

N. Korea says recent ICBM set record

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea on Thursday said the intercontinental ballistic missile it tested the previous day flew 74 minutes, a new record for the regime's missile program.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the test of a Hwasong-18, which “fully demonstrated the might” of the regime, said the state-run Korean Central News Agency. The North last fired a Hwasong-18 on April 13.

Kim said the political climate on the Korean Peninsula was unstable and called for North Korea to bolster its nuclear war deterrent, according to KCNA.

He has called the Hwasong-18 the most powerful weapon of his nuclear forces.

North Korea will not break from its series of weapon tests, the KCNA report said, and Kim ordered the government “to steadily accelerate the development of more ... effective and reliable weapon [systems].”

The missile's built-in solid propellant makes it more difficult for opponents to detect launches in advance and can be fired quicker compared to liquid-fueled missiles.

The North has been developing solid-fuel missiles since 2019 to replace its older, li-

quid-fueled inventory, South Korea's Ministry of National Defense said in its annual readiness report in February.

The ICBM was launched just before 10 a.m. Wednesday from the Pyongyang area and flew about 620 miles before splashing down in the Sea of Japan, or the East Sea, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Japan's military said the missile was fired at 9:59 a.m. and flew 74 minutes before splashing down 155 miles west of Okushiri Island, outside the country's exclusive economic zone, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said Wednesday.

The missile flew at a maximum altitude of 3,730 miles, Matsuno said. No damage was reported.

Wednesday's test is a “significant” indication that the Hwasong-18 could theoretically reach the United States, according to Yang Uk, an associated research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul. But it is still unclear whether the missile was carrying a simulated payload, a crucial factor in determining an ICBM's capability, Yang told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday.

“In this [KCNA] announcement, there's no comment on the payload,” Yang said.

“You can call it a success, but that doesn't mean that the whole system is operational.”

The ICBM was fired nearly 1½ months after North Korea attempted on May 31 to launch what it called a surveillance satellite. The rocket failed and the vehicle fell into the Yellow Sea, where it was recovered by South Korea. The regime promised another attempt soon.

North Korea's latest test was a response to its belief that the U.S. and South Korea violated the country's airspace on multiple occasions, according to KCNA's report on Thursday.

Pyongyang alleged that the U.S.'s crewed RC-135 and unmanned RQ-Global Hawk aircraft violated its maritime airspace between July 2 and Friday, and threatened it may shoot down the aircraft in the future, KCNA reported Monday.

South Korea's military and the U.S. State Department denied its joint aerial surveillance operations had violated the North's airspace.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff from the U.S., Japan and South Korea had a discussion immediately following Wednesday's launch, South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Lee Sung-jun told reporters during a news briefing in Seoul on Thursday.

Biden says NATO ‘never stronger’ as he touts Finland

Associated Press

HELSINKI — President Joe Biden stood alongside Nordic leaders Thursday on the turf of NATO's newest member, Finland, in a powerful demonstration of the military alliance's expanding power and influence against Russia.

“I've been doing this a long time,” Biden said, opening a meeting with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö at the Presidential Palace. “I don't think NATO has ever been stronger.”

Biden also met with the leaders of other Nordic nations including Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Sweden is poised to be admitted as NATO's 32nd member country after it pledged more cooperation with Turkey on counterterrorism efforts while

backing Ankara's bid to join the European Union. Finland gained NATO membership earlier this year. Both Finland and Sweden abandoned a history of military nonalignment and sought to join NATO alliance after Russia invaded Ukraine last year.

Biden's brief stop in the shoreline Finnish capital is the coda to a tour that was carefully sketched to highlight the growth of a military alliance that the president says has fortified itself since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Finland's admittance to NATO effectively doubled the alliance's border with Russia. Biden arrived in Helsinki after what he deemed a successful NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, where allies agreed to language that would further pave the way for Ukraine to also become a future mem-

ber. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the summit's outcome “a significant security victory” for his country but nonetheless expressed disappointment at not getting an outright invitation to join.

