

N. Korea warns of spy craft shoot down

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea on Monday accused the United States of violating its airspace with reconnaissance aircraft and warned that Pyongyang may shoot them down in the future.

North Korea claimed U.S. surveillance aircraft, including the crewed RC-135 and unmanned RQ-4 Global Hawk, flew over waters east and west of the Korean Peninsula between July 2 and Sunday “to conduct provocative aerial espionage,” according to a statement from the country’s Defense Ministry published Monday by the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

An aircraft “illegally intruded” into North Korea’s airspace over the East Sea by “tens of kilometers, several times,” according to the statement.

“The U.S. will surely have to pay a dear price for its provocative air espionage,” the ministry said, adding “there is no guarantee” that U.S. aircraft would not be shot

down over the East Sea. The East Sea is more commonly known as the Sea of Japan. South Korea’s military denied that its joint aerial reconnaissance with the U.S. had violated North Korea’s airspace and described their operations as routine.

“North Korea’s claim is not true that U.S. spy planes violated its airspace,” South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Lee Sung-jun said at a Monday news briefing. “We strongly urge North Korea to immediately stop committing acts of creating tension through untrue claims like this.”

U.S. Forces Korea did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Monday.

U.S. and South Korean aircraft have flown

in joint air exercises and B-52H Stratofortress bomber escort missions in the wake of North Korea’s missile launches. The communist regime has fired 14 ballistic missiles in 10 separate days of testing so far this year.

North Korea has intercepted U.S. aircraft flying near North Korea several times since the 1950-53 Korean War.

On March 2, 2003, four North Korean fighters intercepted a U.S. RC-135S Cobra Ball reconnaissance aircraft flying over 100 miles from North Korea’s eastern coast, according to a CBS News report published two days later.

The U.S. spy plane was in international airspace when the North Korean jets came within 50 feet and locked onto the aircraft with its weapons radar before leaving, U.S. officials reportedly said at the time.

In a separate incident on April 15, 1969, a U.S. EC-121M Warning Star surveillance aircraft was shot down by North Korean jets over the East Sea, killing all 31 crew members.

Japan extends Patriot unit’s stay ahead of launch

By KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japan’s Ministry of Defense is extending its deployment of Patriot missiles on Ishigaki Island ahead of an anticipated second attempt by North Korea to launch a surveillance satellite into orbit, an Ishigaki city spokesman said Monday.

The ministry and Ishigaki city agreed to extend until Aug. 31 the presence of a Patriot Advanced Capability 3, or PAC 3, missile-defense system in Painuhama, where a new beach is scheduled to open Tuesday, a spokesman for the city’s construction division told Stars and Stripes by phone. Some government spokespeople in Japan are required to speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada ordered the missiles deployed to Ishigaki in May after North Korea announced plans to launch a “military surveillance satellite between May 31 and June 11.

“The Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Force will analyze and educate the information to build up an appropriate system.”

Yasukazu Hamada
Japanese Defense Minister

Ishigaki, a popular tourist destination, is 266 miles southwest of Okinawa across the Miyako Strait.

The Patriot’s deployment was delayed until June 2 due to strong winds from a passing typhoon.

A Joint Staff spokesman, citing “security reasons,” declined to comment Monday on details of the missile deployments on Ishigaki.

North Korea’s first attempt to launch

what it called a military spy satellite failed in flight May 31 and fell into the Sea of Japan, or East Sea.

A second launch will be conducted as soon as possible, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

“The Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Force will analyze and evaluate the information to build up an appropriate system,” Hamada said when asked at a June 20 press conference about a second launch.

The PAC-3 units were temporarily deployed at Ishigaki and Miyako in December 2012 and in February 2016 when North Korea launched multiple missiles that passed over Okinawa.

At the time, North Korea said it was launching satellites.

Multiple PAC-3 units have been stationed permanently on Okinawa since April 2013. The PAC-3 missile has a range of just over 18 miles and is designed to shoot down ballistic missiles, according to the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance.

NATO clears obstacle for Ukraine bid if it prevails

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

NATO is poised to put Ukraine on a fast track for membership, but any shot at entry into the U.S.-led security pact hinges on the outcome of its war with Russia, Ukrainian and alliance officials said Monday.

"I welcome this long-awaited decision that shortens our path to NATO," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said in a statement.

Intensive talks in the lead-up to NATO's summit this week in Vilnius, Lithuania, resulted in an agreement on removal of the Membership Action Plan as a requirement for Ukraine to join, Kuleba said.

That process typically involves a host of bureaucratic and military reforms designed to ensure that a prospective member is up to NATO standards.

While most new members must go through the reform process, which can drag on for years, Finland and Sweden were exempted from it.

When President Joe Biden and other heads of state gather in Vilnius starting Tuesday, the Russia-Ukraine war and its security implications will dominate the discussion.

