

Poll: Fewer vets, troops urge enlisting

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Service members and veterans are less likely to recommend joining the military to family and friends than they were two years ago, according to survey results released Thursday from the Military Family Advisory Network.

“That, to us, was concerning,” said Shannon Razsadin, executive director of MFAN, a non-profit advocacy group. “I think it’s the people who are living this life are having a hard time.”

About 63% of respondents said they would recommend the military — a drop from about 75% in the survey completed in 2019. The reason for the decline could be linked to additional survey data that found more than half of military families have a moderate or poor family well-being, she said.

“That’s a really important thing that should get people’s attention and making sure we’re focusing on the whole family,” said Razsadin, the spouse of a Navy officer. “People who do this and live this life, it’s because of a patriotic sense of duty and responsibility to serve. The

reality is that this life is hard, and we can’t count on that to be the only thing that helps us get to the maintenance and growth of the all-volunteer force.”

The findings are part of the network’s 2021 Military Family Support Programming Survey, which is conducted every other year to gain insight into an array of support needs for military and veteran families. The survey was fielded online between October and December, with 8,638 people participating, according to the report on its findings.

Respondents, who were either service members, veterans or their spouses, came from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., two U.S. territories, and 22 countries.

This year, researchers introduced a family health scale into the survey, which is a measure of a family unit’s well-being. It uses 10 questions that measure family relationships, health care, finances and housing to create a well-being score. About 59% of families reported moderate or poor health, according to the survey report.

“These findings paint a clear picture; mili-

tary and veteran family well-being is related to health care satisfaction, family relationships, financial well-being, housing, food insecurity, and the military community,” according to the report.

The results come as the military services have faced a difficult year in meeting recruiting and retention goals and have been increasing enlistment bonuses and relaxing some regulations such as their tattoo policies to entice new recruits. The Army has been particularly challenged in recruiting, in part because it is the biggest of the military services, said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston.

Negative attention focused on military housing and other quality-of-life concerns also is likely having an impact of people’s willingness to sign up or reenlist, among other factors, he said last month.

“I think that’s one of the things that’s actually hurting the Army,” Grinston said, specifically mentioning negative coverage of military family housing. “We are reluctant to see or read a positive story about the quality of life.”

Air Force changes pet travel after dog’s death

By KELLY AGEE

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIRBASE, Japan — The Air Force said it’s making changes at its air terminals around the world to safeguard traveling pets after a family’s dog died in transit July 1 in Japan.

For the rest of the summer, Air Mobility Command will allow traveling pets into climate-controlled terminals when the outside temperature reaches 85 degrees Fahrenheit, according to a post Wednesday on the command’s official Facebook page.

Passenger terminals operated by the 515th Air Mobility Operations Wing throughout the Indo-Pacific also will store animals in a climate-controlled environment as they await their flights, Maj.

Hope Cronin, a spokeswoman for Air Mobility Command at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., said in an email Wednesday.

The dog, Kolbie, a 10-year-old Pomeranian mix, died of heatstroke on the Patriot Express during its leg between Yokota Air Base and Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, both in Japan. The dog’s owners, Amber Marie Panko and Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Christopher Panko, faulted aircraft handlers at Yokota in western Tokyo for leaving the dog in a garage during a layover. The Pankos had arrived in Japan after a 12-hour flight from Seattle.

The 730th Air Mobility Squadron is restoring power to an adjacent, temporary terminal facility

at Yokota to provide additional areas for families with pets and is sourcing an aircraft air conditioning cart to help keep pets cool during the loading process, Cronin said. The passenger terminal at Yokota reopened June 13 after a \$27.5 million renovation.

“We recognize pets are a deeply important part of many families’ lives, and we take seriously the responsibility of safely transporting them when they are entrusted to our care,” said Air Mobility Command.

The command said it is investigating whether all pet transport protocols were followed when the Patriot Express stopped at Yokota on July 1.

“At this time, our initial findings indicate our aerial port spe-

cialists followed established pet transport protocols and there is no evidence of intentional negligence. Unfortunately, these protocols did not adequately factor in the extremely high temperatures and humidity Yokota was experiencing over the July 4 weekend,” said the statement on Facebook.

The command also addressed a Facebook post Monday by Leave No Paws Behind USA that two other dogs had died on the same Patriot Express flight with Kolbie. No other dogs died on that flight, according to the command. The 515th Air Mobility Operations Group, the parent unit to the 730th at Yokota, found that 10 other dogs on the same flight arrived safely at their destinations.

Beijing rebukes Navy operation in South China Sea

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy “seriously violated China’s sovereignty” on Wednesday by sending a destroyer past the Paracel Islands, a disputed chain in the South China Sea, according to the Chinese military command for the area.

The USS Benfold steamed past the Paracels, 200 miles off China’s southern coast, on a freedom-of-navigation operation to assert “navigational rights and freedoms,” according to the U.S. 7th Fleet. China, Vietnam and Taiwan claim the islands, where China has created outposts.

