

Navy wrestles with fate of Super Hornet

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The decision to recover a Navy Super Hornet swept off an aircraft carrier into the Mediterranean Sea likely hinges on whether the plane carried technology that could be exploited by China or Russia, experts have said.

The F/A-18 jet, introduced in 1999, is slowly being phased out of service. But newer, or Block III, versions have an infrared search-and-track system useful in pinpointing stealth aircraft. They also have better radar equipment and a precision approach landing system, experts have said.

Obtaining such advanced technology could enable the Russians or the Chinese to “learn a good deal, both about countering specific U.S. capabilities, and perhaps learning things they could develop and employ in their own aircraft,” said Jan van Tol, a retired Navy officer and senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based think tank Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

While not as sophisticated as the fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter, Super Hornets are “4.5-generation fighters, which means they would have some pretty sophisticated systems that the Russians or

Chinese would be happy to get hold of,” van Tol said.

On July 10, the Navy announced that a Super Hornet assigned to Carrier Air Wing 1 had been blown off the deck of the USS Harry S. Truman two days earlier during heavy weather.

The statement didn’t identify the version of the plane involved or say whether a recovery effort was underway, saying only that a determination was being made.

No one was aboard the plane, although one sailor received minor injuries while doing an unrelated job.

It also was unclear exactly where the plane had sunk, but USNI News reported July 7 that the Truman was sailing in the Ionian Sea, which is south of the Adriatic Sea and bounded by Sicily, southern Italy, southern Albania and the western coast of Greece.

The deepest part of the Ionian Sea is 17,280 feet, according to worldatlas.com.

Since then, the Navy hasn’t made any announcements about the aircraft or potential recovery efforts. If a fifth-generation fighter were lost, the service would almost certainly seek to retrieve it.

When an F-35C fighter attempting to land on the USS Carl Vinson crashed and slipped

into the South China Sea on Jan. 24, the Navy quickly announced it was working to find and recover the \$103 million jet.

The plane was recovered about 37 days later from a depth of 12,400 feet.

Whether the F/A-18 lost July 8 stayed intact or broke up, where it is located and how difficult a salvage operation would be are other factors the Navy would weigh, van Tol and other experts said.

Another factor would be how easily the Chinese or Russians could get to the aircraft, van Tol said.

Any attempt by the Russians or Chinese to recover the jet would be visible to the United States, and “we would likely initiate our own salvage operations and impede theirs,” van Tol added.

It seems that Navy leadership is debating whether it’s worth the trouble and expense of recovering the F/A-18, said James Holmes, who chairs the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

There was no doubt at all when it was “imperative not to let potential opponents get their hands on stealth technology, let alone all of the sensor and computer capabilities that make the F-35 what it is,” said Holmes.

US, allies weigh providing Ukraine with fighter jets

The Washington Post

Senior U.S. officials acknowledged Wednesday that the United States and its allies are considering whether to provide Ukraine with new fighter jets and the training needed to operate them, a move that would dramatically expand Western involvement in the war with Russia.

Gen. Charles Brown, chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, said that although he would not speculate what type of aircraft might be transferred, discussions are ongoing about how to reinforce Ukraine’s fleet, including with new planes. The

Ukrainian air force has been outgunned by Russia since the invasion began Feb. 24, sparingly flying an assortment of MiG jets and other Cold War-era planes.

Brown said there are several possibilities, including American-made fighters or some made in Europe. Options include the Gripen fighter made in Sweden, the Rafale made in France and the Eurofighter Typhoon, which is built by a consortium of companies in several countries.

“It’ll be something non-Russian, I can probably tell you that,” Brown said during an ap-

pearance at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado. “But I can’t tell you exactly what it’s going to be.”

The prospect of training Ukrainian pilots to operate new aircraft has traction in Congress; last week, the House voted to dedicate \$100 million to the endeavor as part of its version of the annual defense authorization bill. Thus far, however, Pentagon leaders have declined to endorse such a plan.

“There’s been no decisions on any of that,” Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday at a news conference alongside

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. “But we do examine a wide variety of options, to include pilot training.”

Austin indicated that, for now, the Biden administration’s priority remains the artillery war Ukraine’s troops are waging in the country’s east.

“Right now, we’re focused on helping them to be successful in the fight that they’re in, and employing the weapons systems they’re going to need to be successful in that fight,” he said. “In terms of predicting where we’re going to be with pilot training in months or years, I won’t venture to do that.”

USAF focuses on defeating Iran's drones

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

Neutering the threat of Iranian aerial drones and regaining full air superiority in the Middle East is one of the key goals for the new top U.S. Air Force commander in the region.

