

UK heat records fall as Europe sizzles

Associated Press

LONDON — Britain shattered its record for highest temperature ever registered Tuesday amid a heat wave that has seared swaths of Europe.

The typically temperate nation was just the latest to be walloped by unusually hot, dry weather that has triggered wildfires from Portugal to the Balkans and led to hundreds of heat-related deaths. Images of flames racing toward a French beach and Britons sweltering — even at the seaside — have driven home concerns about climate change.

The U.K. Met Office weather agency registered a provisional reading of 104.5 degrees — or 40.3 degrees Celsius — at Heathrow Airport in early afternoon — breaking the record set just an hour earlier and with hours of intense sunshine still to go. Before Tuesday, the highest temperature recorded in Britain was

101.7, set in 2019.

As the nation watched with a combination of horror and fascination, Met Office chief scientist Stephen Belcher said such temperatures in Britain were “virtually impossible” without human-driven climate change.

He warned that “we could see temperatures like this every three years” without serious action on carbon emissions.

The sweltering weather has disrupted travel, health care and schools. Many homes, small businesses and even public buildings, including hospitals, in Britain don’t have air conditioning, a reflection of how unusual such heat is in the country better known for rain and mild temperatures.

The intense heat since Monday has damaged the runway at London’s Luton airport, forcing it to shut for several hours, and warped a main road in eastern England, leaving it looking like a

“skatepark,” police said. Major train stations were shut or nearly empty Tuesday, as trains were canceled or ran at low speeds out of concern rails could buckle.

London was faced with what Mayor Sadiq Khan called a “huge surge” in fires because of the heat. The London Fire Brigade listed 10 major blazes it was fighting across the city Tuesday, half of them grass fires.

Sales of fans at one retailer, Asda, increased by 1,300%. Electric fans cooled the traditional mounted troops of the Household Cavalry as they stood guard in central London in heavy ceremonial uniforms. Other guards reduced their duties to stay out of the sun.

Drought and heat waves tied to climate change have also made wildfires more common and harder to fight.

In the Gironde region of southwestern France, ferocious wild-

fires continued to spread through tinder-dry pines forests, frustrating firefighting efforts by more than 2,000 firefighters and water-bombing planes.

Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated from homes and summer vacation spots since the fires broke out July 12, Gironde authorities said.

A smaller third fire broke out late Monday in the Medoc wine region north of Bordeaux, further taxing firefighting resources.

Five camping sites went up in flames in the Atlantic coast beach zone where blazes raged around the Arcachon maritime basin, which is famous for its oysters and resorts.

But weather forecasts offered some consolation, with temperatures expected to ease along the Atlantic seaboard Tuesday and the possibility of rains rolling in late in the day.

Russia slams Ukraine as Putin meets Iranian leader

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles struck cities and villages in eastern and southern Ukraine on Tuesday, hitting homes, a school and a community center as Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to discuss a U.N.-backed proposal to unblock exports of Ukrainian grain.

In Kramatorsk, a city in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk province that is considered a likely occupation target of Russian forces, one person was killed in an airstrike that hit a five-story residential building, regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko said.

Ukraine’s Emergency Service said on Telegram that 10 people were wounded, five of them hospitalized, but it didn’t mention any deaths.

Fresh blood stained the concrete nearby as apartments on at least two floors burned. In

the aftermath of the attack, shrapnel was placed in a small pile near an empty playground.

“There was no one here. Everything is ruined,” said Halyna Maydannik, the resident of one burned apartment. “Who knows why they’re doing this? We were all living peacefully.”

The midday strike came after Kyrylenko had reported four earlier Russian strikes in Kramatorsk and urged civilians to evacuate.

Meanwhile, Putin arrived Tuesday in Iran for a visit intended to deepen ties with regional heavyweights as part of Moscow’s challenge to the United States and Europe amid its grinding campaign in Ukraine.

In only his second trip abroad since Russian tanks rolled into its neighbor in February, Putin is meeting Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo-

gan on pressing issues facing the region, including the conflict in Syria and a U.N.-backed proposal to resume exports of Ukrainian grain to ease the global food crisis.

As the West heaps sanctions on Russia and the costly campaign drags on, Putin is seeking to bolster ties with Tehran, a fellow target of severe U.S. sanctions and a potential military and trade partner. In recent weeks, Russian officials visited an airfield in central Iran at least twice to review Tehran’s weapons-capable drones for possible use in Ukraine, the White House has alleged.

But perhaps most crucially, the Tehran trip offers Putin a chance for a high-stakes meeting with Erdogan, who has sought to help broker talks on a peaceful settlement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as well as help negotiations to unblock Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea.

DOD looks to track hypersonic missiles

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will spend about \$1.3 billion to develop a global network of satellites by 2025 to track hypersonic missiles in mid-flight, the Defense Department's Space Development Agency announced Monday.

The funds will be split between L3Harris Technologies Inc. and Northrup Grumman Strategic Space Systems to purchase the development and launch of 28 satellites that will use infrared data and network communications to detect, track and warn warfighters of hypersonic missiles, which travel at speeds greater than Mach 5 or about five times the speed of sound.