Biden and other administration officials also held what aides said were pivotal conversations with Turkey before that country dropped its objections to Sweden joining NATO. Biden said he felt good about the trip. “We accomplished every goal we set out to accomplish,” he told reporters Wednesday before the flight to Finland.

And despite Zelenskyy's expressed frustrations, Biden — who met with the Ukrainian leader Wednesday in Vilnius — said Thursday that Zelenskyy “ended up being very happy.”

Navy flew Taiwan Strait as China trained nearby

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A Navy surveillance aircraft flew through the Taiwan Strait on Thursday, the U.S. 7th Fleet said, as Chinese forces moved into their third day of drills around Taiwan.

China since Tuesday has engaged in “long-range aerial reconnaissance training” around the island, with scores of aircraft and numerous warships, Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense said through several news releases and tweets.

A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon flew through the contentious strait on Thursday to demonstrate “the United States’ commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” the U.S. 7th Fleet announced that day. The plane moved south from the East China Sea to the South China Sea.

“By operating within the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the United States upholds the navigational rights and freedoms of all nations,” the command said in a news release.

The Navy routinely sends ships, usually guided-missile destroyers, through the strait. Aircraft such as the Poseidon make

the journey less often.

The Poseidon is a multirole, twin-engine aircraft based on Boeing’s 737 Next Generation airliner, according to the manufacturer’s website. Its missions include intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, patrol, search and rescue and anti-submarine warfare.

Beijing organized fighter jets to monitor the Poseidon’s “publicly hyped” flight, Eastern Theater Command spokesman Shi Yijun said Thursday on the force’s Weibo social media account.

“Theater troops maintain a high level of alert at all times and resolutely defend national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability,” he wrote.

All interactions with Chinese military forces during the transit were “consistent with international norms and did not impact the operation,” 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. Kristina Wiedemann told Stars and Stripes.

Taipei on Tuesday reported an increase in Chinese activity in waters around Taiwan, with 34 aircraft and four warships active in the area, according to a tweet by the Ministry of National Defense.

Marines help save choking victim near Mount Fuji

By JEREMY STILLWAGNER
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Two Marines who helped save a choking victim’s life have received letters of appreciation from officials in Gotemba, a city near Combined Arms Training Center-Camp Fuji.

Sgts. William Carroll, of Canyon City, Colo., and Jarret Fuqua, of Ringgold, Ga., were recognized on June 21 for helping a fellow diner at a Korean barbecue restaurant on May 26. The 56-year-old man was choking on food and suffering a heart attack.

The Marines administered the Heimlich maneuver to dislodge a piece of meat from the man’s throat and administered CPR while restaurant employee Ami Amemiya called emergency services, according to a June 21 Marine news release and a spokesman for the Gotemba Fire Department. Amemiya was honored alongside the Marines.

“What you are capable of doing and what you actually do are two different things,” the spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone June 27. “It’s difficult to actually take action, so their act was outstanding.”

The letters Carroll and Fuqua received say their actions were “meaningful to the Japan-U.S. friendship.”

“We are extremely proud and appreciative of Sergeants Carroll and Fuqua for their actions which helped save the life of a local man,” Col. Neil Owens, Camp Fuji’s commander, told Stars and Stripes in an email Wednesday. “The quick thinking and professionalism which they exhibited while in a liberty period should serve as an example for all of us.”

The actions taken by Carroll, the storage chief for the ammunition supply point office, and Fuqua, a logistics platoon sergeant, inspired an interest in CPR classes at Camp Fuji, according to a Tuesday post on the base’s Facebook page.

The two Marines are the latest in a string of good Samaritans among U.S. service members in Japan.

In April, three Marines from Camp Pendleton performed emergency first aid on a Japanese snowboarder while on a skiing trip in Nagano. The young man had fallen and sliced his head open on his snowboard.

Report: US fighter engine issue led pilot to drop fuel tank off Okinawa

By SETH ROBSON
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet that dropped its fuel tank off Okinawa last year was experiencing engine problems at the time, according to a Japanese newspaper report.

The pilot dropped the plane’s external fuel tank May 29, 2022, about 15 nautical miles off Okinawa in international waters as a safety measure before landing at Kadena Air Base, the Navy said at the time.