Naval and air forces of China’s Southern Theater Command tracked and monitored the Benfold, said command spokesman Air Force Senior Col. Tian Junli,

according to the official China Military Online on Wednesday. Chinese forces warned the American destroyer away from the islands, Tian said.

That claim is false, said 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Nicholas Lingo in an email Thursday to Stars and Stripes. The Benfold continued into international waters after passing near the Paracels, he said. Even warships have a right to “innocent passage” through territorial seas under the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea.

“The PLA Southern Theater Command’s statement is the latest in a long string of PRC actions to misrepresent lawful U.S. maritime operations and assert its excessive and illegitimate maritime claims at the expense of its Southeastern Asian neighbors in

the South China Sea,” 7th Fleet said in a news release Wednesday.

Also on Wednesday, the USS Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group entered the South China Sea for the first time since leaving its homeport, Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, in May on its annual patrol, according to 7th Fleet. The strike group’s arrival and the Benfold’s operation were unrelated, Lingo said.

The strike group will train in the area and conduct security operations, according to 7th Fleet.

“Our strike group works consistently to stay capable and ready, and we continue that focus during operations in the South China Sea to demonstrate our commitment to the region,” said strike group commander

Rear Adm. Michael Donnelly in the release.

The group teamed up with South Korea’s navy for an exercise in early June and participated in Valiant Shield, a 12-day U.S. military exercise, later that month.

Beijing regards the South China Sea as its backyard, and mostly its territory. It regularly denounces the presence of U.S. warships there, especially their demonstrations of freedom of navigation and innocent passage that challenge restrictions set by China and other Paracel claimants Taiwan and Vietnam.

“Facts have once again proved that the U.S. is nothing but a ‘security risk maker in the South China Sea’ and a ‘destroyer of regional peace and stability,’” Tian said after the Benfold’s passage.

Solomons PM: Chinese base would make islanders targets

Associated Press

SUVA, Fiji — Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare said Thursday that his country’s new security pact with Beijing would not allow China to build a military base on the South Pacific nation and make his citizens “targets for potential military strikes.”

Sogavare struck an agreement with Beijing in April to provide security support. Details of the pact haven’t been made public but the deal has raised fears of a permanent Chinese military facility within 1,200 miles of the northeast Australian coast.

He used a meeting of Pacific island nation leaders Thursday in Fiji to strongly deny that his country would become a Chinese military foothold in the South Pacific.

“The moment we establish a foreign military base, we immediately become an enemy. And we also put our country and our

people as targets for potential military strikes,” Sogavare told reporters in the capital Suva.

“There is no military base, nor any other military facility or institutions, in the agreement. And that’s a very important point that we continue to reiterate to the family in the region,” he added.

Without naming the United States or the Solomons’ key security partner Australia, Sogavare told his parliament in May that opponents of the Chinese pact had threatened his country and insulted it.

Both the United States and Australia have told the Solomon Islands that the country hosting a Chinese military base would not be tolerated.

New Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government has since been elected on a promise of more aid and engagement with the country’s island neighbors.

Burn pits legislation nears finish line with House OK

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday approved a significant expansion of health care and disability benefits for millions of veterans who were exposed to toxic burn pits while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The 342-88 vote all but assures the measure will soon go to President Joe Biden to be signed into law. The Senate will have to vote again because of a technical fix the House made to the bill, but the essence of the bill is the same as the one senators overwhelmingly passed last month.

The bill contains two major components. First, it extends the grace period by which military veterans serving near burn pits can get medical care through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Their eligibility for VA care will double from five years after their discharge to 10 years.

Second, the legislation directs the VA to presume that certain respiratory illnesses and cancers were related to burn pit exposure, allowing veterans to obtain disability payments to compensate for their injury without having to prove the illness was a result of their service. Currently, more than 70% of disability claims related to burn pit exposure are denied by the VA due to lack of evidence, scientific data and information from the Defense Department.

The bill is projected to increase federal spending by about \$283 billion over 10 years and does not include offsetting spending cuts or tax increases to help pay for it. An earlier version the House approved in March cost more than \$320 billion over 10 years, but senators trimmed some of the costs early on by phasing in certain benefit enhancements.

Scooter incidents lead to restrictions

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Alcohol is off-limits for a U.S. tank brigade deployed to Bavaria after multiple off-base incidents that involved drunken soldiers illegally riding electronic scooters, Army officials said this week.

Overnight passes for soldiers from the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, who deployed to the rural Grafenwoehr Training Area in March on a mission to deter Russian aggression in Europe, also were suspended until the entire unit is retrained.

"It is vital to our mission in the European theater of operations that we uphold good order and discipline within our formations," Maj. Patrick Connelly, the brigade spokesman, said in a statement Wednesday. "These restrictions will ensure we maintain

our mission readiness and remain good guests with our host nation."