U.S. satellites can now identify

a hypersonic missile but have limited mid-flight tracking capabilities, said Derek Tournear, the agency's director. While the U.S. is still developing its own hypersonic missiles, China and Russia have already fielded the advanced missiles. Russian forces have used them in battle during its war in Ukraine, the Pentagon has said.

"[Before hypersonics], I would put a warhead on top of a very big rocket. I would light that rocket up, it would make a very bright flash, and I could see its trajectory very early on. Then I could use physics ... to predict exactly where that missile was going into land," Tournear said. "That worked for many decades. Now, missiles have changed."

Hypersonic missiles can use

atmospheric forces to maneuver midair, he said. That means the old way of using math and science to predict a ballistic missile's path can't account for direction changes post-launch.

"I will not be able to predict where it's going to land because it's going to maneuver significantly," Tournear said.

The U.S. had not launched satellites with hypersonic-tracking capabilities previously because space was not a threatened environment, he said. With space now considered a challenged environment and, by some, a warfighting domain, changes must be made.

"Historically, our architecture was designed in an environment that was very benign ... so you could design your architecture based on environment where you

didn't expect to see any threats," Tournear said. "So, because of that, we have to completely change the way that we do our space architecture."

The 28 satellites will be launched seven at a time on four different flights to allow them to be placed in "slightly different locations" in space to allow for maximum coverage, he said. Each will fly about 621 miles above Earth and will be "polar orbiting, which means they'll go over the globe from north to south and around the globe."

"These satellites are specifically designed to go after that next generation version of threats out there so that we can detect and track these hypersonic maneuvering vehicles and predict their impact point," Tournear said.

Midshipman plunges to his death at waterfall in Chile

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — A midshipman from Texas died after falling over a waterfall in Chile, the U.S. Naval Academy announced Monday.

Midshipman 2nd Class Luke Gabriel Bird, of New Braunfels, Texas, was participating in a semester abroad program at Chile's Arturo Prat Naval Academy, the U.S. Naval Academy said in a news release. The 21-year-old junior was hiking with a student from the school Saturday near the Salto El Agua waterfall in Placilla, in the Valparaíso region when he reportedly lost his footing and fell over the waterfall, the academy said. Chilean authorities found Bird's body in the waterfall's lagoon Sunday.

"We are incredibly saddened by the tragic loss of Midshipman Luke Bird this weekend," Vice Adm. Sean Buck, the U.S. Naval Academy's superintendent, said

in a statement. "I encourage all of our Naval Academy family to offer support to one another as we navigate the grieving process."

Bird attended New Braunfels High School, where he was captain of the wrestling team in his junior and senior years and was active in student government, the academy said. At the Naval Academy, Bird was a member of the 20th and 2nd Companies and an ocean engineering major. He was a member of the Semper Fi Society and competed as an intramural sports athlete.

Midshipman 1st Class Travis Delgado, a friend and fellow Texan, called Bird "unfathomably smart" saying Bird mentored and tutored him in their shared courses.

"He greatly exemplified the hard working midshipman who helps anyone at the drop of a hat," Delgado, a senior, said in a statement.

AFN to offer video-on-demand, streaming app later this year

By PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

The American Forces Network will launch a worldwide television video-on-demand and live-streaming service later this year, as customers increasingly turn to mobile devices for content.

AFN Now will be similar to commercial streaming services, project creators said during a roundtable discussion Monday, when plans for the app were announced.

The service will be free for U.S. troops, their family members, military retirees and Defense Department civilians living overseas to download and watch.

On-demand viewing of sports, which allows viewers to watch prerecorded events, will be "very limited" on the launch date and include professional baseball, soccer and hockey, as well as NASCAR and IndyCar races, AFN officials said. They said talks

continue with the NFL, the NBA and rights holders of nonsports content to expand what's available on the platform.

The video service, which is expected to be available to download from Apple and Google app stores sometime in the fall, comes in the wake of the relaunch of AFN's audio streaming service as AFN Go earlier this year.

A primary mission of AFN is to provide a platform for commands to disseminate information to troops while simultaneously providing entertainment. Public service announcements will be shown on AFN Now in lieu of commercials, as is done on its television network.

While troops can get entertainment elsewhere, "they can't get information on their careers, they can't get information on their local community and that is what we deliver," AFN broadcast operations officer Erik Brazones said Monday.

Executive order punishes captors of American citizens jailed abroad

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden signed an executive order Tuesday aimed at increasing the flow of information to families of Americans detained abroad and at imposing sanctions on the criminals, terrorists or government officials who hold them captive.

It is unclear if the new order will result in bringing home more Americans jailed in foreign countries, but senior Biden administration officials who previewed the action to reporters said they regard it as an important way to raise the cost of hostage-taking and to punish captors.

The executive order is being announced as the administration faces criticism from some families over a perceived lack of creativity and aggressiveness in getting their loved ones home.