Kyiv and member countries along NA-

TO's eastern flank have been pushing for a clear message that Ukraine's future is in NATO. Removing the action plan hurdle was a positive step forward, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda said Monday at a news conference with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

"Ukraine needs a specific signal that once conditions allow, it will become a real member of NATO," Nauseda said, adding that with its battlefield performance, the country has already proved itself up to NATO standards.

Stoltenberg did not address the issue of streamlining Ukraine's eventual path into NATO, saying those decisions will be formally announced during the summit.

Stoltenberg restated, however, that it would be impossible for Ukraine to gain entry as long as it is at war.

"Unless Ukraine prevails, there is no membership issue to be discussed at all," he said.

Predictions about the future course of the war vary greatly, with some experts saying the conflict could drag on for years.

Biden on Sunday also threw cold water on any notion that Ukraine could join the alliance during the war because such a move would turn NATO into a combatant.

DNA testing leads to ex-soldier in '78 death in Germany

Associated Press

DNA testing has led to the arrest of a Nebraska man who was repeatedly questioned over decades in the 1978 stabbing death of a woman while he was stationed with the U.S. Army in Germany, authorities said.

Tommy Molina, 69, was arrested in the western Nebraska city of Gering on June 21, the U.S. Marshals Service in Omaha said in a statement Thursday. He is awaiting extradition to Germany to face a murder charge.

German prosecutors in the Bavarian city of Schweinfurt believe Molina, 24 at the time, was having an extramarital affair with 18-year-old Cornelia Humpfer when she was killed April 20, 1978.

He was initially questioned days after the killing and then again in 1996, after he told his third wife, while intoxicated, that a woman with whom he'd been having an affair had revealed she was pregnant and that he killed her, authorities said in a complaint unsealed at his initial appearance June 30 in federal court in Lincoln, Neb.

If extradited, Molina will face murder charges in Germany that could lead to at least 15 years in prison. A date for his next hearing has not been set.

His public defender in the extradition case did not immediately return a call.

The case is laid out in the complaint, which seeks his extradition and includes documents from German prosecutors, the U.S. Army and the FBI.

The day after Humpfer was killed, her body was discovered on a roadside with 14 stab wounds in the neck and back. A witness said she had seen a small car with a green license plate used by the American military near where the woman's body was found. The vehicle description matched the Fiat 124 Molina owned at the time.

German authorities questioned Molina five days after the killing but didn't move forward with charges. He said he had been at home with his wife that night, and the wife said she couldn't remember the night.

Later, the availability of new DNA technology led investigators to reopen the file.

They got a blood sample from Molina in 2020 under a federal search warrant and confirmed that genetic traces from the suspect were on key parts of the victim's clothing, German prosecutors said.

Strikes kill 10 militants in Somalia

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Three airstrikes launched by American forces in Somalia over the weekend killed an estimated 10 al-Shabab militants, according to U.S. Africa Command.

The strikes occurred about 65 miles north of the coastal southern city of Kismayo, AFRICOM said in a statement Sunday, adding they were carried out in support of Somali forces attacked by al-Shabab.

AFRICOM did not release details about the units involved, but the strikes came on the heels of an explosion Thursday near Kismayo when a U.S. convoy hit a roadside bomb.

The blast did not cause any casualties,

AFRICOM said at the time.

On Sunday, AFRICOM described al-Shabab as the most violent of all al-Qaida affiliates and said the group "has proved both its will and capability to attack partner and U.S. forces and threaten U.S. security interests."

The U.S. mission in Somalia involves assistance to local military forces in their fight against the terrorist group, which has been waging a campaign against the Somali government for two decades.

In addition to advising troops, AFRICOM carries out periodic airstrikes in the country.

Several hundred U.S. troops now operate in Somalia.

Nassar stabbed multiple times in prison

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Disgraced sports doctor Larry Nassar, who was convicted of sexually abusing female gymnasts including Olympic medalists, was stabbed multiple times during an altercation with another inmate at a federal prison in Florida.

Two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press the attack happened Sunday at United States Penitentiary Coleman. The people said he was in stable condition Monday.

One of the people said Nassar had been stabbed in the back and in the chest. The prison was experiencing staffing shortages, and one of the people familiar with the matter said the officers assigned to the unit where Nassar was held were working mandated overtime shifts. The people were not authorized to publicly discuss details of the attack or the ongoing

investigation and spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity.

Nassar is serving decades in prison for convictions in state and federal courts. He admitted sexually assaulting athletes when he worked at Michigan State University and at Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics, which trains Olympians. Separately, Nassar pleaded guilty to possessing child pornography.

The federal Bureau of Prisons has experienced significant staffing shortages in the last few years, an issue thrust into the spotlight when disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein took his own life at a federal jail in New York in 2019. An Associated Press investigation in 2021 revealed nearly one-third of federal correctional officer positions were vacant nationwide, forcing prisons to use cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard inmates. The

staffing shortages have hampered the response to emergencies at other prisons, including suicides.