The temporary restriction of drinking privileges and overnight travel went into effect July 7. Since the unit's arrival in Germany, five soldiers have been charged with DUI for riding e-scooters while intoxicated, Connelly said.

He added that the brigade is taking steps to ensure that discipline is maintained.

In Germany, rentable e-scooters have become ubiquitous in recent years, particularly on sidewalks. That has led to occasions of troops running afoul of German law, which treats e-scooters the same as motor vehicles when it comes to blood alcohol limits.

The Fort Stewart, Ga.-based soldiers are part of a U.S. force that mobilized on short notice to Europe in connection with Russia's full-fledged war on Ukraine. There are now more than 100,000 troops operating on

the Continent, up from about 80,000 before Moscow's Feb. 24 attack.

Since its arrival, the 1st Brigade has gotten high-level attention from German officials. In March, Bavaria governor Markus Soeder ordered 4,000 white sausages and hosted a welcome breakfast for the troops in a show of appreciation for their contributions to European security.

And on Wednesday, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Grafenwoehr to thank the brigade.

"What you do here, each and every one of you, is of existential importance to the security of my country, my people, our continent and our alliance," Steinmeier told the brigade's soldiers during a speech at the base.

The last visit by a federal president to the U.S. armed forces in Germany was in 1996, according to Steinmeier's office.

USS Abraham Lincoln to host Mich. St.-Gonzaga game

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — They're going to try to play college basketball on an aircraft carrier again, and nautical veteran Tom Izzo and Michigan State will get a return trip to San Diego Bay to face Gonzaga on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on Veteran's Day.

The game will be shown in prime time on Nov. 11 as part of ESPN's Armed Forces Classic from the flat top moored at Naval Air Station North Island in Coronado, across the bay from downtown San Diego.

The Abraham Lincoln is on deployment and is due back in port later this summer.

Izzo's Spartans lost to No. 1 North Carolina 67-55 on the flight deck of the USS Carl Vinson on Nov. 11, 2011, in the first college basketball game on an active carrier. President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama watched from courtside. The Carl Vinson conducted Osama bin Laden's burial at sea after he was killed by Navy SEALs in a raid ordered by Obama six months earlier. This will be the first aircraft carrier game since 2012, when on-

ly two of four games scheduled that fall were played, including one in San Diego that had to be pushed back two days because of rain rather than moving it indoors.

While the 2011 Carrier Classic was played in a spectacular setting, it ended less than an hour before rain drenched the court, just one of the hazards organizers face in staging carrier hoops games. Organizers said there would be a backup court on the hangar deck as a contingency, but that court was never set up.

Japan PM blames police for death of ex-leader Abe

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Thursday blamed inadequate police protection for the death of former leader Shinzo Abe, who was shot last week while giving an outdoor campaign speech.

Abe, one of Japan's most influential politicians, was assassinated last Friday in western Japan, shocking a nation known for its low crime rate. Photos and videos of the shooting show the gunman was able to come close to Abe from behind, while security guards were focused toward the front.

"I think there were problems with the se-

curity measures," Kishida said.

Officials at the National Public Safety Commission and National Police Agency are investigating what went wrong and will compile measures in response, Kishida said.

"I urge them to carry out a thorough inspection and fix what needs to be fixed, while also studying examples in other countries," he said.

Kishida also announced plans to hold a state funeral for Abe later this year, noting his contributions at home and in boosting Japan's security alliance with the United States. Abe's nationalistic views drove the

governing party's conservative policies.

"By holding a state funeral in memory of former Prime Minister Abe, Japan will show its determination not to cave in to violence and to firmly defend democracy," Kishida said. "Japan will also show to the world its determination to keep up its vigor and open a path toward the future."

A smaller funeral ceremony was held at a temple in Tokyo on Tuesday.

A suspect was arrested immediately after Abe was shot and is being held for up to three weeks for questioning until prosecutors decide whether to press murder charges.

Biden, Lapid agree to stop Iran nuke program

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid stood side-by-side Thursday and declared they would not allow Iran to become a nuclear power. They parted ways, though, on how to get there.

Biden, in a joint news conference after a one-on-one meeting with the Israeli leader, said he still wants to give diplomacy a chance. Moments earlier, Lapid insisted that words alone won't thwart Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

While Biden suggested his patience with Iran was running low, he held out hope that Iran can be persuaded to rejoin a dormant deal intended to prevent it from building a nuclear weapon.

"I continue to believe that diplomacy is the best way to achieve this outcome," Biden said on the second day of his visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Biden's emphasis on a diplomatic solution contrasted with Lapid, who said Iran must face a real threat of force before it will agree to give up on its nuclear ambitions.

"Words will not stop them, Mr. President. Diplomacy will not stop them," Lapid said. "The only thing that will stop Iran is knowing that if they continue to develop their nuclear program the free world will use force."

Lapid suggested that he and Biden were in agreement, despite his tougher rhetoric toward Iran.

"I don't think there's a light between us," he said. "We cannot allow Iran to become nuclear."