However, the Navy didn’t explain why the fighter, assigned to Carrier Air Wing 5 aboard the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, diverted to Kadena.

The Okinawa Times, citing a Navy inci-

dent report obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, reported Monday that the plane had engine trouble before dropping the tank. The pilot diverted to Kadena due to a fire aboard the carrier, the newspaper reported. The Super Hornet lost power in its right engine before its left engine caught fire. Then the pilot jettisoned the fuel tank and landed at Kadena, according to the report.

The accident cost the U.S. government approximately \$23,664, according to Naval Safety Command, the newspaper reported.

The 16-foot-long fuel tank washed ashore near Higashi Village, Okinawa, and was found by a resident. It was retrieved by the Navy on June 1, 2022, according to a spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau.

Heat wave baking 111M in Southwest

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — After a historically wet winter and a cloudy spring, California's summer was in full swing Thursday as a heat wave that's been scorching much of the Southwest brings triple digit temperatures and an increased risk of wildfires.

Blistering conditions will build Friday and throughout the weekend in the central and southern parts of California, where many residents should prepare for the hottest weather of the year, the National Weather Service warned.

Midday highs were mostly expected to be above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and desert areas could reach 120 F, forecasters said. Little relief was expected overnight, when temperatures could remain in the 80s. An excessive heat watch was in effect through Sunday for interior Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

"Please plan accordingly, this is not the time to be hiking or be outside for long durations," the weather service's LA office said on Twitter. "If you need to work outside, shift hours to the early morning, take frequent breaks and hydrate!"

Employers were reminded to adhere to regulations that require outdoor workers are given water, shade and regular breaks to cool off. The state will be performing spot checks at work sites to make sure the rules are being followed, said Jeff Killip with the Division of Occupational Safety & Health.

Across the U.S., more than 111 million people were under extreme heat advisories, watches and warnings, mostly in the Southwest, the National Weather Service reported Wednesday.

Forecasters said the long-duration heat wave is extremely dangerous, especially for elderly people, homeless residents and other vulnerable populations. The heat could persist into next week as a high pressure dome moves west from Texas. In Arizona, temperatures have hit 110 degrees for more than a dozen consecutive days.

Horse racing events were canceled at the California State Fair near the state capital over concerns for animal safety.

Meanwhile, California's wildfire season was ramping up amid the hot, dry conditions with a series of blazes erupting across the state this week, said Secretary Wade Crowfoot of the Natural Resources Agency.

"As we get deeper into the summer and vegetation that grew up during the wet spring dries out, we are seeing an uptick in wildfire activity," Crowfoot said Wednesday during a state media briefing.

Crowfoot said global climate change was "supercharging" heat waves. California has instituted a \$400 million extreme heat action plan to protect workers, help vulnerable communities and assist local communities in opening cooling centers.

Officials said the state's power system, which was strained to the point of widespread blackouts in recent years, has been fortified and should be able to withstand the latest heat wave. The California Independent System Operator, which runs the electricity grid, said battery storage capacity reached 5,600 megawatts on July 1 — enough to power more than 3.8 million homes for up to four hours before recharging.

"The batteries being added to the grid are charged during the day, when solar power is abundant, and dispatched primarily in the evening hours when demand is still high and the sun is setting and solar capacity diminishing," Cal ISO said in a statement.

Suspected tornadoes do damage in Chicago, suburbs

Associated Press

CHICAGO — A National Weather Service team will survey damage Thursday in northeast Illinois, where fierce winds from suspected tornadoes ripped roofs from buildings, downed trees and sent residents scrambling for safety as sirens sounded.

The weather service warned Wednesday evening that a confirmed tornado was on the ground near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Passengers took shelter and the storm disrupted hundreds of flights, but there were no immediate reports of injuries. A short time later, the weather service said the Chicago forecast area was "currently tornado warning free."

The storm moved into Michigan before passing through the state and into Canada early Thursday. Tornado watches that were in effect for parts of Michigan, Indiana and Ohio all expired.