During victim impact statements in 2018, several athletes testified that over the course of Nassar's more than two decades of sexual abuse they had told adults, including coaches and athletic trainers, what was happening but that it went unreported.

More than 100 women, including Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles, collectively sought more than \$1 billion from the federal government for the FBI's failure to stop Nassar when agents became aware of allegations against him in 2015. He was arrested by Michigan State University police in 2016, more than a year later.

The Justice Department's inspector general said in July 2021

that the FBI made "fundamental" errors in investigating the sexual abuse allegations against Nassar and did not treat the case with the "utmost seriousness." More athletes said they were molested before the FBI swung into action.

The inspector general's investigation was spurred by allegations that the FBI failed to promptly address complaints made in 2015 against Nassar. USA Gymnastics had conducted its own internal investigation, and the organization's then-president, Stephen Penny, reported the allegations to the FBI's field office in Indianapolis. But it took months before the bureau opened a formal investigation.

At least 40 girls and women said they were molested over a 14-month period while the FBI was aware of other sexual abuse allegations involving Nassar.

Army financial counselor accused of bilking families

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

An Army Reserve major and financial counselor has been indicted on charges stemming from a scheme that defrauded grieving military families out of \$3 million in survivor benefits, according to the Justice Department.

Caz Craffy, also known as Carz Craffey, 41, of Colts Neck, N.J., was charged last week with wire fraud, making false statements in a loan application and securities fraud, among others.

The case has prompted congressional legislation intended to prevent families of fallen service members from being taken advantage of. The Washington Post reported in late June. The amendment to next year's defense policy bill would require stricter vetting of financial counselors employed by the Defense Department, the paper reported.

Craffy targeted at least two doz-

en Gold Star families, tricking them into investing in private brokerage accounts that he managed for his own financial gain, the Justice Department said in a statement Friday.

Gold Star families are those with an immediate family member who dies while on active duty. They're entitled to a \$100,000 survivor benefit and up to \$400,000 if the service member is enrolled in the military's life insurance plan.

As an Army civilian financial counselor at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., Craffy worked for an office that administered survivor benefits. His job was to provide survivors with financial information without offering an opinion on what they should do with the money. But according to court documents, he steered families toward investing in private financial firms for which he worked, employment he didn't disclose to the Army.

'Historic' rain floods roads in New York, New England

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Heavy rain washed out roads and forced evacuations in the Northeast on Monday as more downpours were forecast throughout the day. One person in New York drowned as she was trying to leave her home.

The slow-moving storm reached New England in the morning after hitting parts of New York and Connecticut. Heavy downpours with possible flash flooding were forecast in parts of Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine.

One of the worst hit places was New York's Hudson Valley, where rescuers found the body of a woman in her 30s whose home was surrounded by water. The force of the flash flooding dislodged boulders, which rammed the woman's house and damaged part of its wall, Orange County

Executive Steven Neuhaus said. Two other people escaped.

"She was trying to get through (the flooding) with her dog," Neuhaus said, "and she was overwhelmed by tidal-wave type waves."

He said many roads and bridges were washed out. Officials believed everyone was accounted for, but they were trying to reach people to make sure they were OK.

Officials say the storm has already wrought tens of millions of dollars in damage. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, said at a news conference Monday that the storm sent "cars swirling in our streets" and dumped a "historic" amount of rain.

Hochul announced a state of emergency Sunday for Orange County. That included the town of Cornwall, near the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, where many roads were flooded.

Putin hosted Prigozhin after brief mutiny

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin at the Kremlin days after the commander led a short-lived rebellion, a senior government spokesman said Monday, the latest twist in a baffling episode that has raised questions about the power and influence held by both men.

The three-hour meeting took place on June 29 and also involved commanders from Prigozhin's Wagner Group military contractor, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Putin gave an assessment of Wagner's actions on the battlefield in Ukraine — where the mercenaries have fought alongside Russian troops — and of the revolt itself. The Wagner forces pledged loyalty to Putin, according to Peskov.

The confirmation that Putin met face-to-face with Prigozhin, who led troops on a march to Moscow last month in order to demand a change of defense minister, was extraordinary. Though Putin branded Prigozhin a traitor as the revolt unfolded, the criminal case against the mercenary chief was later dropped and his ultimate fate remains

unclear.

Adding to the unusual nature of the meeting was that until very recently, Putin had denied any link between the state and Prigozhin's forces. Though mercenaries are illegal in Russia, Wagner troops have fought for Russian interests around the globe and played a vital role in the capture of Bakhmut in the war's longest and bloodiest battle.

But throughout the war, Prigozhin has criticized decisions made by Russia's top military brass, leading to tensions with the Kremlin that culminated on June 24 in an armed mutiny in which he led his fighters into Russia.

The rebellion severely weakened Putin's authority, even though Prigozhin claimed that the uprising was not aimed at the president but at removing Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and military chief Gen. Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin ended his mutiny after a deal was brokered for him to go to Belarus.