Biden, too, said, "We will not, let me say it again, we will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon."

He warned that his patience is wearing thin for Iran to rejoin the nuclear deal, a day after saying he'd be willing to use force

against Tehran as a last resort. The president said the U.S. had laid out for the Iranian leadership a path to return to the nuclear deal and was still waiting for a response.

"When that will come, I'm not certain," Biden said. "But we're not going to wait forever."

Resurrecting the Iran nuclear deal brokered by Barack Obama's administration and abandoned by Donald Trump in 2018 was a key priority for Biden as he entered office. But administration officials have become increasingly pessimistic about the chances of getting Tehran back into compliance.

Israeli officials have sought to use Biden's first visit to the Middle East as president to underscore that Iran's nuclear program has progressed too far and encourage the Biden administration to scuttle efforts to revive the deal.

Man charged with rape of girl who traveled for abortion

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — An Ohio man has been charged with raping a 10-year-old girl whose case drew national attention following a doctor's comments that the child had to travel to Indiana for an abortion, an account that had led some prominent Republicans — including Ohio's attorney general and a congressman — to suggest it was fabricated.

Democratic President Joe Biden highlighted the case last week at the signing of an executive order aimed at protecting access to abortion as state after Republican-led state, including Ohio, enacted near-total restrictions after the U.S. Supreme Court's recent landmark ruling.

A detective testified Wednesday at an initial court appearance for the 27-year-old suspect that Columbus police learned

about the girl's pregnancy after her mother alerted Franklin County Children Services on June 22, The Columbus Dispatch reported. The detective said the girl had an abortion in Indianapolis on June 30.

The detective said DNA from the Indianapolis abortion clinic was being tested to confirm paternity.

An Indianapolis physician who provides abortion services,

Dr. Caitlin Bernard, had told The Indianapolis Star that an abortion had been provided for such a child because the girl couldn't get the procedure in Ohio under a newly imposed state ban on abortions at the first detectable "fetal heartbeat."

A judge lifted a stay on the ban after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

US weekly jobless claims at highest point in nearly 8 months

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits last week hit its highest level in nearly 8 months, but the total number of those collecting benefits fell.

Applications for jobless aid for the week ending July 9 rose by 9,000 to 244,000, up from the previous week's 235,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications generally reflect layoffs. Analysts had expected the number to remain flat from the previous week.

The four-week average for claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility,

rose by 3,250 from the previous week, to 235,750. The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending July 2 fell by 41,000 from the previous week, to 1,331,000. That figure has hovered near 50-year lows for months.

Last week, the Labor Department reported that employers added 372,000 jobs in June, a surprisingly robust gain and in line with the pace of the previous two months. Economists had expected job growth to slow sharply last month given the broader signs of economic weakness.

The unemployment rate remained 3.6% for a fourth straight month, matching a

near-50-year low that was reached before the pandemic struck in early 2020.

The government also reported last week that U.S. employers advertised fewer jobs in May amid signs that the economy is weakening, though the overall demand for workers remained strong. There are nearly two job openings for every unemployed person.

On Wednesday, the government said that consumer prices soared 9.1% compared with a year earlier, the biggest yearly increase since 1981. From May to June, prices rose 1.3%, another huge increase, after prices had surged 1% from April to May.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man freed from pizza oven vent, treated

GA LITHONIA — A Georgia man became trapped while trying to crawl down through a vent from a strip mall roof into a pizza restaurant on Tuesday, forcing firefighters to slice open the vent to free him, police said.

The man was taken to a hospital and the extent of his injuries was unclear.

Police told local news outlets that emergency responders cut open the vent where it extended upward from a pizza oven at a Little Caesars outlet in Lithonia, about 15 miles east of downtown Atlanta.

Brittany Davis, a U.S. Army recruiter, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution she could hear the man yelling for help when she arrived for work at a neighboring recruiting office.

"I looked on the roof but couldn't see anybody," Davis said. She called 911.

Davis said she went inside the pizza restaurant and spoke to the man, who reported he was in pain and having a panic attack.

The man walked to an ambulance shortly after being removed. Police did not identify him or announce any criminal charges.

3 charged in stolen 'Hotel California' notes case

NY NEW YORK — Three people were charged Tuesday in an alleged conspiracy involving the handwritten lyrics to the classic rock juggernaut "Hotel California" and other hits by the Eagles.

Prosecutors said the defendants, despite knowing the ma-

terial was stolen, lied to auction houses and buyers about the manuscripts' origins.

An indictment filed in state court in Manhattan accuses Glenn Horowitz, Craig Inciardi and Edward Kosinski of plotting to possess Don Henley's notes and lyrics for songs that also included "Life in the Fast Lane" and "New Kid In Town," altogether valued at more than \$1 million. The men pleaded not guilty through their lawyers at the arraignment.

According to court documents, an author hired to write a biography of the band originally stole the manuscripts in the late 1970s.