It also comes as the ongoing detention in Russia of WNBA star Brittney Griner has

brought increased attention to the population of Americans who are jailed abroad and designated by the United States as wrongfully detained.

The action relies on a section of the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act — named after a retired FBI agent who vanished in Iran 15 years ago and is now presumed dead — that authorizes the president to impose sanctions, including visa revocations, on people believed to be involved in the wrongful detention of Americans.

In this case, officials said, that could apply to government officials or to criminals or terrorists unaffiliated with a government.

Since sanctions may not always help facilitate a jailed American's release — Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for instance, has proceeded despite a wave of economic sanctions from Western allies — such punishment is expected to be

used judiciously, according to one official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the administration. Another element of the order will direct federal agencies to do better at sharing information and intelligence with families of detainees about the latest status of their case and efforts to get their loved one home.

In addition, the State Department is adding a new risk indicator to its country-specific travel advisories to warn travelers about nations where there's believed to be an elevated risk of detention.

The department already uses foreign travel risk indicators for categories including crime, health and kidnapping. Officials said the new risk indicator, marked as "D" for detention, will be applied at least initially to the following countries: China, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Russia and Venezuela.

Police: Man who killed mall shooter was 'heroic'

Associated Press

GREENWOOD, Ind. — A 20-year-old man likely assembled a rifle in the bathroom of a suburban Indianapolis shopping mall before shooting five people in the food court, killing three of them before an armed shopper fatally shot him, authorities said Monday.

Jonathan Sapirman, of Greenwood, was apparently facing eviction before he opened fire at the Greenwood Park Mall shortly before it closed Sunday evening, the city's police chief, James Ison, said at a news conference.

Sapirman continued shooting people until he was shot and killed by 22-year-old Elissha Dicken, of Seymour, a city about 45 miles south of Greenwood, who was shopping with his girlfriend, Ison said, calling Dicken's quick action "nothing short of heroic."

"Many more people would have died last night if not for a responsible armed citizen," said the chief, noting that authorities were still trying to determine a motive for the attack.

The Johnson County and Marion County coroners' offices identified the slain victims as a married Indianapolis couple — Pedro Pineda, 56, and Rosa Mirian Rivera de Pineda, 37 — and Victor Gomez, 30, also of Indianapolis.

A woman and a 12-year-old girl who was hit by shrapnel were wounded in the attack, police said.

Although authorities said Dicken was legally armed, the mall prohibits people from carrying weapons on its property. The mall issued a statement Monday saying it grieves for the victims and praising Dicken's "heroic actions."

Killer earned 'school shooter' nickname

Associated Press

The Uvalde, Texas, gunman gave off so many warning signs that he was obsessed with violence and notoriety in the months leading up to the attack that teens who knew him began calling him "school shooter."

He was once bullied as a fourth-grader in one of the same classrooms where he killed 19 children and two teachers before being killed by police. And in the planning for the May 24 massacre, he collected articles about the Buffalo, N.Y., supermarket shooting and played video games with a young student while quizzing him about the school schedule.

A state investigative report that highlighted law enforce-

ment's bungled response to the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School has also provided the most in-depth account to date about missed red flags and possible motivations surrounding 18-year-old Salvador Ramos. Despite many warning signs, he still managed to legally amass more than \$5,000 in guns, ammunition and gear in the weeks leading up to the killings.

Just days before the attack, Ramos spoke out on social media of his plans to do something that would "put him all over the news." He wrote of a desire to kill himself, shared online videos of beheadings and violent sex, and sent footage of himself driving around with "someone he met on the internet" holding a

plastic bag containing a dead cat and pointing BB guns at people out the window.

"The attacker became focused on achieving notoriety," according to the interim report released Sunday by an investigative panel of the Texas House of Representatives.

The 77-page report — based on interviews with family members, testimony and data from Ramos' phone — lays out a long trail of missed signals prior to the massacre, but notes these clues were known only to "private individuals" and not reported to authorities. It also found Ramos had no known ideological or political views that would have made his rantings more widely known.

Study: Student gains narrowed COVID gap

Associated Press

Despite a year of disruptions, students largely made academic gains this past year that paralleled their growth pre-pandemic and outpaced the previous school year, according to new research released Tuesday from NWEA, a nonprofit research group that administers standardized tests.

Gains across income levels partially closed the gap in learning that resulted from the pandemic, researchers found. But students in high-poverty schools had fallen further behind, making it likely they will need more time than their higher-income peers to make a full recovery.

The results are a measured sign of hope for academic recovery from COVID-19. But sustained effort and investment in education remain crucial.

"These signs of rebounding are especially heartening dur-

ing another challenging school year of more variants, staff shortages, and a host of uncertainties. We think that speaks volumes to the tremendous effort put forth by our schools to support students," Karyn Lewis, director of the Center for School and Student Progress at NWEA, and the study's co-author, said in a statement.

The study used data from more than 8 million students who took the MAP Growth assessment in reading and math during the three school years impacted by COVID. Those numbers were then compared with data from three years before the pandemic.

The study found that if rebounding occurs at the same pace it did in the 2021-2022 school year, the timeline for a full recovery would likely reach beyond the 2024 deadline for schools to spend their federal funds.