Russia's Defense Ministry published a video featuring Gerasimov on Monday — the first time he has been seen since the rebellion.

The twin updates appeared to be another attempt by the Kremlin to show it's in control after a turbulent period. But many questions remain, including about the deal that ended Prigozhin's revolt.

Days after the revolt, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Prigozhin was in Belarus. But last week the president said the mercenary chief was in Russia while his troops remained in their camps.

Peskov said that during the June 29 meeting, Putin offered an "assessment" of Wagner's actions on the battlefield in Ukraine and "of the events of June 24." The president also "listened to the explanations of the commanders and offered them options for further employment and further use in combat," the Kremlin spokesman said.

Meanwhile, a Russian airstrike on a school in southern Ukraine killed four adults as people gathered to receive humanitarian aid, the governor of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region said Monday, branding the attack "a war crime."

Three women and a man, all in their 40s, died in the strike Sunday in the town of Orikhiv, Gov. Yuriy Malashko said.

Dutch prime minister to leave politics after election

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the Netherlands' longest serving premier, said Monday he will leave politics after an early general election sparked by a dispute over migration that led to his government's resignation.

His decision means the end of nearly 13 years in power for the conservative leader sometimes called "Teflon Mark" because scandals that plagued his four different ad-

ministrations did not stick to him.

Rutte, 56, the leader of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or VVD, announced his decision at a hastily arranged parliamentary debate to discuss the fall of his latest governing coalition.

"Yesterday morning I made a decision that I will not be available again as a leader of the VVD. When a new Cabinet takes office after the elections, I will leave politics," he said.

Rutte called it a "personal decision, re-

gardless of the developments in recent weeks." There was no immediate indication who might replace Rutte as leader of the VVD.

The party's parliamentary faction is led by Sophie Hermans, Rutte's former political assistant.

No date has yet been set for the election, but it is not expected before October or November. That means that Rutte will likely remain in office as caretaker prime minister for months.

Heavy rains cause flooding in Japan, leaving two dead

Associated Press

TOKYO — Torrential rain pounded southwestern Japan, triggering floods and mudslides and leaving two people dead and at least six others missing, officials said Monday.

Rain falling in the regions of Kyushu and Chugoku since the weekend caused flooding along many rivers, triggered mudslides, closed roads, disrupted trains and cut the water supply in some areas.

The Japan Meteorological Agency issued an emergency heavy rain warning for Fukuoka and Oita prefectures on the southern main island of Kyushu, urging residents in riverside and hillside areas to take maximum caution. More than 1.7 million residents in vulnerable areas were urged to take shelter.

The emergency warning was downgraded later Monday to a regular warning.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who is

scheduled to attend a July 11-12 NATO summit in Lithuania, said he will make a final decision on whether to go after assessing the extent of damage Tuesday morning. "Either way, we will do our utmost to respond to the disaster by putting people's lives first," he said.

Two people died and at least six others were missing, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency and prefectural officials.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Underwater music show promotes reef protection

FL BIG PINE KEY — Hundreds of divers and snorkelers listened to an underwater concert that advocated coral reef protection Saturday in the Florida Keys.

The Lower Keys Underwater Music Festival, which also spotlighted eco-conscious diving, took place at Looe Key Reef, an area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary located approximately 6 miles south of Big Pine Key.

Participants swam among Looe Key's colorful marine life and coral formations while listening to water-themed music broadcast by a local radio station. The music was piped undersea through waterproof speakers suspended beneath boats above the reef.

Tunes were interspersed with diver awareness messages about ways to minimize environmental impacts on the world's coral reefs.

Mass wedding held at Lincoln Center

NY NEW YORK — There were fancy dresses and men in tuxes, but some came in attire that was decidedly more casual — not an unusual sight at New York's Lincoln Center. But the scene Saturday evening was far from routine as faux flowers hung from the balconies and brides clutched bouquets of roses and wildflowers in the din of a hall teeming with hundreds of giddy couples.

In all, some 700 couples arrived at the iconic New York City venue to profess their love, no matter how new or how long.

Some were exchanging vows for the first time, while others came to renew their vows after eloping so many years ago, to the dismay of family.

It was just the second year for what could become an annual event at Lincoln Center. With so many weddings delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic, center officials thought the event would help COVID-fatigued couples reengage after months of lockdowns and seclusion. None of the weddings were legally binding. More than 500 couples took part last year.

Suspect killed as robbery spree ends with shootout

OH COLUMBUS — An armed robbery spree in Ohio ended with a police chase and shootout that left one suspect dead and an officer critically wounded, authorities said. Two other suspects who fled on foot from the shootout were later captured.

The spree began around 2:15 p.m. Thursday, when a man stole the keys to an SUV at gunpoint from a worker at a Porsche dealership in Whitehall, according to Whitehall Deputy Police Chief Dan Kelso. That suspect and two other men then robbed a bank in Columbus but were confronted by police.