Maj. Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich took charge of 9th Air Force (Air Forces Central) in a ceremony Thursday at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, succeeding Lt. Gen. Gregory Guillot, who helmed the unit during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan last year.

The command manages the five expeditionary wings that provide U.S. air power across 21 countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, with missions that include combat airstrikes, surveillance and supply.

U.S. combat jets still have the advantage in the skies of the Middle East, but Iran has adapted its tactics and made great strides because of its drones, Grynkeiwich said.

"If an adversary is able to do what they want and we can't stop it, they have localized air superiority," Grynkeiwich said.

His comments dovetail with what former U.S. Central Command chief Kenneth McKenzie told Congress this spring. The U.S. is "operating without complete air superiority" for the first time since the Korean War because of Iran's drone capabilities, McKenzie said.

CENTCOM's current boss, Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, presided over the command change ceremony Thursday.

"My charge from General Ku-

rilla is to figure out, 'How can we regain a level of control in the air, so this threat is neutered,'" Grynkeiwich said.

Iran's drones are among the most advanced in the world and made an outsized impact in proxy wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, experts and U.S. military officials have said.

Earlier this month, senior U.S. officials said Iran is planning to train and equip Russian forces with drones for use in Ukraine.

In January, Iran-backed Houthi rebels launched several missile and drone attacks into the United Arab Emirates, with targets that included Al Dhafra Air Base, which hosts the U.S.'s 380th Air Expeditionary Wing.

The various U.S. military branches created different systems to counter the specific

drones they faced, but these systems don't communicate with each other well enough, Grynkeiwich said, adding that better coordination and technology are needed.

In addition to dealing with Iran, the U.S. must maintain regional partnerships to prevent Russia and China from gaining a foothold in the Middle East, Grynkeiwich said.

He also listed the need to contain international terrorist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

The U.S. still has a basic understanding of what is happening in Afghanistan, Grynkeiwich said, but he added that it has become more difficult to keep tabs on terrorist groups in that country since the U.S. withdrawal last year.

Monkeypox case confirmed at US Navy base in Naples

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The first case of monkeypox has been confirmed within the Naval Support Activity Naples community, officials announced Thursday.

U.S. Naval Hospital Naples was working with "Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (in Germany) and the Defense Health Agency Region-Europe to ensure testing and vaccine capabilities are in place to support the Naples community," according to a post on the hospital's Facebook page.

The post did not indicate if the infected person was a sailor or another community member. It also didn't say when the case was discovered, or if the person was quarantined.

"While it remains a low health risk as assessed by the World Health Organization, this does warrant awareness and taking

protective measures," the hospital said.

In June, an American service member in Stuttgart, Germany, was diagnosed with the virus. That person was infected with the West African variant, which generally is mild and has limited human-to-human transmission. The case was believed to be the first involving a U.S. military member.

As of Tuesday, European officials had identified at least 9,281 monkeypox cases in 31 countries as reported through the European Surveillance System, according to a WHO report. Of those, 9,276 were laboratory confirmed.

The virus spreads through direct contact with infectious body fluids, rash, scabs and respiratory secretions. It typically causes fever, chills, rash, and lesions on the face or genitals, the hospital said.

Biden: US military frowns on a Pelosi trip to Taiwan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that U.S. military officials believe it's "not a good idea" for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to visit Taiwan at the moment.

Biden's comments in an exchange with reporters came a day after the Chinese Foreign Ministry said it would take "resolute and strong measures" should Pelosi proceed with reported plans to visit Taiwan in the coming weeks.

"Well, I think that the military thinks it's not a good idea right now," Biden said in response to a question about Pelosi's reported trip. "But I don't know what the status of it is."

The president stopped short of suggesting that Pelosi not travel to Taiwan.

Pelosi was originally scheduled to visit in April but had to

postpone after she tested positive for COVID-19. She would be the highest-ranking American lawmaker to visit the close U.S. ally since Newt Gingrich, a Republican, traveled there 25 years ago when he was House speaker.

The Financial Times reported on Tuesday that Pelosi planned to move forward with her visit to Taipei in the next month. Her office declined to comment, saying the office does not confirm or deny the speaker's international travel in advance, due to longstanding security protocols.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijiang said such a visit would "severely undermine China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, gravely impact the foundation of China-U.S. relations and send a seriously wrong signal to Taiwan independence forces."

Biden positive for COVID, has 'mild symptoms'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden tested positive for COVID-19 on Thursday and is experiencing “very mild symptoms,” the White House said.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden has begun taking Paxlovid, an antiviral drug designed to reduce the severity of the disease.

She said Biden has “very mild symptoms” and “will isolate at the White House while continuing to carry out all of his duties fully.” She said Biden has been in contact with members of the White House staff

by phone and will participate in his planned meetings at the White House “via phone and Zoom from the residence.”