For the average elementary school student, researchers projected it would take three years to reach where they would have been without the pandemic. For older students, recovery could take much longer. Across grade levels, subject and demographic groups, the timeline can vary widely and researchers found most students will need more than the two years where increased federal funding is available.

Some of the most successful interventions for students involved increasing instructional time, ranging from more class time, intensive tutoring or high-quality summer programming, said Lindsay Dworkin, senior vice president for policy and communications at NWEA. But those initiatives can sometimes be costly and complex, and districts may hesitate to implement them when recovery funds have a fast-approaching

deadline to be spent.

"The funding expires in such a short amount of time that districts are really struggling with, 'What can I do that will be big and impactful and I only need to do for two years?'" Dworkin said in an interview. "I think if they knew that there would be more federal money coming and that it would be sustained, that would make all the difference both in the kind of creativity we would see from states and districts."

Dworkin also said that while the study looked at national trends, understanding the unique and specific local context was essential to figuring out how to best support children in schools. In addition to variation across student groups, districts that share similar characteristics, such as demographics and poverty levels, still showed large variation in student outcomes.

China to hold exercise near disputed islands

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

The Chinese military has announced a five-day exercise in the South China Sea in an area that overlaps a chain of disputed islands the U.S. Navy patrolled last week.

The exercise is slated to run from Saturday to July 27 in approximately 38,000 square miles of the South China Sea near the island of Hainan, a Chinese territory, China's Maritime Safety Administration announced Friday.

The exercise area is about 221 miles off the coast of Vietnam and intersects the Paracel Islands, according to the coordinates provided.

The USS Benfold, a guided-missile destroyer, steamed past the Paracels on July 13 and then past the Spratly Is-

lands 500 miles farther south on Saturday. Both island chains are claimed in full by China, Taiwan and Vietnam, and the operations were meant to challenge "unlawful" restrictions imposed by the three countries, the U.S. 7th Fleet said at the time.

Also on July 13, the USS Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group entered the South China Sea for training and security operations.

The Navy regularly operates in and around the sea and routinely sends ships near the islands. The Benfold conducted a similar operation in January.

China, however, considers much of the South China Sea to be its territory, and it regularly denounces the presence of warships in the region.

Waves swamp Hawaii during 'historic' swell

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Towering waves on Hawaii's south shores crashed into homes and businesses, spilled across highways and upended weddings over the weekend.

The large waves — some more than 20 feet high — came from a combination of a strong south swell that peaked Saturday evening, particularly high tides and rising sea levels associated with climate change, the National Weather Service said Monday. A wedding Saturday evening in Kailua-Kona was interrupted when a set of large waves swamped the event, sending tables and chairs crashing toward guests.

Sara Ackerman, an author who grew up in Hawaii and attended the wedding, filmed the

waves as they barreled ashore.

"It just was huge," she said. "I was filming it and then it just came over the wall and just completely annihilated all the tables and chairs."

She said it happened about five minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to begin.

"It wasn't like a life-threatening situation by any means whatsoever," she said. "It was just like, 'Oh my gosh... what are we going to do? Where are we going to put the tables?'"

She said they went ahead with the ceremony and cleaned up the mess after the newlyweds exchanged vows.

"We had the ceremony and it was beautiful, having all the (sea) spray," she said. "The ocean was really wild. So it was great for the photos."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman awakens from coma, identifies brother

WV CHARLESTON — A West Virginia man has been charged with trying to kill his sister, who recently awakened from a two-year coma and identified him as her attacker, authorities said.

News outlets reported that Wanda Palmer was found unconscious with serious head injuries at her home in Jackson County on June 10, 2020.

Palmer was in a coma in a nursing home for two years. Her brother, Daniel Palmer, had been identified as a suspect, but investigators did not have enough evidence to file charges, court documents said.

In an interview with a deputy, Wanda Palmer said the person who injured her was her brother and she identified him as Daniel, a criminal complaint obtained by WCHS-TV said.

Daniel Palmer, 55, has been charged with attempted murder and malicious wounding, the Jackson County Sheriff's Office said on Facebook.

Lawsuit: Bass Pro won't honor lifetime warranty

MO SPRINGFIELD — A Missouri man said in a class-action lawsuit against Bass Pro that the outdoor outfitter is refusing to honor its lifetime warranty on socks.

Kent Slaughter, of Springfield, said that after years of exchanging his "Redhead Lifetime Guarantee All-Purpose Wool Socks" every time they wore out, the Springfield-based company changed its policy in 2021 before he tried to return

four pairs of socks. Instead of getting another pair with a lifetime warranty, Slaughter said he was given socks that only carried a 60-day warranty, according to the Springfield News-Leader.

A Bass Pro representative said the company won't comment on pending litigation.

The lawsuit said Bass Pro is misrepresenting the socks in its ads because it said they are "The last sock you'll ever need to buy" because of the lifetime warranty. Slaughter said in the lawsuit that the warranty was a major factor in his decision to buy the socks.