The trio fled in the SUV and the police pursuit began, eventually winding up on Interstate 70 in Columbus. Greg Bodker, the city's assistant police chief, said the suspects then began shooting at officers, who returned fire.

One suspect wounded in the shootout was pronounced dead at the scene. The wounded officer's partner took him to a hospital, where he underwent surgery and

was later upgraded to stable condition.

Suit filed over new law banning drag readings

MT HELENA — A transgender woman, the owners of an independent bookstore and an educator who teaches in costume are among those challenging Montana's first-in-the-nation law that bans people dressed in drag from reading to children in public schools or libraries.

The federal lawsuit filed Thursday in Butte argues the law violates the free speech and equal protection guarantees in the U.S. Constitution.

The plaintiffs seek an injunction to temporarily block the law, a ruling that the law is unconstitutional and damages for Adria Jawort, whose planned talk on LGBTQ+ history at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Library was canceled in early June by county officials who cited the new legislation.

Woman allegedly kept Honor Flight donations

WI MILWAUKEE — Prosecutors have charged a Wisconsin woman with pocketing tens of thousands of dollars in donations meant for a program that flies veterans to Washington, D.C.

Joni Nogay, of Cudahy, was charged June 22 with felony theft in a business setting of between \$10,000 and \$100,000. She could face up to 10 years in prison as well as \$25,000 in fines if she is convicted. She made her initial court appearance Thursday, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported.

According to a criminal complaint, Nogay ran We Run — They Fly, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit that collects donations for Stars and Stripes Honor Flight, a program that provides veterans with flights to Washington to see military memorials. The organization raised money for the program through local fundraisers and an annual 5K run in Milwaukee.

Nogay, 60, collected more than \$100,000 in donations from 2013 to 2023 but deposited most of the money in her personal accounts, prosecutors alleged. She made just five donations to the honor flight program during that seven-year span totaling just under \$20,000, according to the complaint.

Grand Canyon gets US grant for greener buses

AZ GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK — Grand Canyon National Park is getting \$27.5 million in federal highway money to upgrade its aging fleet of shuttle buses, which help the more than 4 million annual visitors get around the huge park.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration announced the grant at an event Thursday on the canyon's south rim.

The replacement project includes 30 new buses — 20 that run on compressed natural gas and 10 electric buses. Charging stations will be installed for the electric buses. The new buses are expected to reduce pollution and ease the overcrowding of vehicles at the park.

The park has over 270 miles of paved and unpaved roads.

— From wire reports

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J-Rod show takes stage at All-Star Game

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Less than a block from T-Mobile Park, the image of Julio Rodríguez plasters the side of a warehouse. The mural is an ode to the Emerald City's young baseball star — one the Seattle Mariners plan to have in center field for the next decade.

At only 22, he's already the face of the franchise, the one whose No. 44 jersey floods the stands nightly, both home and road. He's carrying the expectations as the next generational player watching over that sacred position of center field in Seattle.

This All-Star week in Seattle was supposed to be Rodríguez's party. The "J-Rod Show" at home for the world to see on the All-Star stage.

And it still might be, even with a season that to date hasn't matched those expectations, for Rodríguez or the team.

Already committed to competing in the Home Run Derby, Rodríguez was an injury replacement on the American

League roster after injuries to outfielders Yordan Alvarez and Mike Trout created an opportunity for Rodríguez to be added.

But his season and that of the Mariners has not been what was expected coming off Rodríguez winning AL rookie of the year and Seattle snapping its 21-year playoff drought.

"It's a learning curve. It's a huge learning curve," said Hall of Famer Ken Griffey Jr., the last generational center fielder in Seattle. "But he'll be all right."

This season has been that learning curve for Rodríguez. It's not a sophomore slump. It's not a disappointment. Rodríguez's season has been much like the team he plays for — remarkably average. The Mariners are 45-44 at the break.

Is he deserving of being in the All-Star Game? A slash line of .249/.310/.411 with 13 home runs and 49 RBIs at the break doesn't exactly jump off the page. Even his own fans in Seattle seemed to recognize Rodríguez's first half lacked the buzz of a season

ago, and he didn't crack the top 10 in All-Star voting among outfielders.

But for a sport that needs engaging personalities on its biggest stages, having Rodríguez — with his youthful exuberance and radiant smile — taking part in everything inside his home ballpark this week is a win for the league.

"To be rewarded with the opportunity to be able to step on that field, and for all those fans in Seattle, for my family that's going to be there, it's definitely going to be a lot of fun," Rodríguez said.

Seattle's meager team success has historically created an environment where fans passionately latch on to individual stars of the franchise. It happened with Griffey, who had a candy bar as a rookie and quickly became the best player in the game in his early 20s. It happened with Félix Hernández, who debuted at 19 and was known by "King Felix" as one of the best right-handers in baseball at 21.