Ty Carr, a resident of the Skyline Motel in McCook, Ill., said a tornado tore off the roof.

"Just chaos," Carr said, cradling a toddler as he spoke to reporters. "It was really fast, and the noises and the crackling and the wind

— it was just something I've never seen or been through, you know?"

Rajan Patel, whose family owns the motel, said his family came to the Chicago area in the 1990s with nothing, and now their motel is severely damaged.

"The entire place is ruined," Patel said. "I don't know, man. I don't know how to recover anything. I don't know."

The weather service posted a map on social media highlighting several areas where tornadoes are suspected to have touched down, noting that they were spawned by rotating thunderstorms known as supercells. A team will survey damage Thursday to determine an official count of the tornadoes, their tracks and intensity ratings.

Hillary Timpe in Countryside, Ill., a suburb southwest of Chicago, who was with her husband, Greg Timpe, said a tornado damaged homes in the neighborhood, but luckily no one was hurt. It also ripped their 100-year-old tree out of the ground.

"When the winds kicked up really hard, really fast, and I'm like, 'Basement — now! Grab the dog, let's go!' And it wasn't more than a

couple seconds after that, that got really crazy."

The storm moved through quickly, Greg Timpe said.

"It really left as quick as it came," he said. "It was maybe 10, 20 seconds, and it was out of here, and all this."

Video from TV stations showed hundreds of people taking shelter in an O'Hare concourse. Some 173 flights departing the airport were canceled and more than 500 were delayed, according to the flight tracking service FlightAware.

Kevin Bargnes, director of communications for O'Hare and Chicago Midway International Airport, told WGN-TV Wednesday night that no damage was reported at either airport.

The weather service quoted an unidentified emergency manager as saying a roof was blown off in the community of Huntley in McHenry County northwest of Chicago. Huntley Battalion Chief Mike Pierce told ABC-7-TV that firefighters and other emergency services were responding to downed power lines, trees and tree branches, and that power outages had been reported.

Chinese hackers breached US agencies' emails

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — State-backed Chinese hackers foiled Microsoft's cloud-based security in hacking the email accounts of officials at multiple U.S. agencies that deal with China ahead of Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing last month, officials said Wednesday.

The surgical, targeted espionage accessed the email of a small number of individuals at an unspecified number of U.S. agencies and was discovered in mid-June by the State Department, U.S. officials said. They said none of the breached systems were classified, nor was any of the stolen data.

The hacked officials included Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, The Washington Post reported, citing anonymous U.S. officials. Export controls imposed by her agency have stung multi-

ple Chinese companies.

One person familiar with the investigation said U.S. military and intelligence agencies were not among the agencies impacted in the monthlong spying campaign, which also affected unnamed foreign governments.

The officials spoke on condition they not be further identified.

In a technical advisory Wednesday and a call with reporters, the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the FBI said Microsoft determined the hackers gained access by impersonating authorized users.

Officials did not specify the nature of the stolen data. But one U.S. official said the intrusion was "directly targeted" at diplomats and others who deal with the China portfolio at the State Department and other agencies.

The official added that it was not yet clear if there had been any significant compromise of information.

The Blinken trip went ahead as planned, although with customary information security procedures in place, which required his delegation to use "burner" phones and computers in China.

The hack was disclosed late Tuesday by Microsoft in a blog post. It said it was alerted to the breach, which it blamed on a state-backed, espionage-focused Chinese hacking group "known to target government agencies in Western Europe," on June 16. Microsoft said the group, which it calls Storm-0558, had gained access to email accounts affecting about 25 organizations, including government agencies, since mid-May as well as to consumer accounts of individuals likely associated with those agencies.

Neither Microsoft nor U.S. officials would identify the agencies or governments impacted. A senior CISA official told reporters in a press call that the number of affected organizations in the United States is in the single digits.

While the official declined to say whether U.S. officials are displeased with Microsoft over the breach, U.S. National Security Council spokesman Adam Hodge noted that it was "government safeguards" that detected the intrusion and added, "We continue to hold the procurement providers of the U.S. Government to a high security threshold."