The White House released a letter from Biden’s physician, Dr. Kevin O’Connor, that said the president has a runny nose and “fatigue, with an occasional dry cough, which started yesterday evening.”

Biden, 79, is fully vaccinated, after getting two doses of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine shortly before taking office, a first booster shot in September and an additional dose March 30.

O’Connor wrote in his letter about the president’s treatment plan: “I anticipate that he will respond favorably” to Paxlovid “as most maximally protected patients do.”

Jean-Pierre said Biden had last tested negative on Tuesday, and he will stay isolated until he tests negative again. Biden had planned to visit Pennsylvania on Thursday to talk about his crime prevention plans and attend a Democratic fundraiser, and then spend a long weekend in Delaware. His appearances and travel are canceled.

First lady Jill Biden spoke to reporters as she arrived at a school in Detroit on Thursday, telling them she had just gotten off the phone with her husband.

“He’s doing fine,” she said. “He’s feeling good.”

The first lady, who was wearing a mask, said she tested negative earlier in the day.

She will keep her full schedule in Michigan and Georgia on Thursday, though she will be following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on masking and distancing, said Michael LaRosa, her spokesperson.

Jobless claims at highest levels in over 8 months

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits last week rose to the highest level in more than eight months in what may be a sign that the labor market is weakening.

Applications for jobless aid for the week ending July 16 rose by 7,000 to 251,000, up from the previous week’s 244,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. That’s the most since Nov. 13, 2021, when 265,000 Americans applied for benefits.

Analysts surveyed by the data firm FactSet expected the number to come in at 242,000.

First-time applications generally reflect layoffs.

The four-week average for claims, which smooths out some of the week-to-week volatility, rose by 4,500 from the previous week, to 240,500.

The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending July 9 rose by 51,000 from the previous week, to 1,384,000. That figure has been near 50-year lows for months.

Earlier this month, the Labor Department reported that em-

ployers added 372,000 jobs in June, a surprisingly robust gain and similar to 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 earlier in July 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 still nearly two job openings for every unemployed person.

Consumer prices are still soaring, up 9.1% in June compared with a year earlier, the biggest yearly increase since 1981, the government reported last week.

Though the number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits last week increased, the total number of those actually collecting benefits fell. The Labor Department also reported last week that inflation at the wholesale level climbed 11.3% in June from a year earlier.

Major Ukraine city struck as Russia expands goals

Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine — Russian shelling pounded a densely populated area in Ukraine’s second-largest city Thursday, killing at least three people and injuring at least 23 others with a barrage that struck a mosque, a medical facility and a shopping area, according to officials and witnesses.

Police in the northeast city of Kharkiv said cluster bombs hit Barabashovo Market, where Associated Press journalists saw a woman crying over her dead husband’s body. Local officials said the shelling also struck a bus stop, a gym and a residential building.

The bombardment came after Russia reiterated its plans to seize territories beyond eastern Ukraine, where the Russian military has spent months trying to conquer Ukraine’s Donbas region, which is south of Kharkiv. The Russian declaration Wednesday came after Ukrainian officials aired plans to try to recapture Russian-occupied areas near the country’s southern Black Sea coast.

Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov said the attacks early Thursday

targeted one of the most crowded areas of the city, which had a prewar population of about 1.4 million.

“The Russian army is randomly shelling Kharkiv, peaceful residential areas, civilians are being killed,” Terekhov said.

At the market, desperate screams of Sabina Pogorelets pierced the air as she begged Ukrainian police to let her embrace her husband, Adam, whose body was lying partly covered with cloth next to a small stall. A bloody wound could be seen on his head as policemen gently pulled his wife away so medical workers could take away his body.

“Please! I need to hold his hand!” Pogorelets cried.

Nearby, a man hugged his small daughter as he and other visitors stood in shock. Emergency teams treated at least two of the wounded in nearby ambulances.

The Kharkiv regional governor, Oleh Syniehubov, said four people were in grave condition and a child was among those wounded in the shelling. Russian forces also shelled wheat fields, setting them on fire, he said.

Jan. 6 panel probes Trump's 187 minutes as Capitol was attacked

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House Jan. 6 committee was to hold its final hearing of the summer the way the series began — vividly making the case that Donald Trump's lies about a stolen election fueled the grisly U.S. Capitol attack, which he did nothing to stop but instead "gleefully" watched on television at the White House.

Thursday's prime-time hearing will dive into the 187 minutes that Trump failed to act on Jan. 6, 2021, despite pleas for help from aides, allies and even his family.

The panel intends to show how the defeated president's attempt to overturn Joe Biden's election victory has left the United States facing enduring questions about the resiliency of its democracy.