Prosecutors say that between 2012 and 2017 the defendants tried to get Henley to buy back the stolen manuscripts, while at the same time seeking to peddle them to other potential buyers through Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses.

Woman to plead guilty to posing as sick Marine vet

RI PROVIDENCE — A Rhode Island woman who authorities say pretended to be a decorated Marine Corps veteran with cancer to fraudulently collect about \$250,000 in veterans benefits and charitable contributions has agreed to plead guilty, federal prosecutors said Tuesday.

Sarah Jane Cavanaugh, 31, of East Greenwich, signed an agreement in U.S. District Court in Providence under which she will admit to wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, forgery and fraudulent use of medals, U.S. Attorney Zachary Cunha said in a statement.

She has also agreed to pay

more than \$82,000 in restitution.

There is no record of Cavanaugh ever serving in the U.S. military, according to authorities. However, she did work as a licensed social worker for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Providence. Through her job, she gained access to documents, personal information and medical records belonging to a real veteran with cancer, which she used to create fraudulent documents and medical records in her name.

Man accused of falsely selling crops as organic

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A Minnesota farmer is accused of making \$46 million by passing off chemically treated corn and soybeans as organically grown.

James Clayton Wolf was charged in federal court with felony wire fraud. Prosecutors say Wolf falsely labeled crops grown on his rural Cottonwood County farm as organic and that he defrauded grain buyers and undermined the nation's organic labeling system.

Organic crops are grown from non-GMO seeds and without chemicals or fertilizers. They generate higher prices at market than non-organic crops.

Ex-manager accused of stealing \$1M at bank

WA BATTLE GROUND — A former southwestern Washington bank manager is accused of stealing more than \$1 million from vulnerable customers.

The Columbian reported that Brian Davie, 43, was arrested last Friday in Yakima on charges of bank fraud and aggravated

identity theft, according to a U.S. Attorney's Office statement.

The Department of Justice said while Davie was a branch manager at a Wells Fargo in Battle Ground, Wash., he made unauthorized cash withdrawals and money transfers and forged cashier's checks. Investigators said among the eight victims is a woman who had over \$546,000 stolen from her retirement accounts, according to the statement.

Davie worked at the bank from 2014 until he was fired in 2019, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. Wells Fargo reimbursed the victims for their loss, the U.S. Attorney's Office said.

Woman surprised by iguana in her toilet, has it removed

FL HOLLYWOOD — A Florida woman interrupted an uninvited guest in her bathroom on Saturday night.

Michelle Reynolds told WSVN that she went to use the bathroom and "opened the door and did a quick turnaround because I saw this thing in there and quickly shut the door!" she said.

The thing? An iguana.

The reptile was unable to find its way out of the commode so Reynolds had to enlist Harold Rondon of Iguana Lifestyles, a wildlife removal service, to rescue the little fella.

Rondon said he has removed several iguanas from South Florida properties this year already.

While they are not dangerous to people, some iguanas can transmit salmonella.

— From wire reports

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Elliott driver to beat in NASCAR Cup

Associated Press

Sure, it's been a wild NASCAR Cup season, with seemingly everyone in the field capable of taking the checkered flag.

Through all the chaos, one driver has emerged as the clear favorite.

Chase Elliott is the guy everyone else is chasing.

The 26-year-old became the first three-time winner in the Cup series with a thrilling victory at his home track Sunday, making a timely block on the final lap to fend off Corey LaJoie's bid to become the most unlikely winner yet in a year filled with surprises.

Elliott checked off another box on his increasingly impressive résumé with the win at Atlanta Motor Speedway, joining his father, Bill, as the only Georgia-born drivers to take first at the historic track.

That made for a raucous celebration in front of the main grandstand, where Elliott celebrated with a crowd that cheered every move by the No. 9 Chevrolet.

But setting emotions aside, it was another masterful performance by NASCAR's steadiest

driver — the kind that have become the norm rather than the exception.

"I just saw a look in his eye all day," said four-time Cup champion Jeff Gordon, now the vice chairman of Hendrick Motorsports. "You could hear it in his voice over the radio. He was just very focused and determined."

Elliott won the first two stages of the Atlanta race. He led 96 of the 260 laps, more than twice as many as anyone else on the treacherous, high-banked track. And at the end, after surging by LaJoie with just under two laps to go and taking the white flag still out front, he aggressively slid up the track going into Turn 1 to prevent LaJoie from pulling off the same move.

LaJoie, with only one top-five finish in his career, stayed on the gas, ran out of room and smacked the wall. Elliott sped away unscathed, his victory assured as soon as the yellow flag came out.

Elliott was a bit apologetic about his closing move, but LaJoie had no complaints.

It was just good, hard racing

— and Elliott is as good as anyone in that department.

"I hate to throw a megablock like that," he said. "But, heck, we're on the last lap. ... The guy is coming with a massive run. Am I taking a chance of crashing when I threw it up in front of him? Absolutely. But I didn't think I was going to get another shot at him if I let him grab the lead right there."