Shattering of hotel door is mistaken for gunfire

NV LAS VEGAS — The loud shattering of a glass door at a Las Vegas Strip hotel was apparently mistaken for gunfire, causing panic inside and a social media frenzy about a possible active shooter.

Las Vegas Metropolitan Police said they responded to calls of possible gunfire and found a glass door shattered in the valet area of the MGM Grand.

"It caused a loud bang, there was a subsequent panic, thinking it was possible gunfire given the nature of what's been happening across the nation," Metro Police Capt. Branden Clarkson said.

Third dog missing after day care burglary found

MN ST. PAUL — The third dog that went missing when a Minnesota dog day care was burglarized has been found, but no arrests have been made.

Railroad workers in St. Paul found Cooper, the miniature pinscher. The dog had been missing since a burglary was reported at the St. Paul Paws dog day care.

Police said all the dogs that went missing during the burglary have been accounted for. Fourteen dogs were being boarded at the facility at the time of the burglary.

St. Paul police said investigators are reviewing surveillance video from the burglary and chasing several leads to try and identify a suspect.

Convenience store customer kills robber

MO ST. CHARLES — Police said a convenience store customer shot and killed an armed robber in a St. Louis suburb.

The QuikTrip customer, who St. Charles police identified only as a 26-year-old man from St. Louis, grabbed a gun from his vehicle and confronted the robber after he saw the man grab the clerk and hold a knife to her throat, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

St. Charles police said the suspect who died was Lance Bush, 26, of St. Louis, who was homeless. But they wouldn't identify the customer who shot him until prosecutors review the incident to determine if the killing was justified.

Coast Guard plans drill on river with vessel

TN CHATTANOOGA — The U.S. Coast Guard plans to conduct a large-scale drill involving a vessel on the Tennessee River in Chat-

anooga, officials said.

The maritime incident readiness drill is scheduled at the Riverpark boat ramp in Chattanooga, the Coast Guard said in a news release.

The operation will involve a passenger vessel operated by Chattanooga Riverboat, officials said. The purpose is to help law enforcement and fire-rescue personnel who may respond to a maritime incident occurring along the Tennessee River regional area, officials said.

Millions in jewels stolen from armored truck

CA LOS ANGELES — Millions of dollars worth of gems and jewelry were stolen in an armored truck robbery in Southern California, authorities said.

The Brink's truck was robbed near Los Angeles, said Dana Callahan, a spokeswoman for the security company.

The merchandise had been loaded onto the truck following an exhibit hosted by the International Gem and Jewelry Show in San Mateo, south of San Francisco, said Brandy Swanson, the group's director. It was going to an event at the Pasadena Convention Center just northeast of Los Angeles, she said.

Swanson said between 25 and 30 bags were taken, containing an unknown number of individual pieces. She said 18 victims were reporting more than \$100 million in losses. Callahan said it was less than \$10 million.

Swanson said vendors who travel between jewelry shows typically underinsure their merchandise because they can't afford to insure it fully.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Ohtani: Made in Japan but adapted to US

Associated Press

TOKYO — Shohei Ohtani is doing things no other player has ever done, a point of pride for Japanese such as Fumihito Fujisawa.

Fujisawa is the president of the Association of American Baseball Research — similar in Japan to SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research. So he knows the numbers. But he has trouble recognizing Ohtani, who is built like a tight end in American football.

“In the last five years, his body has become bigger and stronger. We see that he’s become an American — not a Japanese,” Fujisawa said.

There have been physical changes, added maturity and cultural adaptations. But make no mistake, Ohtani is “Made In Japan” with roots deep in the Japanese countryside.

American Robert Whiting, who has written bestsellers about baseball in Japan, views Ohtani as the result of 150 years of baseball evolution. An American professor in Tokyo in 1872 introduced the game, which is known in Japanese as “yakyu,” or “field ball.”

Ohtani follows two other milestone players — pitcher Hideo Nomo, who joined the Dodgers in 1995, and Ichiro Suzuki, who has more than 3,000 hits and is likely headed to Cooperstown when he becomes eligible in 2025.

But there were always qualifiers with those two, and with others. When Nomo excelled, some dismissed him as only a pitcher. Japanese could pitch — they were technically proficient — but couldn’t make it as position players. Then Ichiro came along. Well, he could hit but not for power.

Now comes Ohtani. He pitches, he has power and he’s one player, not two. No asterisks or footnotes needed.

“Ohtani can defeat Americans on their own terms, or the Latin Americans for that matter,” Whiting told the AP. “I mean, he’s bigger than most of them. He’s stronger than most of them, plus he’s pitching every five days and he’s hitting at the top of the order every day. You can make the argument that Ohtani is the best baseball player in the history of the game just because of what he did last year and this year. You could argue that he deserves to be MVP every year as a top-10 hitter and top-10 pitcher.”

No argument from Astros manager and AL All-Star manager Dusty Baker, for whom Ohtani will lead off as the designated hitter in Tuesday night’s All-Star Game.

“He’s not just an All-Star, he’s a megastar,” Baker said.