"A profound moment of reckoning for America," said Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., a member of the committee.

With live testimony from two former White House aides, and excerpts from its trove of more than 1,000 interviews, the nearly two-hour session will add a closing chapter to the past six weeks of hearings that at times have captivated the nation.

Returning to prime time for the first time since the series of hearings began, the panel aimed to show just how close the U.S. came to what one retired federal judge testifying this summer called a constitutional crisis.

The events of Jan. 6 will be outlined "minute by minute," said the panel's vice chair, Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.

"You will hear that Donald Trump never picked up the

phone that day to order his administration to help," Cheney said.

"He did not call the military. His Secretary of Defense received no order. He did not call his Attorney General. He did not talk to the Department of Homeland Security," Cheney said. "[Vice President] Mike Pence did all of those things; Donald Trump did not."

Former White House aides who had close proximity to power were set to testify Thursday.

Matt Pottinger, who was deputy national security adviser, and Sarah Matthews, then his press aide, both submitted their resignations on Jan. 6, 2021, after what they saw that day. Trump has dismissed the hearings on social media and regarded much of the testimony as fake.

Man saves 5 from Ind. house fire

Associated Press

LAFAYETTE, Ind. — An Indiana man ran into a burning home and saved five people, including a 6-year-old girl whom he was holding when he jumped out of a second-floor window.

But Nick Bostic, 25, of Lafayette, says he's no hero and that the serious injuries he suffered were "all worth it."

Bostic was driving early on July 11 in the northwestern Indiana city when he saw a house in flames. He stopped and ran inside to alert its residents.

"I slammed on the brakes, I turned the steering wheel, I did a 180. I ran into the back of the house and I was yelling for anybody. Four faces, three or four faces, came out the top," he told WLFI-TV.

An 18-year-old woman was in the home babysitting her three siblings, ages 1, 6 and 13, along with a 13-year-old friend of the 13-year-old sibling, while the four siblings' parents were out playing darts, The Washington Post reported.

Bostic said the 18-year-old was able to get three of the children out, but she told him one child was still missing, prompting him to search the smoke-filled home for that child.

"I heard a faint whine, a faint crying noise and I went down there till I found that baby," he said.

Because of the dense smoke, he said his only option was to exit through a second-floor window. Bostic punched out the glass and jumped to safety with the 6-year-old girl in his arms. He suffered multiple injuries but the girl only suffered a minor cut to her foot. Police body camera video captured the aftermath of the jump, with Bostic backlit by the burning home and walking toward first responders, the girl in his arms.

Two battle it out for Conservative votes in next UK prime minister race

Associated Press

LONDON — The two candidates vying to become Britain's next prime minister began a head-to-head battle Thursday for the votes of Conservative Party members who will choose the country's new leader.

Former Treasury chief Rishi Sunak is promising fiscal prudence, while Foreign Secretary Liz Truss is offering immediate tax cuts to members of the right-wing governing party, which is divided and demoralized after three turbulent years under departing Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Sunak and Truss were chosen Wednesday by Conservative lawmakers — whittled down from an initial field of 11 candidates — as finalists to replace Johnson, who quit as party leader on July 7 after months of ethics scandals. He remains prime minister until his successor is chosen. The result of the party leadership contest is due on Sept. 5 and that person automatically becomes Britain's next prime minister.

Only about 180,000 Conservative Party mem-

bers have a vote in choosing the country's next leader. The rest of the U.K.'s 67 million people must watch the campaign from the sidelines, as the candidates spar in televised debates and party meetings — against a backdrop of soaring prices, growing climate extremes that broke U.K. temperature records this week and the war in Ukraine.

The winner of the Conservative contest will not have to face British voters until 2024, unless he or she chooses to call an early general election.

Odds makers say the favorite is Truss, who has led the U.K.'s response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and is running as a low-tax, small-state conservative in the mold of Margaret Thatcher.

In interviews Thursday, Truss said she had the "toughness" and "grit" to lead the country in troubled times.

"We are in very difficult times. We need to be bold," she told the BBC. "We cannot have business as usual for the challenge we face."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Owner drives off in van free from giant sinkhole

NY NEW YORK — Street repairs were underway Tuesday after a van fell into a giant sinkhole in New York's Bronx borough.

A sinkhole the length of three cars opened up on Radcliff Avenue in the Morris Park neighborhood after heavy rains Monday. Videos that aired on local news stations show a white van tip over on its left side and then plunge into the huge hole.

The van's owner told reporters at the scene that he wasn't worried. "I'm all right," he said. "Lose the van ... it's life."

The sinkhole was being filled on Tuesday and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection was investigating the cause of the roadway collapse, department spokesperson Edward Timbers said.