In addition to his wins at Dover, Nashville and Atlanta, Elliott has a runner-up finish at Road America, a fourth-place showing at Circuit of the Americas and a fifth-place result from Darlington.

He has seven other top-10 finishes and just missed another with an 11th at Phoenix. He has only placed outside the top 20 four times in 19 races.

What makes Elliott's performance even more impressive is that it's come in a season with 13 different winners already, including five drivers claiming their first career victory.

"There have been a lot of winners," Kurt Busch said, "but Chase Elliott has been that consistent rock."

With a comfortable lead in

the point standings and a playoff spot all locked up, Elliott surely has his sights on a second Cup championship to add to the one he captured in 2020.

But crew chief Alan Gustafson said it's far too soon to start looking ahead. There's still seven races to go in the regular season, beginning with next weekend's event on the 1.058-mile oval at Loudon.

"A lot of things can happen," Gustafson said. "Just focus on trying to improve. There's still things we can do better."

Elliott has never won at New Hampshire Motor Speedway, managing one top-five showing in eight Cup appearances.

Of course, the Dawsonville native had a similar record on his home track before Sunday's victory.

Sporting a mustache that appears modeled after Atlanta Braves rookie pitcher Spencer Strider, Elliott hopes to carry on what's been a winning run for sports in his home state. The Braves are the reigning World Series champions. The Georgia Bulldogs won college football's national title in January.

Character witnesses testify in third day of Griner trial

Associated Press

KHIMKI, Russia — American basketball star Brittney Griner didn't testify on the third day of her drugs possession trial in Russia, but the director of the Russian team she plays for in the offseason said he told the court about her merits.

Griner was arrested in February at the Russian capital's Sheremetyevo Airport when customs officials said they found vape canisters with cannabis oil in her luggage. She has been jailed since then, facing up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

Last week, Griner pleaded guilty. She acknowledged to the court that she possessed the canisters, but said she had no criminal intent and said the presence in her luggage was due to hasty packing. She was expected to testify on Thursday in the court in the

Moscow suburb of Khimki, where the airport is located, but did not.

In Russia's judicial system, admitting guilt doesn't automatically end a trial.

Most journalists were denied access to Thursday's trial session, but the manager of UMMC Ekaterinburg, for which she plays when the WNBA isn't in season, said he testified as a character witness.

"Our task today was to tell the court about her characteristics as an athlete, as a person — tell about how she played a big role in the success of the Ekaterinburg club and Russian women's basketball as a whole," club director Maxim Rybakov told reporters outside the courthouse.

"Today is the first day when we have seen our basketball player since February. Thank God, she feels well, looks good," Ry-

bakov said.

The next trial session is set for Friday.

"I can say that Brittney has always been a very good teammate, so my role here is just to be with her, to support her. We miss her very much, we miss her energy. I was very happy to see her, and I hope this trial will be over soon and with a positive outcome," said teammate Evgenia Belyakova, who also testified.

With the U.S. government under pressure at home to do more to secure her freedom, her guilty plea last week could be an effort to expedite the court proceedings so any negotiations could move forward. A senior Russian diplomat has said no action could be taken by Moscow until the trial was over.

Griner is one of the United States' most prominent female athletes.

Jackets sign top free agent Gaudreau

Associated Press

A hectic start to the NHL's free-agency period Wednesday closed with the Columbus Blue Jackets landing the highest-profile player: "Johnny Hockey."

Johnny Gaudreau cashed in on a career season by signing a \$68.25 million, seven-year contract with Columbus in the Blue Jackets' bid to return to prominence after losing their core of stars — including Artemi Panarin — in free agency two years ago.

Gaudreau's decision to sign with Columbus came a day after turning down an eight-year deal to re-sign with Calgary, where he spent his first nine NHL seasons. The Blue Jackets also signed defenseman Erik Gudbranson to a four-year, \$16 million contract.

"Johnny Gaudreau is a superstar in the National Hockey League, and we couldn't be happier to welcome him," general manager Jarmo Kekalainen said. "He is an elite player with great character that makes the players around him better."

The 28-year-old who played at Boston College finished tied for second in the NHL with a ca-

reer-best 115 points and 40 goals last season. And so much for the speculation of Gaudreau, who is from New Jersey, heading to a team much closer to home such as the Devils, Philadelphia Flyers or New York Islanders.

Gaudreau's signing highlighted a busy day in which Claude Giroux looked ahead to a homecoming in Ottawa, the Washington Capitals landed Stanley Cup-winning goalie Darcy Kuemper and the New York Rangers spent big on center Vincent Trocheck.

The slight, \$1 million rise of the NHL salary cap to \$82.5 million, coupled with numerous teams dumping or buying out contracts to free up payroll space, led to a rush of action once teams were allowed to begin signing players.