Whiting is the author of the bestselling book “You Gotta Have wa,” which looks at

Japanese culture through the prism of sports. Another book, “The Samurai Way of Baseball,” follows the career of Ichiro, who was Japan’s most famous player until he retired in 2019. It was also titled “The Meaning of Ichiro.”

Ohtani came up in Japan’s highly regimented baseball system at Hanamaki Higashi High School in largely rural Iwate prefecture in northeastern Japan. Blue Jays pitcher Yusei Kikuchi attended the same high school a bit earlier.

As a teenager, Ohtani constructed an 81-box development chart detailing his goals. The step-by-step process is well known in Japan, and so is Ohtani’s own chart. He lists baseball areas for improvement, but also the mental and personal side.

He specifies, among other things, that to improve he needs to read books, clean the room, improve the slider, get the fastball up in the 100 mph range — and be trustworthy.

“Ohtani was raised in this Japanese, martial arts-inspired training system where you join a baseball team and you play year-round. It’s not a seasonal thing like the States,” said Whiting, who has lived on and off for 60 years in Japan.

“Ichiro in his first year in high school was probably the best player on the team, but he couldn’t play. He had to do the laundry and cook the meals. He’d get up in the middle of night and practice his swing. The same thing with Ohtani. He was cleaning toilets in high school during his first year.”

This is not that unusual. Public schools in Japan have limited cleaning staffs, so students do it to learn discipline and humility.

Ichiro had an edge, often defying the conventions of Japanese culture. The Japanese phrase “*deru kugi wa utareru*” captures him: “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.”

Ohtani appears to be the opposite — polite, soft-spoken and discreet, a player whose only focus seems to be baseball. There are few reports about any social life.

“The guy is totally committed,” Whiting said. “It’s not too much to call him a modern-day warrior monk.”

“In high school there are countless, endless practices and development of spirit and teamwork and self-sacrifice,” Whiting added. “That’s the essence of the martial arts. It’s the essence of Japanese life. You see it in the corporations, in the school systems. He grew up in a culture where there was a lot of discipline.”

A game in 1896 in Yokohama between Japanese and Americans stands out in local his-

tory. Japan won 29-4, and many of the players were from Samurai families. The result was front-page news in Japan.

Whiting quotes Japanese historian Kyushi Yamato: “Foreigners could not hope to understand the emotional impact of this victory, but it helped Japan, struggling toward modernization, after centuries of isolation, overcome a tremendous inferiority complex it felt toward the more industrially advanced West.”

Emma Ryan Yamazaki, in collaboration with Japan’s NHK television, directed a 90-minute film several years ago about Japan’s annual high school baseball championship, which is known as Koshien. The film is titled “Koshien: Japan’s Field of Dreams.” ESPN aired it in 2020, and Yamazaki included a brief interview with Ohtani.

“Koshien is like our World Series,” Ohtani said. “Except that it’s a single-elimination, so one loss and it’s over.”

The film features long interviews with Hiroshi Sasaki, Ohtani’s high school coach who gets some credit for nurturing Ohtani, as does Hideki Kuriyama, who coached him at the Japanese professional team Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters.

His parents were both athletes in their own right: Toru, a semi-pro baseball player, and Kayoko, who was accomplished at badminton.

Sasaki is fond of Bonsai, the Japanese practice of growing miniature trees in pots. In the film, Sasaki talks about the difficulty of raising Bonsai, the need to remove wires that guide the branches and the duty to eventually put the plants in larger pots. He seems to be talking about Ohtani.

“I didn’t create Ohtani, he was incredible from the beginning,” Sasaki said in the film. “But I do think about how many pitchers I may have killed before him by my poor coaching. There are so many plants I killed by forcing them into my own small pots. So it’s scary for me to speak of having raised Ohtani.”

Yamazaki said it was her understanding pitchers at Ohtani’s high school were singled out for the “grunt work” of cleaning toilets since they received the most attention on the field.

“He (Ohtani) has dedicated himself to being the best baseball player he can be, every moment of his life,” she said. “He eats whatever, not necessarily because it’s tasty, but because it’s good for his body. He spends the offseason struggling around his training schedule rather than hanging out like a lot of baseball players do.”

Soto holds off J-Rod to win HR Derby

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Juan Soto bet heavily on his own talent and health by turning down a massive, long-term contract extension from the Washington Nationals.

Soto then went to the Home Run Derby at Dodger Stadium and showed why he almost certainly can't lose.

Soto won the Derby for the first time Monday night, holding off Seattle Mariners rookie Julio Rodríguez 19-18 in the final.

The 23-year-old Soto hit 53 total homers, beating each of his three opponents by one homer while hitting second each time in the midseason power showcase. Soto was locked in at the plate even after spending an hour earlier at Chavez Ravine answering repeated questions about his possible departure from the Nats after turning down a \$440 million offer.

"It feels amazing. It feels tiring," said Soto, a reserve on the NL All-Star team for Tuesday's Midsummer Classic. "I just tried to concentrate to square off the balls, because I know I have the power."