Meanwhile, the van was hoisted out of the hole and set upright; the owner got in and drove it off, Timbers said.

Chicken hitches ride, ends up 13 miles away

VT HINESBURG — A Vermont family's chicken is back home after hitching a ride in the undercarriage of their pickup truck and ending up 13 miles away in the state's largest city late last month — a journey that included speeds of 65 mph on an interstate.

Someone having coffee on Burlington's Church Street Marketplace, an outdoor pedestrian mall, spotted the chicken and knew the bird was in a predicament, WCAX-TV reported.

"That's a chicken! That's a

chicken on Church Street and I don't know why it's here," Lo Fasano told the news station. "What can I do now aside from find who it belongs to?"

Fasano took the chicken home, gave her food and a place to nest, and turned to social media. A Facebook post led to finding the chicken's owners in Hinesburg.

The chicken is now home. Because of her adventurous spirit, the family changed her name from Bug to Amelia after Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly alone across the Atlantic Ocean.

Juvenile charged in fires, vandalism at churches

MD BETHESDA — A juvenile has been arrested and charged after fires and vandalism at two Maryland churches, officials announced Monday.

Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service spokesman Pete Piringer said the matter is being considered in juvenile court. The incidents occurred July 9 and 10 at two churches on Old Georgetown Road in the North Bethesda area, Piringer said.

No motive behind the incidents could be learned immediately. There was no ongoing threat to the community, Piringer said.

Rollout of logo similar to Nazi symbol paused

GA MARIETTA — The rollout of a new logo for an Atlanta area elementary school has been paused after parents noted similarities to a Nazi symbol, though a school

district said the design was based on a U.S. Army colonel's eagle wings.

The Cobb County School District said Tuesday that it has halted distribution of the new logo for East Side Elementary School in Marietta after it drew condemnation on social media. The logo depicts an eagle, the school's mascot, over the school's initials ES.

The Nazi eagle, which was developed in the 1920s and later became a symbol for white supremacists, depicts an eagle holding a swastika in its talons.

Georgia's second-largest school district announced plans to delay the new logo while "immediately reviewing needed changes."

East Side Elementary is across the street from a synagogue.

Man sentenced in \$27M fake COVID aid attempt

CA LOS ANGELES — A Southern California man who tried to obtain \$27 million in unemployment benefits by falsely claiming his business was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic was sentenced Tuesday to more than 11 years in federal prison.

Robert Benlevi, 53, of the Encino area of Los Angeles, received a 135-month sentence following his March conviction for bank fraud, money laundering and making false statements to a financial institution, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a statement.

In 2020, Benlevi submitted 27 applications for forgivable loans under the Paycheck Protection Program, prosecutors said.

The applications to four banks were made on behalf of eight companies that Benlevi owned. Benlevi claimed that each company had 100 employees and an average monthly payroll of \$400,000 "even though he knew that the companies did not have any employees or payroll expenses," the DOJ said.

Benlevi sought \$27 million in funding to meet expenses and received \$3 million that he spent on personal expenses, authorities said.

Sea turtle healthy, to be part of Tour de Turtles

FL MARATHON — A juvenile green sea turtle that underwent multiple surgeries to remove cauliflower-like tumors was released last week off the Florida Keys with a satellite-tracking transmitter.

"Tortie" was treated at the Keys-based Turtle Hospital after being rescued last December. The turtle was unable to dive and suffering from fibropapillomatosis — a debilitating tumor-causing disease that develops from a herpes-like virus that affects sea turtle species around the world.

The turtle's satellite tracker will be monitored as part of the 15th annual Tour de Turtles, an online "race" organized by the Sea Turtle Conservancy that follows the long-distance migration of a contingent of sea turtles over three months.

Tortie, who was released Friday, is competing in the hard-shell turtles' division, with tracking to begin Aug. 1.

— From wire reports

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Yankees begin second half on top

Associated Press

Aaron Judge and the New York Yankees, Mookie Betts and the Los Angeles Dodgers, Jose Altuve and the Houston Astros — they're all just looking for more of the same. The Atlanta Braves' title defense is rolling along, and Julio Rodriguez and the Seattle Mariners are looking to crash the playoff party.

As baseball returns from the All-Star break — all packed up and ready to go after the AL's 3-2 victory at Dodger Stadium on Tuesday night — the post-season picture is quite crowded, thanks to the addition of a third wild card in each league.

The October equation can change in a hurry, too. Just ask Rodriguez and the Mariners, winners of 14 in a row. Or the contenders looking at the Aug. 2 trade deadline, with Cincinnati Reds ace Luis Castillo, Chicago Cubs catcher Willson Contreras and, yes, Washington Nationals slugger Juan Soto, all believed to be on the market to varying degrees.