There's a weight that comes with being the front door of an organization at such a young age. In just his second season, Rodríguez has several national endorsements and even his own cereal, on top of seemingly always being the first image when the Mariners are mentioned.

"There's always going to be expectation. Julio probably gets more because he plays every day. I used to go out there every five days," Hernández said. "He's doing a great job. He's a great kid and lots of talent."

When Rodríguez took off in 2022, so did the Mariners, with their center fielder the spark-plug to so much of the good that took place for Seattle. While baseball knew Rodríguez, his national introduction came during the All-Star Game a season ago and specifically the Home Run Derby, when he hit 81 homers over three rounds before losing to Juan Soto in the final.

"It was unbelievable. It definitely felt like a dream, honestly," Rodríguez said of last year's All-Star experience.

Pirates take Skenes with top pick in amateur draft

Associated Press

SEATTLE — LSU's stars stole the spotlight at the College World Series. It carried over to the top of baseball's amateur draft.

The Pittsburgh Pirates selected hard-throwing LSU right-handed pitcher Paul Skenes with the top pick in the draft on Sunday night, with teammate Dylan Crews going No. 2 to the Washington Nationals.

It's the first time in the draft's history teammates went 1-2.

"It's super humbling. I was in shock when I heard," Skenes said. "A year ago, two years ago, I never thought it was a possibility to be the first overall pick. I don't know what I was

expecting going into today, but it means a lot."

Skenes went 12-3 with 209 strikeouts in 122⅓ innings in helping lead the Tigers to the College World Series championship. The pick was announced by Hall of Famer Ken Griffey Jr., the top pick of the 1987 draft by the Seattle Mariners.

Skenes was the first college pitcher selected No. 1 overall since Casey Mize by Detroit in 2018.

"He had an incredibly special season at LSU. He obviously took another step forward this spring," Pittsburgh general manager Ben Cherington said. "It's a really special combination of pitches and just as much about the mix and command

than any one pitch."

For the second time in three years, the Pirates held the top overall selection thanks to winning the first draft lottery and jumping Washington in the selection order. The Pirates picked catcher Henry Davis at the top in 2021; he made his major league debut last month for Pittsburgh.

Skenes' signing bonus is expected to be near the slot value of about \$9.7 million. Cherington said the hope is an agreement can come quickly and Skenes could pitch somewhere in the Pirates organization in 2023.

"It will have been a little while since he last pitched in the World Series and we want to be sure that whatever that

schedule and progression looks (like) makes sense for him," Cherington said.

It seemed to be a debate between Skenes and Crews for the top pick.

It didn't take long for Crews to come off the board after hitting .426 with 18 home runs while playing center field for the Tigers. Crews had a 26-game hitting streak as part of his standout season for the Tigers and finished his career at LSU by reaching base in each of his final 75 college games.

Crews said he's never been to Washington, but saw plenty of the Nationals while growing up and watching Bryce Harper.

"Seeing him in a Nationals uniform, it was pretty awesome," Crews said.

Rays top Braves, end 7-game losing streak

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Isaac Paredes and Yandy Díaz homered as the Tampa Bay Rays snapped a season-high, seven-game skid with a 10-4 win over the Atlanta Braves on Sunday in a matchup of teams with the best records in baseball.

Zach Eflin (10-4) gave up two runs and four hits over five innings in a 77-pitch outing as Tampa Bay avoided the three-game series sweep. The 29-year-old righty is 9-1 in 10 starts at home.

"It's a day we kind of needed a win," Eflin said. "Get right back on track. Take that momentum into the break."

Travis d'Arnaud homered for the MLB-best Braves, who are 20-3 since June 14 and head into the All-Star break at 60-29. Atlanta has homered in 26 consecutive games, the longest streak in modern-era franchise history.

Atlanta All-Star Bryce Elder (7-2) allowed seven runs, six hits and four walks in 3½ innings, his shortest outing this season. The right-hander, who had his ERA jump from 2.45 to 2.97, went 3-0 over his previous four starts, giving up five runs in 25⅓ innings.

Cubs 7, Yankees 4: Yan Gomes hit a tying pinch-hit two-run single in the seventh inning

following a fielding error by second baseman Gleyber Torres, and Seiya Suzuki homered and hit a go-ahead sacrifice fly in the eighth in visiting Chicago's win over New York.

The Cubs (42-47) won for just the fifth time in 14 games since getting to within a game of .500 following a 9-1 win over St. Louis on June 24 in London.

Padres 6, Mets 2: Manny Machado homered twice off Max Scherzer and drove in five runs for host San Diego, which got six strong innings from Joe Musgrove to beat New York and take two of three in a series between high-priced, yet underwhelming, teams.

The Padres got to Scherzer (8-3) right away and handed him his first loss since May 3 at Detroit. Kim Ha-Seong hit a leadoff single to left, Fernando Tatis Jr. doubled off the center field wall with one out and then Machado drove a 2-2 pitch into the middle balcony of the four-story brick warehouse in the left field corner. Machado homered into the home run porch in right, his 15th, in the fifth for his third multi-homer game this season.