"It was a little bit expected because teams have had time to recover from the COVID pandemic," said defenseman Ben Chiarot, who signed a \$19 million, four-year contract with Detroit. "Players thought it would be better than in past years because teams are operating at a normal clip."

The Red Wings were among

the busier teams in general manager Steve Yzerman's bid to end a six-year playoff drought. Detroit also signed center Andrew Copp to a \$28.125, five-year contract, and forwards David Perron and Dominik Kubalik two two-year deals.

Washington GM Brian MacLellan took particular notice of the Red Wings being one of the teams with cap space that capitalized on it.

"Detroit was really busy," MacLellan said with a laugh. "It went real quick. I think you add another team and you got 32 teams competing for guys, it's a competitive environment."

The Capitals signed Kuemper to a \$26.25 million, five-year contract. Kuemper, who had a career-best 37 wins last season, takes over after the Capitals moved on from Ilya Samsonov by not issuing him a qualifying offer and traded Vitek Vanecek to New Jersey.

Colorado also bid farewell to forward Andre Burakovsky, who signed a \$27.5 million contract with the Seattle Kraken. The defending champions did re-sign forward Artturi Lehkonen and defenseman Josh Man-

son to long-term contracts.

The Carolina Hurricanes completed two trades by first acquiring 2017 Norris Trophy-winning defenseman Brent Burns in a deal with San Jose. Carolina then took advantage of the salary cap-strapped Vegas Golden Knights by acquiring forward Max Pacioretty and defenseman Dylan Coghlan in a trade for future considerations.

The move freed up the final year of Pacioretty's contract, and the \$7 million salary cap hit it represented, from Vegas' payroll.

With Gaudreau off the market, forward Nazem Kadri and defenseman John Klingberg were the top players still available through Wednesday evening.

Giroux's signing in Ottawa was expected: General manager Pierre Dorion joked he couldn't escape Senators fans asking: "When are you signing Claude?" Giroux, who played his junior hockey across the river from Ottawa in Gatineau, Quebec, signed a \$19.5 million, three-year contract.

Trocheck signed a \$39.375 million, seven-year contract with the Rangers.

Young shoots 64; McIlroy not far behind in British Open

Associated Press

ST. ANDREWS, Scotland — The first time Cameron Young played the Old Course at St. Andrews was one of his best moments in golf. The most recent one was even better.

In his British Open debut, Young plotted his way around the course in a gentle breeze and finished with a long two-putt birdie for an 8-under 64 for a two-shot lead over Rory McIlroy among the earlier starters.

Young, whose father is the longtime pro at Sleepy Hollow in New York, first came to Scotland in 2010 when he was 13. He

played some of the fabled courses in the area — St. Andrews, Carnoustie, North Berwick — not knowing then that he would even pursue a career in golf.

"Any time you set foot on the first tee or 18th green or anywhere, there's just no hiding how special of a place it is," Young said. "And it's certainly been a goal to get to an Open Championship. And for my first one to be here is a little bit extra special for me."

He's not even sure he played his best for his opening round. His tee shots weren't always go-

ing where he was looking. But in his short time back at St. Andrews, he learned enough about where to go and how to play the centuries-old course to get by just fine.

Young went out in 31. He drove over the green on the par-4 12th, pitched back to 8 feet and holed it for birdie to reach 7-under par. A record score at St. Andrews on a good day for scoring was within reach.

But he three-putted for par on the 14th. His 10-foot birdie chance on the 15th spun out of the cup. He missed another good chance from 15 feet on the

next hole.

Even so, the 25-year-old New Yorker had few complaints. He loves links golf.

"I don't think I've figured that much of it out, honestly," Young said. "You could play every day here for a year and you would just scratch the surface of what you can know about this place. There's so many humps and bounds and little nuances to the golf course that we could never know in the four or five days that I've had to prepare."

As for that trip? He still has great memories, none that top St. Andrews.

Ohtani wins 6th straight start, triples

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Shohei Ohtani is putting to rest any doubts anyone might have had about whether he could exceed what he accomplished during last year's AL MVP campaign.

The two-way Japanese phenom won his sixth straight start by striking out 12 in six innings and also hit a two-run triple in the Los Angeles Angels' 7-1 victory over the Houston Astros on Wednesday night.

Over his last six starts, Ohtani has allowed only three runs (two earned) and 20 hits in 39⅓ innings with 58 strikeouts and 11 walks. The right-hander is 9-4 with a 2.38 ERA in 15 starts this season.

"The last few starts, unfortunately we've lost a couple going into it and he takes that personally. He understands how important his day is," manager Phil Nevin said after the Halos snapped a five-game losing streak. "His last three or four times, he has put the team on his back."

It's the third time this season Ohtani has had double-digit strikeouts and multiple RBIs in a game. The only other pitchers to accomplish that are Atlanta's Kevin Millwood in 1999 and Hal Newhouser with Detroit in 1946.