Welcome back, indeed. "We still got a long way to go," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "A lot of baseball to play."

Roberts' club is one of three teams with at least a nine-game lead in their respective divisions heading into the second half. Led by Betts and Freddie Freeman, Los Angeles is 10 games up on Manny Machado and the San Diego Padres in the NL West.

"Just a lot of good things happened in the first half for us," Freeman said.

Altuve and Houston still have a nine-game lead in the AL West, even with the win streak for Seattle. The Astros and Mariners close out their season series with seven more games this month, beginning Friday night in Seattle.

"I thought the Mariners had a good team from the very beginning, and I told everybody that then at the time, they finished extremely strong last year, and you know, you have to beat them," Houston manager

Dusty Baker said. "They are not going to beat themselves."

The AL East has been the best division in baseball — every team is .500 or better, even the 46-46 Baltimore Orioles — but that hasn't affected New York very much at all. The Yankees begin the second half with a gaudy 64-28 record and a whopping 13-game lead over Tampa Bay.

While Giancarlo Stanton has delivered his usual power and Clay Holmes has been one of the game's most dominant relievers, it's Judge leading the way for the Bronx Bombers. He is batting .284 with 33 homers and 70 RBIs, joining Shohei Ohtani among the frontrunners for AL MVP.

"I think he continues to get better and better as a leader, which has always been, I think, a positive trait of his," New York manager Aaron Boone said. "But I would just say he's a more complete, refined, veteran player that is also in the prime of his career."

Judge and the Yankees are trying to chase down the franchise's first championship since 2009 and No. 28 overall. But there are all sorts of potential roadblocks — both nearby and further away.

The crosstown Mets are on top of the NL East, looking to hold off the Braves and take the franchise's first division title since 2015. Each of baseball's Central divisions had a mediocre first half, but Milwaukee and St. Louis have an array of stars, and Carlos Correa could power Minnesota back into the playoffs after it finished last in the AL Central in 2021.

Even the Chicago White Sox, who under-performed early on, showed some positive signs while taking three of four at the division-leading Twins in the run-up to the break.

"We've been talking about it for a while. We're going to turn the corner," White Sox right-hander Michael Kopech said. "Things are going to start going our way."

Guardians improving faster than expected

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — It's still three hours from the scheduled first pitch and the young Cleveland Guardians are already playing games.

Meet the kinder-Guardians.

Jumping on an electric scooter, pitcher Triston McKenzie rolls by a ping-pong table and barely taps the brakes while jetting past the Mario Kart arcade game, whose joystick is often manned by All-Star third baseman José Ramírez.

In the corner, utilityman Ernie Clement fires shots on a Nerf basketball court with a three-point line taped to the clubhouse carpet. The team's trash-talking chess club will get a match going soon, and a card game will break

out before the Guardians take the field.

"This is absolutely as much fun as I've ever had, and it's not just the team," said catcher Austin Hedges, who at 29 is one of Cleveland's oldest players. "We enjoy each other and pull for each other. There's no cliqueness."

"I don't think that happens in every clubhouse."

Under manager Terry Francona, baseball's youngest team — the Guardians' average batting age (26.1) and average pitching age (26.5) are below Triple-A averages — is having fun while also developing into a playoff contender sooner than expected.

They're a work in progress, but making strides.

"We're so young," said the 63-

year-old Francona, invigorated by his team's youth in his 10th season with Cleveland after health issues sidelined him the previous two. "But that's not an excuse. When you have youth, you have some enthusiasm that comes with it."

"We make mistakes, but we don't play dumb baseball," he said. "I get a kick out of that."

The Guardians reached the All-Star break at 46-44, only two games behind first-place Minnesota in the AL Central despite an uneven unofficial first half that included scheduling challenges due to wet weather.

Perhaps it was fitting their last game before the break was postponed — Cleveland's ninth home rainout.

And while they lack household names or national TV appearances, the Guardians, whose solid first half could prompt the front office to make moves at the Aug. 2 trading deadline, are a team to watch, both this season and beyond.

In Ramírez, they've got one of the game's best all-around players and he's under contract through 2028 after signing a seven-year, \$141 million deal. Ramírez hit the break leading the AL with 75 RBIs.

Second baseman Andrés Giménez, acquired last year when Cleveland sent Francisco Lindor to the New York Mets, made the All-Star team in his first full season and has the look of a perennial star.

High expectations again for UGA, Alabama

Associated Press

ATLANTA — It's no easy task to live with expectations at the top of the Southeastern Conference.

Alabama's 2021 season has been described as a disappointment even though the Crimson Tide won the SEC title and played in the national championship game.