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, called the U.S. accusation of hacking "disinformation" aimed at diverting attention from U.S. cyberespionage against China.

Director defends 'real FBI' against criticism from GOP

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — FBI Director Chris Wray defended the "real FBI" during a contentious congressional hearing Wednesday, rejecting a litany of grievances from angry Republicans who are harshly critical of the bureau, threatening to defund some operations and claiming the Justice Department is unfair to political conservatives, including former President Donald Trump.

Wray refused to engage in specific questions about ongoing federal investigations, including those involving Trump and Hunter Biden. The son of President Joe Biden recently reached an agreement to plead guilty to misdemeanor federal tax charges; Republicans have derided that as a sweetheart deal.

In testy exchanges with Republicans on the House Judiciary

Committee, Wray rejected the GOP assertion that the bureau was favoring the Biden family and said the notion that the bureau was involved in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol was "ludicrous." Referring to his own background, he said the idea that he harbors bias against conservatives is "insane."

"The work the men and women of the FBI do to protect the American people goes way beyond one or two investigations that seem to capture all the headlines," said Wray, a registered Republican whom Trump nominated to lead the FBI after firing James Comey in 2017.

The director spelled out the bureau's crime-fighting work breaking up drug cartels, taking some 60 suspected criminals off the streets each day and protecting Americans from "a staggering array of threats."

He said, "That is the real FBI."

VP ties 191-year-old record for breaking ties in Senate

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Vice President Kamala Harris has tied the record for tie-breaking votes in the Senate that was set nearly 191 years ago by John C. Calhoun.

Harris on Wednesday voted in favor of ending debate on the nomination of Kalpana Kotagal to be a member of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, her 31st tie-breaker vote since entering office with President Joe Biden two and a half years ago.

"This is a history-making moment for the United States Senate," Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said after the motion was agreed to on a 51-50 vote. "When it's mattered most, Vice President Harris has provided the decisive vote on some of the most historic bills of modern times... to so many federal judges who now preside and provide balance on the federal bench."

With two years of a 50-50 Senate, Harris' tie-breaking ability proved especially crucial for Democrats in getting their priority legislation passed, including COVID-19 relief measures and their fiscal 2022 reconciliation package. While Democrats have taken a very slight 51-49 majority, her vote has been necessary to confirm controversial Biden nominees through attendance issues and Democratic no votes.

Calhoun, a defender of slavery who represented South Carolina in the House and Senate, set the record in almost eight years as vice president between 1825 and 1832 when he served under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Calhoun's tie-breaking votes have gained additional attention, as he is known for having gone against Jackson on two occasions, when voting on confirmation of future President Martin Van Buren to be minister to England.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Numbers show rising deaths among new moms

GA ATLANTA — Georgia health officials laid out efforts on Tuesday to stem the tide of increasing deaths among new mothers in the state as evidence shows that the rate of death from pregnancy has risen more steeply in Georgia than almost any other state. The state's numbers found that 113 women died from pregnancy-related causes in the years 2018 to 2020, either during pregnancy or in the year after birth. That's 30.2 deaths for every 100,000 live births.

A study published last week by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and the Boston-based Mass General Brigham health system found that between 1999 and 2019, Georgia was among the five worst states for increasing mortality among white, Hispanic, Black and Asian-Pacific Islander women.

Death rates for all those groups more than doubled over the 20-year period, the study found.

While Georgia found 48.6 deaths per 100,000 births for Black mothers, the researchers estimated the number is roughly 100 per 100,000. That means 1 Black mother dies for every 1,000 births in Georgia. That study used a different methodology and is not comparable to Georgia's numbers, said Department of Public Health spokesperson Nancy Nydam.

S. Korea office opens to attract investment

IN INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana has opened an office in South Korea to attract foreign investment to the state's

energy, electric vehicle and semiconductor sectors, the Indiana Economic Development Corp. said Tuesday.

"Indiana's new Seoul office underscores the importance of the state's deepening relationships with Korean companies and their increased interest in a dynamic Hoosier workforce and economy," Secretary of Commerce Brad Chambers said in a prepared statement. The office opened July 1, the Indianapolis Business Journal reported.