With a big celebratory bat flip after the final homer dropped into the stands, Soto became the second-youngest Home Run Derby winner in baseball history — by a single day. At 23 years and 266 days old, Soto is only one day older than Juan González was when he won in 1993.

Soto hit a 482-foot blast to right-center while beating Cleveland's José Ramírez 18-17 in the first round, and he got past 42-year-old Albert Pujols 16-15 to reach the final.

Rodríguez was even more impressive in the first two rounds while signaling his arrival on baseball's biggest stage, particularly when he knocked off two-time defending champion Pete Alonso of the Mets 31-23 in the second round. Only four players had managed to hit 30 homers in a single Derby

round before the Mariners' 21-year-old phenom did it twice, and he finished the night with 81 of them.

"What did I show the fans? Who I am," said Rodríguez, who made his big league debut on April 8 and hit his first career homer on May 1. "A little bit of my style, of who I am. I think they know a little bit now."

In the final-round matchup between Dominican-born friends who sometimes play "Call of Duty" together, Soto started slowly while batting second, failing to hit his first homer until his 10th swing. He eventually caught fire to win a lively Derby that began with an on-field pyrotechnic flame display that spooked the competitors.

Soto hit the winning 415-foot homer with 20 seconds of bonus time to spare, then whipped his bat in the air before being swarmed by other Dominican All-Stars. His homers traveled a total of 5.41 miles.

Soto earns a \$1 million prize — a whole lot more than his \$700,000 salary this season — and another highlight on his resume as his time with Washington possibly nears an end. Soto started his day at Dodger Stadium answering rapid-fire questions in two languages about his future, with agent Scott Boras standing right next to him throughout the grilling.

"I'm a lone survivor," Soto said with a laugh. "I've been going through all this stuff, and I'm still here standing up and with my chin up, all the time. And that shows you I can go through anything."

Soto turned down a \$440 million, 15-year contract to stay with the Nationals in a decision first reported by The Athletic last weekend, and he could be traded by the end of the month. That contract would have been the biggest in total value and the 19th-largest by average salary in baseball history.

"Right now, I'm not even thinking about

it," Soto said while hoisting the trophy over his head. "I'm a champion, and I will be a champion for the Nationals."

Potential suitors for Soto are chasing a former World Series champion still reaching his prime, one whose power is just one aspect of his overall ability — but as he showed in Los Angeles, the long ball is a key component of his skills. Soto will turn 26 years old around the time when he is eligible for free agency after the 2024 season. But until the final, the Derby's best stories were the oldest and the youngest competitors.

Pujols beat top-seeded Kyle Schwarber in a heartwarming first-round upset before Soto finished his night in a victory that probably didn't much bother Pujols, an idol to fellow Dominican stars such as Soto and Rodríguez.

"In (the Dominican Republic), I know all the people are really proud," Soto said. "Since we all three were in the finals, three Dominicans, it just shows you, it's a win for the DR, so we feel pretty proud about it."

Pujols, a commissioner's invitee for Tuesday's game, was embraced by both his fellow All-Stars and the Southern California fans who cheered for him for nine seasons in Anaheim and again last year with the Dodgers.

Rodríguez became the third-youngest Derby finalist at 21 years, 201 days old, with only Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Bryce Harper getting there more quickly. Rodríguez will have another chance to become the youngest Derby winner next year at home in Seattle's T-Mobile Park, since he'll still be younger than González was in 1993 or Soto is today.

Rodríguez's 32 dingers against Texas' Corey Seager in the first round were the second-most ever in that round, and the rookie was nearly as sharp in the second round while finishing off Alonso, whose mid-competition meditation sessions didn't do the trick.

Too fast, too bad: Allen's speedy start hurt at worlds

Associated Press

EUGENE, Ore. — Hurdler Devon Allen did not jump before the starting gun. He got disqualified for a false start anyway. That sent parts of the track and field world — and also the NFL world that he will be part of soon — into a frenzy.

Allen's DQ for a false start in the 110-meter hurdles came Sun-

day night and put a slight damper on an otherwise otherworldly performance by the United States at world championships in Eugene, Oregon. The Americans won nine medals — a record for one day. It could've been 10 had Allen been allowed to run.

The sensors in the starting blocks measure what's called "reaction time," which is the amount

of time it takes for a runner's foot to leave the block after the starting gun goes off. Obviously, if a runner leaves the starting block before the gun goes off, it's an easy call. But there is also a rule that says it's a false start if a runner leaves within 0.1 seconds *after* the gun sounds — the idea being that nobody could possibly react that quickly to the gun.

His reaction time was measured at 0.099 seconds. That's one-thousandth of a second too fast. He lingered near the starting line after receiving his red card, and looked at the replay in a monitor in the infield. Ultimately, though, rules are rules, and Allen went back underneath the stadium to watch Grant Holloway win the gold medal.

Morgan's PK lifts US past Canada

Associated Press

MONTERREY, Mexico — Alex Morgan never gets tired of winning championships, even after so many titles already.