Georgia won its first national championship since 1980 by beating Alabama. After having 15 players selected in the NFL Draft, including three defensive linemen, Georgia has faced criticisms that its time at the top will be only a one-year stay.

The Bulldogs are viewed as underdogs to the Tide in this year's SEC race. Alabama, Ohio State and possibly others are more popular picks in early national championship projections.

Coach Kirby Smart said Wednesday that he doesn't

worry about his Bulldogs getting complacent.

"I don't think any of our guys would rest on the laurels because we don't really have a lot of guys that have laurels to rest on," Smart said at the SEC Media Days. "I think that's the biggest thing because everybody keeps bringing up you won a national championship, so do you worry about complacency? Well the guys who won it, they're mostly in NFL camps, so there's a lot of hungry guys on our team."

Alabama standout linebacker Will Anderson said just winning the SEC title last season wasn't enough.

"The biggest goal of our team is always to win a national championship and we didn't meet that goal last year," Anderson said Tuesday. "So that season was not the successful season that we wanted, because all the blood, sweat and tears we put in, all the hard work, all

the long meetings — is to get to the national championship and win it. And we got there and didn't finish the way we wanted to finish."

If Smart's read on his new starters' motivation is correct, the Bulldogs' hunger is most prominent on defense. There were five Georgia defensive players selected in the first round of the NFL Draft, including defensive end Travon Walker as the No. 1 overall pick by Jacksonville. Three more were picked later in the draft.

Georgia linebacker Nolan Smith said he attended Walker's draft party and wasn't worried about the impact of the draft on this season's defense.

"It made me really happy, seeing all my friends realize their dreams," Smith said. "There's nothing more that a friend should ask for than to see your other friends be successful."

Including LSU in 2019, Ala-

bama in 2020 and Georgia, the SEC has had three different teams win the past three national championships. That can provide encouragement for coaches trying to build championship programs, including first-year Florida coach Billy Napier.

"I think we're all aware if you can win your division, the championship here, you can be a national championship contender," Napier said. "The path, it's been proven. ... We're consumed with Florida right now. We've got a lot of grass to mow, right? It's our grass, not anybody else's. We've got a lot of work to do."

Georgia has won the SEC East four of the last five years and is 27-2 in the division since 2017.

"I think we're all aware there's a large gap between Georgia and No. 2, and we're working on closing that," Kentucky coach Mark Stoops said.

Despite record revenue, ACC looking for a boost

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Atlantic Coast Conference commissioner Jim Phillips leads a league bringing in record revenues, with more and more money going to member schools.

It's also a league struggling to keep up with peers in the Big Ten and Southeastern conferences.

League schools have talked for years about finding ways to close that growing gap. But as the Big Ten and SEC expand to add marquee names, the ACC's concern becomes more pressing and even stirs uncertainty about its long-range future in terms of whether schools might eventually try to chase money elsewhere.

For now, that means trying to squeeze more money out of a long-running TV deal, kick-

ing around ideas and even holding out hope that Notre Dame might one day shed football independence to join the ACC and boost the bottom line.

At ACC Kickoff preseason media days on Wednesday, Phillips said "all options are on the table."

"It's significant ... so it deserves your attention," Phillips said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It deserves creativity. It deserves all that you have to try to figure a way for a path forward that really makes sense and that brings additional value to the conference."

The league's deal with ESPN, which included the long-sought 2019 launch of its own network, runs through 2036. It also has an extension of a grant-of-rights provision

that gives the league control of media rights for any school that attempts to leave for the duration of the deal, which is a move to deter defections in future realignment.

That appears to have the ACC on stable footing for the immediate future. But for how long? Figuring out a way to better grow the financial picture could determine that.

Phillips described the league and ESPN as partners with a mutual interest in making the ACC Network as profitable as possible to support the league.

"How can they have a partnership and an asset and not want it to really be thriving over the next 14 years?" Phillips told the AP. "That doesn't make any sense. So they are motivated. And when you talk about (how) we're considering multiple options, it's just that.

"You're not trying to eliminate potential opportunities, you're trying to create. ... You can do something with your network. You can do something with events. You can do something certainly with expansion if you so choose. But there has to be a value in whatever move you end up making."

The ACC's most recent tax filing listed a record \$578.3 million in total revenue while distributing an average of \$36.1 million per school for the 2020-21 season, which included Notre Dame as a one-year full football member for scheduling purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, TV revenue has increased from roughly \$288.6 million in the 2018-19 fiscal year before the launch of the ACC Network to \$397.4 million in 2020-21.

Semenya finishes 13th in 5,000 heat

Associated Press

EUGENE, Ore. — In one way, this race was like so many in the past for Caster Semenya. When she crossed the finish line, there wasn't anyone near her.

