinez and Hunter Renfroe connected back-to-back as Boston won a home run derby in Toronto's final game at its temporary Buffalo home.

The Blue Jays will return to Toronto on July 30 after the Canadian government

granted them an exemption to the U.S.-Canada travel ban. Toronto hasn't played at Rogers Centre since 2019 because of coronavirus protocols.

**Padres 3-5, Braves 2-4 (second game suspended At 4½ innings):** Fernando Tatis Jr. hit a two-run homer, starter Chris Paddack reversed his recent struggles and San Diego won at Atlanta in the first game of a scheduled doubleheader.

The second game was suspended by rain in the middle of the fifth inning with the Padres leading 5-4. It was called after a 3-hour, 3-minute delay and will resume at a date yet to be determined.

**Rays 5, Orioles 4:** Austin Meadows hit a two-out, two-run single in the ninth inning and Tampa Bay rallied past visiting Baltimore.

Randy Arozarena hit two home runs and also had a key single as the Rays won for the 10th time in 13 games. He stopped a 21-game home run drought in Tuesday night's 9-3 win over Baltimore.

**Royals 6, Brewers 3:** Nicky Lopez hit a bases-loaded, tiebreaking double, Brad Keller earned his first win in over six weeks and visiting Kansas City completed a season sweep of Milwaukee.

On an afternoon when the Brewers made a pair of errors that caused the Royals' first five runs to be unearned, two of the loudest ovations at the stadium came when the scoreboard showed video clips of Milwaukee Bucks players asking fans to get loud.

**Rockies 6, Mariners 3:** Austin Gomber pitched effectively for six innings after spending a month on the injured list, Dom Nunez hit a bases-loaded double in a five-run first and host Colorado beat Seattle.

Gomber (7-5) allowed three runs on three hits — solo homers by Kyle Seager, Luis Torrens and Mitch Haniger — to win his

fourth straight decision. Gomber was reinstated earlier in the day after being out since June 20 because of tightness in his left forearm.

**Diamondbacks 6, Pirates 4:** Pavin Smith and Daulton Varsho hit consecutive homers in the seventh inning for the go-ahead runs, and host Arizona completed a three-game sweep of Pittsburgh.

**Marlins 3, Nationals 1 (10):** Pinch-hitter Jorge Alfaro drove in the go-ahead run with a double in the 10th, and Miami won at Washington to snap a four-game losing streak.

**Tigers 4, Rangers 2:** Matt Manning pitched six strong innings to lead host Detroit to its sixth straight victory.

**Twins 7, White Sox 2:** Max Kepler homered for a second straight game, Jorge Polanco also went deep and Minnesota won at Chicago.

**Indians 5, Astros 4:** Rookie Ernie Clement had a season-high three RBIs and Cesar Hernandez hit a tiebreaking home run in the seventh inning as Cleveland avoided a series sweep with a win at Houston.

It was 4-all with one out in the seventh when Hernandez, who earlier hit an RBI double, sent a pitch from Austin Pruitt (0-1) into the seats in right field.

**Yankees 6, Phillies 5 (10):** Pinch-hitter Ryan LaMarre singled home the winning run in the 10th inning and host New York recovered to beat Philadelphia after blowing a late three-run lead.

**Cardinals 3, Cubs 2 (10):** Yadier Molina doubled home the winning run against All-Star closer Craig Kimbrel in the 10th inning to give host St. Louis a victory over Chicago.

Adam Wainwright pitched seven strong innings for the Cardinals. Harrison Bader and Dylan Carlson each hit an RBI double in the seventh.

## Source: Texas, Oklahoma explore joining the SEC

Associated Press

The last time Texas got a wandering eye for another conference, it fueled a series of realignments in college sports that nearly killed the Big 12.

Texas is once again exploring free agency, stealing the headlines at the Southeastern Conference media days and cranking up speculation about another round of conference shuffling. And the Longhorns aren't alone in looking around.

There have been discussions between Texas and Oklahoma and SEC officials about switching conferences, but no formal invitations have been extended, a person with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press on Wednesday night.

The person, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the talks were intended to be confidential, said officials from Texas initiated the discussion. The Houston Chronicle first reported the discussions.

Adding two members would give the powerhouse SEC 16 teams, the most in major college football. Losing two schools would be a devastating blow to the 10-member Big 12.

Questions about the report were greeted by a series of no comments from the primary parties involved, but no denials.

"I'm talking about the 2021 season," SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said at SEC football media days.

# New NHL franchise drafts its roster

*Associated Press*

SEATTLE — What the expansion draft of the Seattle Kraken lacked in drama it made up for with quirks, production and a giant party to celebrate one of the biggest steps in the launch of the NHL's newest team.

"I envisioned this a lot of different ways and this is unbelievable," Seattle coach Dave Hakstol said. "All the boats on the lake behind us, the scene on the other side of the stage. It's awesome."