Mariners 6-2, Nationals 4-1: Jesse Winker hit his second solo homer of the day and visiting Seattle won its 10th straight game, edging Washington to sweep a doubleheader.

In the opener, the Mariners got a three-run homer from Eugenio Suárez and six solid innings from Chris Flexen (6-8), who won his fourth straight start.

All-Star Juan Soto extended his hitting streak to 15 games when he hit his second ninth-inning homer of the day, a solo blast into the upper deck in right.

Orioles 7, Cubs 1: Anthony Santander hit a two-run double to spark a three-run first in-

ning, Spenser Watkins and four relievers scattered six hits and visiting Baltimore won its 10th straight game, its longest winning streak in a single season since it won 13 in a row from Sept. 7-22, 1999.

Twins 4, Brewers 1: Minnesota's Jose Miranda hit a game-ending, three-run homer against Milwaukee's Josh Hader.

Miranda's third hit of the game traveled to the second deck in left field. The Twins have five walk-off wins this season.

Blue Jays 8, Phillies 2: Teoscar Hernández hit a pair of two-run home runs, Vladimir Guerrero Jr. also connected and host Toronto won its first game after firing manager Charlie Montoyo.

Mets 7, Braves 3: Francisco Lindor hit a three-run homer, Chris Bassitt threw six strong innings and visiting New York beat Atlanta.

Eduardo Escobar and Mark Canha also homered for the Mets.

Eddie Rosario had three hits, including one of Atlanta's three homers.

Yankees 7, Reds 6 (10): DJ LeMahieu capped his 34th birthday by sliding across the plate on Alexis Díaz's second straight wild pitch in the 10th inning, and host New York rallied from a four-run deficit to beat Cincinnati and stop a three-game skid.

The Reds allowed five unearned runs. Díaz (2-1) threw consecutive wild pitches to Giancarlo Stanton.

Dodgers 7, Cardinals 6: Hanser Alberto hit a tiebreaking single with two outs in the ninth and visiting Los Angeles charged back from a 6-0 deficit with seven runs in the final three innings to beat St. Louis.

Mookie Betts had an RBI double in the eighth and Trea Turner's two-run single cut it to 6-5. Max Muncy tied it in the ninth with a sacrifice fly.

Giants 4, Diamondbacks 3: Brandon Crawford hit a game-ending RBI single to

complete host San Francisco's rally from an early 3-0 deficit.

Wilmer Flores tied the game in the eighth with a pinch-hit homer. Brandon Belt started the rally with a solo homer in the seventh as the Giants took two of three from Arizona and won their first series since June 17-19 at Pittsburgh.

Rays 4, Red Sox 1: Shane McCann earned his 10th win and regained the major league lead in strikeouts during his final outing before the All-Star Game as host Tampa Bay beat Boston.

Taylor Walls homered for the Rays, who have won five straight against the rival Red Sox.

White Sox 2, Guardians 1: Lucas Giolito pitched one-run ball into the seventh inning and visiting Chicago beat Cleveland.

José Abreu and Andrew Vaughn drove in runs in the sixth inning.

Rangers 5, Athletics 2: Jon Gray allowed only a fourth-inning infield single and struck out nine in seven shutout innings and host Texas beat Oakland.

Leody Taveras and Brad Miller hit two-run singles during a five-run first inning.

Marlins 5, Pirates 4 (10): Jesús Aguilar hit a tying single and scored the winning run on a wild pitch as host Miami rallied for three runs in the 10th inning to beat Pittsburgh.

Daniel Vogelbach's RBI groundout and Ke'Bryan Hayes' run-scoring single put the Pirates ahead 4-2 in the top of the 10th.

Rockies 10, Padres 6: José Iglesias drove in a career-high six runs with a homer and two singles, and host Colorado beat San Diego for the 12th time in the past 13 games at Coors Field.

Royals 5, Tigers 2: Brady Singer worked six innings, allowing one run on seven hits to win for the first time in more than a month as Kansas City completed its first winning homestand in nearly a year.

Blue Jays fire manager Montoyo, promote Schneider

Associated Press

TORONTO — The Toronto Blue Jays fired manager Charlie Montoyo on Wednesday and promoted bench coach John Schneider to interim manager for the remainder of the season.

General manager Ross Atkins made the move even with the Blue Jays at 46-42 this season. They held the AL's final wild-card slot when the day began but were in fourth

place in the AL East.

"I truly wanted this to work with Charlie and wasn't able to make that happen," general manager Ross Atkins said before the Blue Jays hosted Philadelphia. "I'm extremely disappointed in where we are. I think we're better than how we've played."

"Us as players know things could be better, things have to be better," Blue Jays outfielder George Springer said. "We under-

stand what we all can do. It hasn't really shown yet. I think that's the frustrating part."

Atkins said the decision to fire Montoyo was made in the past 24 hours.

"It got to the point where it felt as though there were a lot of good individual things happening and we need to be playing better as a team," Atkins said.

The Blue Jays are 3-9 in July.