Royals 4, Guardians 1: Ryan Yarbrough won his first game back after being hit in the face by a line drive two months ago and visiting Kansas City snapped a six-game losing

streak.

Yarbrough (2-4) suffered several facial fractures when he was hit on May 7 against Oakland by a line drive clocked at 106.2 mph. The left-hander limited Cleveland to one run and six hits over six innings. Scott Barlow earned his 11th save.

Marlins 7, Phillies 3: Bryan De La Cruz had a solo homer among his four hits as host Miami took the three-game series from Philadelphia.

Jesús Sánchez and rookie Dane Myers also went deep for the Marlins, who reached the All-Star break with their best record in franchise history at 53-39.

Nationals 7, Rangers 2: Joey Meneses homered for the third consecutive day, Patrick Corbin earned his first home victory since May 20 and host Washington sent AL West-leading Texas to its eighth loss in 11 games.

Stone Garrett and Dominic Smith also homered for last-place Washington, which won the final two games of the series after dropping 15 of its previous 16 at Nationals Park.

Blue Jays 4, Tigers 3 (10): Nathan Lukes' RBI double in the 10th inning gave visiting Toronto a comeback win over Detroit.

Red Sox 4, Athletics 3: Masataka Yoshida scored the tying

run with good baserunning and hit a go-ahead homer two innings later as host Boston rallied past Oakland and extended its winning streak to five games.

Brewers 1, Reds 0: Wade Miley pitched six strong innings and host Milwaukee made a first-inning run stand up in a win over Cincinnati.

Orioles 15, Twins 2: Anthony Santander hit two of his team's six homers and visiting Baltimore completed a series sweep of Minnesota.

Cardinals 4, White Sox 3 (10): Paul DeJong had an RBI double in the 10th inning to give visiting St. Louis a win over Chicago.

Mariners 3, Astros 1: Jarred Kelenic hit a two-run double to back up a strong start by Logan Gilbert, lifting visiting Seattle past Houston.

Giants 1, Rockies 0: Logan Webb overcame a shaky start for a 10-strikeout, complete-game victory and host San Francisco made J.D. Davis' solo homer in the fourth inning stand up in a win as Colorado starter Kyle Freeland left the game with an apparent right shoulder injury.

Pirates 4, Diamondbacks 2: Ji Man Choi hit a two-run homer, seven pitchers combined on a four-hitter and visiting Pittsburgh ended a four-game losing streak with a win over Arizona.

Corpuz tames Pebble, wins Women's Open for 1st LPGA title

Associated Press

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif.—Allisen Corpuz found herself on the biggest and most beautiful stage in women's golf, and she made it look like a stroll on the beach.

Never mind that Corpuz had never won on the LPGA Tour or that she had heard all week about the historic occasion of the U.S. Women's Open held at Pebble Beach for the first time. Nothing could make her crack.

"Every few holes I kind of looked out and said, 'I'm here at Pebble Beach. There's not many places that are better than this,'" Corpuz said.

There weren't many better performances,

either. Corpuz turned a tight duel with Nasa Hataoka into a runaway, closing with a 3-under 69 on Sunday for a three-shot victory to become the first American in 20 years to make the U.S. Women's Open her first LPGA title.

At Pebble Beach, no less.

The 25-year-old from Hawaii was calm and cool, no matter the shot or the circumstances, until reality set in as she took a three-shot lead down the 18th fairway. It's a path taken over the years by the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson and Tiger Woods, all of them U.S. Open champions at Pebble Beach.

"Just knowing the history ... Tiger just ab-

solutely annihilated this place. Yeah, it's really special," Corpuz said. "Twenty, 30 years from now, I think just the fact that it's a U.S. Open means a lot to me. But know that it's at Pebble makes it even sweeter."

She won by three shots over Charley Hull (66) and Jiyai Shin (68) and claimed the \$2 million prize, the richest ever for an LPGA major champion.

Corpuz couldn't contain a wide smile when she tapped in for par, only to cover it with her hand as the tears began to flow. She wiped them with her Aloha-print tower.

"Unreal," Corpuz said. "This week has felt like a dream come true."

Djokovic shows skill in reaching quarterfinals

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Novak Djokovic's experience was on display at Wimbledon on Monday. And so was Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva's inexperience.

Djokovic, a seven-time champion at the All England Club who is looking for his 24th Grand Slam title overall, reached the quarterfinals at the grass-court major for the 14th time by beating Hubert Hurkacz 7-6 (6), 7-6 (6), 5-7, 6-4 in a match that started Sunday on Centre Court.

Djokovic saved three set points in the first set and then was two points from losing the second set. Play was then suspended because of the late hour. On Monday, Hurkacz finally managed to pick up a set, using his strong serve to near perfection.