This race, though, was the 5,000 meters — not her specialty, the 800 — and when Semenya crossed the line all alone, she was in 13th place.

She failed to advance through the opening heat at the world championships Wednesday, an expected result for the South African who is barred from her best event because of rules that demand she take hormone-reducing drugs to enter races between 400 meters and one mile.

Semenya finished the 12½-lap race — run in blistering 91-degree heat — in 15 minutes, 46.12 seconds, 54 seconds behind the winner, Gudaf Tsegay of Ethiopia. Given the circumstances, Semenya said this did not feel like defeat, and she was nowhere near giving up.

"I think it is great to be able to run here," she said. "Just being able to finish the 5K, for me, it is a blessing. I am learning and I am willing to learn even more. It was hot, I could not keep up with the pace, I tried to stick as much as I can. But it is a part of the game."

Semenya lost an appeal of a World Athletics regulation that made women with certain intersex conditions ineligible in races between 400 meters and a mile. Since 2019, she hasn't raced in a major 800-meter race, the event in which she has won two Olympic and three world titles.

But there's nothing keeping her from the 5,000, and even though she had virtually no chance of winning, she came to Oregon anyway. Her personal best in the race is 15:31.50, which is outside the world-championships qualifying standard. But she moved into the race after some higher-ranked

runners did not enter.

American Karissa Schweizer, who finished fifth in Semenya's heat, said "it's pretty inspiring that she's making most of her effort and she's still out here competing at a world level."

"She's in obviously a different situation," Schweizer said. "She can't control that. She has to move up to a different event and the 5K is a tough event. We just have to look it as that regard — that she's at a world-level in a 5K."

Semenya's case is the most recognizable of a handful of instances involving intersex and transgender athletes in sports.

Semenya is not transgender, but her case carries strong implications for how transgender athletes are treated and classified. Semenya has never publicly identified herself as intersex or having the intersex condition called 46, XY difference in sex development (DSD). But she essentially acknowledged having

the condition when she appealed the World Athletics rules.

World Athletics President Sebastian Coe, who has hinted that the rules could be updated later this year, but probably not in a way that would restore Semenya's eligibility in the 800, said science regarding the effects of testosterone on athletes has guided all World Athletics' decisions.

"The issue for me is very simple," Coe said in an interview the day before Semenya's race. "Of course, I recognize that both with DSD and with transgender, these are societal issues. I don't have the luxury, however, of being intimately involved in that debate. My responsibility is to protect the integrity of women's sport."

Semenya has been an outspoken critic of the rules, most recently saying through her lawyer that they are "an affront to the spirit of the sport."

Murray, Cardinals agree to long-term contract

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — Kyler Murray has agreed to a long-term contract that will keep the quarterback with the Arizona Cardinals through the 2028 season.

The two-time Pro Bowl selection was taken with the No. 1 overall pick out of Oklahoma after he won the Heisman Trophy and has largely delivered in his quest to make the Cardinals a better franchise. The team announced the new contract on Thursday.

Arizona had a 5-10-1 record during his rookie season in 2019 but the Cardinals improved to 11-6 last season before losing to the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC Wild Card round during the playoffs.

The move brings an end to a strange, passive-aggressive off-season contract squabble. At

one point, Murray wiped his social media accounts of all references to the Cardinals and it wasn't clear if the franchise was ready to make a long-term investment.

Now that's all cleared up and Murray can take the field for training camp next week knowing his football future is secure.

Harden, 76ers agree on 2-year, \$68 million deal

James Harden has agreed to terms on a two-year contract to stay with the Philadelphia 76ers and will make about \$14.5 million less this coming season than he could have earned under his previous deal, a person with knowledge of the negotiations said Wednesday.

Harden will sign a deal worth slightly over \$68 million, paying

him about \$33 million this season and with a \$35 million player option for the 2023-24 season, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the team has not announced the deal.

Harden had a \$47.4 million option for this coming season that he declined last month, saying he wanted to give the 76ers flexibility to improve their roster and compete for a championship.

Texas A&M WR Smith suspended after arrest

COLLEGE STATION, Texas — Texas A&M receiver Aini Smith was arrested early Wednesday on charges of driving while intoxicated, unlawful carrying of a weapon and pos-

session of less than 2 ounces of marijuana, according to Brazos County jail records.

Smith, 21, was arrested by Texas A&M police and was booked into the Brazos County jail. He posted \$8,000 bond and was released later Wednesday, according to jail records. The records did not indicate if he had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Smith has been suspended from the football team per athletic department policy following his arrest, according to Alan Cannon, a spokesman for Texas A&M. Cannon added that coach Jimbo Fisher was aware of the situation and looking into it.

Smith was scheduled to attend SEC Media Days on Thursday in Atlanta with Fisher and two other players.