Morgan converted on a penalty in the 78th minute and the U.S. women's national team won the CONCACAF W Championship 1-0 over Canada on Monday night to secure one of the region's spots in the 2024 Olympics.

"It just always feels good to be called the champion, and this game just, like, means a lot to us. It's always going to mean a lot," Morgan said. "Obviously against Canada, they gave us a run for our money, but we prevailed and feel good about the performance."

As FIFA President Gianni Infantino watched from a private box, the United States finally broke a stalemate when Rose Lavelle was fouled in the box and Morgan fooled Canadian goalkeeper Kailen Sheridan on the penalty. It was Morgan's 118th overall career goal.

"Alex is a big player, and big players are born for big moments," U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski said. "And that's what makes her special."

Jamaica defeated Costa Rica 1-0 in overtime earlier Monday to claim third place in the tournament.

The four semifinalists all earlier earned

spots in the 2023 World Cup next summer in Australia and New Zealand. Runner-up Canada will play Jamaica in a playoff for the region's other Olympic bid in September 2023.

The United States is now 33-0 in World Cup or Olympic qualifying matches since losing to Mexico 2-1 in advance of the 2011 World Cup.

The game was a rematch of the Olympic semifinal a year ago in Tokyo. Canada edged the United States 1-0 on a late penalty kick to advance to the final, its first victory over the Americans in 20 years.

The Canadians went on to win the gold medal on a penalty shootout with Sweden. The U.S. team finished with the bronze.

Alyssa Naeher was in goal for the United States instead of Casey Murphy, who started the last game at the tournament. Defender Emily Fox also returned to the lineup from COVID-19 protocol.

The United States has changed since the Olympics, and Morgan is now one of the older players on the roster surrounded by up-and-coming talent such as forward Sophia Smith and Mallory Pugh.

But the team has clearly benefitted from the steady veteran presence of Morgan, Megan Rapinoe and Becky Sauerbrunn. All three are veterans of two World Cup titles and know what it takes to perform on the big

stage.

Temperatures hovered in the low 90s at the start of the match at Estadio BBVA. Sheridan had a big save in the 31st minute when Pugh made a break down the right side and took a hard shot at the goal.

She made another in the 45th, with an assist from teammate Kadeisha Buchanan, on Smith's scramble to score at the goal line. Smith had another chance in the 64th, but it went wide.

Canada had a flurry of late opportunities, including a header from Jordyn Huitema that went wide.

"I think what I was most pleased with is, after you get that penalty call, the bounce back from the group after that, they showed that they were willing to do anything to get the result back. So we gave it everything and that's all you can ask," Canada coach Bev Priestman said.

Kalyssa van Zanten scored in the 102nd minute to give Jamaica the edge in the earlier game.

Van Zanten, who plays for Notre Dame, came into the game as a substitute in the 99th minute and scored on a well-placed pass from Drew Spence.

"I talked to her before she goes in and told her there's a goal in those boots and she nodded to me and it gave her some confidence," said Jamaica coach Lorne Donaldson.

Sankey views SEC as being 'stronger' than ever

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Southeastern Conference Commissioner Greg Sankey proclaimed Monday the league "is stronger now than at any other time in our history."

But the conference can't rest on its success, which includes the last three national championships in football, Sankey said in his address that opened SEC Media Days. He spoke of the changes to come with conference realignments, leaving open the possibility of further expansion after Texas and Oklahoma join the SEC in 2025 to make it a 16-team conference, as well as what might be next for the College Football Playoff.

The Big Ten recently countered the SEC's move by voting to

add Southern California and UCLA as conference members beginning in 2024, positioning both the SEC and Big Ten as super conferences.

Sankey said the league feels no pressure to add to its 16: "We know who we are. We're confident in our success. ... Don't feel pressured to just operate at a number. But we'll watch what happens around us."

Last year, Sankey was named co-chairman of a Transformation Committee charged with reshaping NCAA Division I. He also has a voice in unresolved efforts to expand the four-team College Football Playoff.

"I walked into one of the first (CFP) meetings when we were looking at the format and said, 'If

we want to expand to eight teams for the playoff with no automatic bids, I'll have that conversation,'" Sankey said. "But moving to an eight-team playoff and granting what were going to be six automatic bids, reducing at-large access, is unwise."

Sankey said a 12-team playoff proposal with six at-large teams and six conference qualifiers "was a really good balancing outcome." He added that "things have changed" and said taking the discussion "back to square one" includes the necessity to "rethink the approach, number of teams, whether there should be any guarantee for conference champions at all."

"Just earn your way in. There's something that's healthy competit-

ively about that and creates expectations and support around programs," he said.

The SEC has won three consecutive national championships: Georgia beat Alabama in last season's all-SEC title game. LSU won the 2019 title, followed by Alabama in 2020.

Sankey mentioned those championships before adding that four different SEC teams won four consecutive national titles in a stretch that began in 2007: LSU, Florida, Alabama and Auburn. A sixth SEC team, Tennessee, won the 1998 championship.

"I'll let you make the comparisons between us and our colleagues as it relates to national championship success in football," Sankey said.