Any unknowns about Seattle's selections evaporated when all 30 names leaked hours before the team announced its selections on the shore of Lake Union. It was still a celebratory night to introduce the nucleus of a team that will make its debut at Vegas in a matchup of the league's two newest teams in mid-October and play its first home game on Oct. 23 against rival Vancouver.

One pick was announced by an octopus from the Seattle

Aquarium. Another came written on a fish thrown in the city's legendary Pike Place Market. And there was an assembly line of Seattle sports celebrities taking part, from Sue Bird to Marshawn Lynch.

Fans on all types of aquatic devices — paddleboards, kayaks and all sizes of boats — created a flotilla traffic jam on Lake Union. There were giant inflatable octopuses, makeshift Stanley Cups and when Gary Bettman appeared next to the shore, he was soundly booed as all commissioners are.

"It proves you're true hockey fans," Bettman said to the group on the water, leading to chants of "Gary, Gary, Gary!"

It was clear that flexibility with the salary cap was one of Seattle's biggest priorities in setting its first roster. Of the 30 players selected, Seattle committed only \$54 million of a possible \$81.5 million, not including a few restricted free agents who will push the number closer to \$60 million should they

stay.

The side deals and trades that Vegas fleeced the league with four years ago were absent this time around. Vegas announced 10 trades during its expansion draft; Seattle, zero.

"Last time around (with Vegas), teams were paying a price to stay away from guys. This time, they weren't willing to do that because GMs learned," Seattle general manager Ron Francis said. "What they were looking to do is get us to take bad money or bad contracts in order to leave somebody exposed and for us we think (cap space) was the most valuable asset we had right now, especially in potentially a flat cap environment for a year or two."

Defense was clearly a priority for Seattle, whether to build its own depth or for the opportunity to flip players for other options. A few seem locks to stay, like Adam Larsson and Jamie Oleksiak, both unrestricted free agents who signed long-term deals with Seattle. Lars-

son got a \$16 million, four-year deal and Oleksiak got \$23 million over five years.

Veteran Mark Giordano from Calgary was thought to be a possible option for flipping, but seemed unlikely when he walked on stage and pulled on the Kraken home jersey.

Giordano, 37, has the biggest cap hit of any player taken but could soon wear the captain's "C" when they open their inaugural season.

"It feels a little bit different today, but it's been crazy last day or so," Giordano said. "This is the first time in my career I've ever been drafted, so thank you to the Kraken and I'm happy to be here."

As far as other players selected, the Kraken got their goaltender in late-blooming Chris Driedger, and veteran forwards Jordan Eberle and Jared McCann. Seattle took Tampa Bay forward Yanni Gourde but he will miss at least the first month of the season following shoulder surgery.

## NBA gears shift quickly into very short offseason

*Associated Press*

Detroit, you are on the clock.

The NBA offseason — if you can call it that — is here. The Milwaukee Bucks officially flipped the league calendar to summer on Tuesday night, capturing their first title in 50 years and turning out the lights on a season that navigated its way through a pandemic to crown a new champion.

There isn't much of a break, of course.

The NBA Draft, with the Pistons holding the No. 1 pick and presumably the chance to choose Oklahoma State's Cade Cunningham, is fast-approaching on July 29. Free agency starts in less than two weeks, on Aug. 2. Most new contracts can be signed starting Aug. 6, and summer league opens two days after that.

"We made it. We crowned a champion," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said during the trophy ceremony in Milwaukee on Tuesday night. "I have to say playing through a pandemic required enormous re-

silience from all 30 teams. Thank you to every team and every player in the league for a tremendous season."

And now, it's already next season.

The good news is there's a sense of normalcy, even amid a pandemic, and the NBA plans to continue along that path. Training camps will begin in late September, as is the new normal. Preseason games are back in early October, and the league's 76th season — even though it'll be celebrating its 75th anniversary all year long — starts Oct. 19.

That's not even three months away.

Protocols will remain in place; how many and how strict will depend on the virus and what's happening in the world in a few months.

### Free agency

Chris Paul helped Phoenix get to the NBA Finals and now has a decision to make about his \$44 million option for next season. He could opt-in and stay, or opt-out — and quite

possibly still stay, if he and the Suns work out a new deal.

There will be plenty of seasoned veterans on the market, including Kyle Lowry and Mike Conley. Kawhi Leonard of the Los Angeles Clippers could be a free agent as well, if so inclined.

An interesting situation to watch will be Victor Oladipo, most recently of Miami and someone who would like to remain with the Heat. He's coming off another leg surgery and may not be ready to start next season, which could certainly affect his number of suitors — and how much they will be willing to offer him.

### The draft

Detroit picks first, followed by Houston, Cleveland and Toronto. Orlando has two picks in the top eight and Oklahoma City has three picks in the first 18 — the start of the massive haul of draft capital that the Thunder have acquired in recent years.