"Honestly, I don't recall the last time I felt this miserable in returning games ... due to his incredibly accurate and powerful serve," Djokovic said on court. "He's got one of the best serves in the world and it's so difficult to read it."

Hurkacz had held his serve for all 67 games at Wimbledon this year until the fourth set, when Djokovic broke him to lead 4-3. Before that, the 17th-

seeded Pole had saved all 18 break points he faced.

Djokovic reached the quarterfinals at a Grand Slam tournament for the 56th time in his career, second only to Roger Federer's men's record 58. He will next face Andrey Rublev for a spot in the semifinals.

Top-seeded Iga Swiatek saved two match points and came back to beat Belinda Bencic 6-7 (4), 7-6 (2), 6-3 on Sunday to reach the Wimbledon quarterfinals for the first time.

Twice, Swiatek was a single point from exiting Wimbledon, a single point from the sort of confounding defeat at the place that gives her so much more trouble than any of the other Grand Slam tournaments.

Down a set and 6-5 in the second, Swiatek steeled herself and dispensed with the pair of match points. She erased the first with a booming forehand, the second with a forceful backhand, and soon enough, Swiatek was not just back in the contest, she was controlling it.

Swiatek, a 22-year-old from Poland who will face wild-card entry Elina Svitolina of Ukraine for a semifinal berth, extended her unbeaten run to 14 matches, which includes claiming her fourth major title at the French Open last month.

Andreeva, a Russian qualifier who is still only 16 years old, had been showing her maturity throughout the first week of the Wimbledon tournament but things went awry on Monday. The teenager had won all six of her matches on grass to reach the fourth round at the All England Club but she let a big lead over 25th-seeded Madison Keys slip away in a 3-6, 7-6 (4), 6-2 loss on No. 2 Court.

Andreeva took the first set and led 3-0 in the second — winning nine of 10 games in one stretch — before Keys turned things around. Frustrated at one point, Andreeva threw her racket and received a warning from Swedish chair umpire Louise Azemar Engzell.

In the final game, Andreeva slipped while going for a ball and the racket again went flying out of her hand.

Engzell docked the Russian a point for a second thrown racket, giving Keys a match point. Andreeva argued the call, pleading her case.

"I didn't throw the racket. I fell," Andreeva told Engzell. "I slid and then I fell."

The call stood, however, and Keys then finished off the match to reach the Wimbledon quarterfinals for the first time since 2015.

"Coming out here, you know that she's a really great player. But you don't want to be the player that loses to her for her to get to her first quarter," Keys said on court. "I've fallen short a few times and it's great to be back in the quarterfinals here at Wimbledon."

Keys has reached the semifinals at the other three Grand Slam tournaments, including a run to the final at the U.S. Open in 2017, but her only other quarterfinals appearance at the All England Club ended at that stage.

Andreeva, the latest teen sensation in tennis, was the youngest player in the Wimbledon draw. She was bidding to become the youngest player to reach the Wimbledon quarterfinals since Anna Kournikova in 1997.

Keys will next play Aryna Sabalenka, who defeated No. 21 Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-4, 6-0. The second-seeded Sabalenka won the Australian Open this year and has a 16-1 record in major tournaments in 2023.

Defending champion Elena Rybakina also reached the quarterfinals. She advanced when Beatriz Haddad Maia retired from their match with a lower back injury with Rybakina leading 4-1.

Byron wins rain-shortened Atlanta NASCAR Cup race

Associated Press

HAMPTON, Ga. — William Byron overcame a spin early in the second stage that knocked him back a lap, and then was in the right position when weather took control at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Byron won the rain-shortened NASCAR race at Atlanta on Sunday night for his series-leading fourth victory of the season. It was the second win in Atlanta in the last two years for Byron, who took the NASCAR points lead.

Byron said it was "kind of pins and needles" after his crew made changes to his No. 24 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet that had been damaged by the spin.

"When I spun, I was like here we go," By-

ron said. "... It was not good at that moment. We lost a lap, changed tires."

The threat of rain affected strategy as drivers fought to move toward the front of the field before weather delayed or ended the race.

On lap 185, with 75 laps to go, NASCAR ordered cars to pit road due to rain and the possibility of lightning. Cars were covered while officials waited to see if the rain ended.

Only six minutes later, fans were warned of severe weather within eight miles of the track and were encouraged to leave the stadium immediately, and NASCAR called the race soon after that announcement.

"I 1,000% agree with erring on the side of

caution," said Kyle Bush, who finished fifth.

Daniel Suarez, looking for his first win of 2023, was second. AJ Allmendinger was third, followed by Michael McDowell.

Suarez said he had "a little bit of mixed feelings" about NASCAR's decision to end the race.

"I wish we had one more shot to get ahead and then it could rain all it wants," Suarez said with a laugh.

The race became official after 130 laps. After that, the weather watch factored heavily into race strategy.

"We knew the rain was coming," McDowell said. "We wanted to give ourselves the best chance to win the race."