The announcement comes less than a month after South Korea-based Samsung SDI chose New Carlisle in northern Indiana for a projected \$3 billion electric vehicle battery cell plant that is forecast to create 1,700 manufacturing jobs in a joint venture with General Motors Corp.

SUV with infant may have rolled into brush

AL PARRISH — An SUV that was reported stolen with an infant inside in Alabama may have instead rolled into thick brush where it lay hidden, AL.com reported Tuesday.

Officers found the SUV in vines Tuesday morning, roughly 100 yards from where it was reported stolen about 12 hours earlier, Parrish police Chief Danny Woodard told the news site. The girl, 9-month-old Harlow Darby Freeman, was safe in her car seat.

Investigators now say it's likely the car was not stolen and Harlow was not kidnapped. Instead, the SUV may have rolled down an embankment when the driver failed to put it in park, Woodard said. He said police

were still investigating and planned to conduct more interviews.

US probes Ford about SUV doors opening

MI DEARBORN — U.S. auto safety regulators are investigating complaints that the doors on some Ford Escapes can open while the SUVs are being driven.

The investigation by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration covers 346,000 Escapes from the 2020 and 2021 model years. The agency says in documents posted Tuesday on its website that it has 118 complaints that spot welds in a door assembly bracket can fail. Investigators contacted some of the owners and found 25 reports of minor injuries.

Many reported a popping noise when they opened the door as a bracket begins to separate. The agency says continued use could dislodge the door, and it could fail to latch when closed. Ford says it's working with the agency to support the investigation.

Chiefs superfan accused in bank robbery

MO KANSAS CITY — A rabid Kansas City Chiefs fan known on Twitter as "ChiefsAholiC" is accused of robbing a bank in Iowa, and federal authorities suspect he's responsible for bank and credit union robberies throughout the central U.S.

Federal prosecutors on Monday announced that 28-year-old Xavier Michael Babudar of Overland Park, Kan., was charged with one count of bank theft and one count of transport-

ing stolen property across state lines. It wasn't immediately clear if Babudar had an attorney.

Babudar had a strong following on social media and often wore a full-body wolf costume to games. His Twitter handle has been taken down.

He was charged in December with robbing a credit union in Tulsa, Okla. He was released on bond in February but prosecutors said he removed an ankle monitor and fled until his arrest Friday near Sacramento, Calif.

Woman safe after held in standoff at resort

NV LAS VEGAS — A man was arrested and a woman described as his hostage was released unharmed Tuesday after an hour-long standoff in a room at the Caesars Palace resort on the Las Vegas Strip, police said.

No injuries were reported and police did not immediately say if the man in custody had been armed in a high-rise tower of the iconic Las Vegas Boulevard property. Furniture, cushions and other objects fell from a 21st floor window, frightening guests in a swimming pool area below.

Las Vegas police Capt. Stephen Connell said the standoff began about 9:15 a.m. with a report from hotel security that a man and woman were arguing and that the man pulled the woman into a room "by force."

Police SWAT officers secured the hallway outside the room, although Connell said it was not immediately clear if the man was armed.

— From wire reports

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US takes aim at World Cup three-peat

Associated Press

Even without a few key players, the United States heads into the Women's World Cup with a formidable group of wily veterans and eager newcomers.

The question is, will it be enough for the team to lift international soccer's most prestigious trophy again?

The United States has won the last two World Cups and the goal is to three-peat. But American dominance in women's soccer isn't assured anymore.

Teams like England and France have caught up, Germany and Sweden remain strong, and then there's that rival to the north, Canada, which won gold at the Tokyo Olympics.

The growth of women's soccer globally means greater parity. And that means the United States has had to adapt.

"There's so many leagues around the world that are paying players more, that are playing more often throughout the season, and that are treating players in a professional way

that we've been fighting for a long time, so I think that that has a lot to do with it," star forward Alex Morgan said.

The Americans look far different now than they did four years ago, when they beat the Netherlands 2-0 in the World Cup final and fans in Lyon, France, feted them with chants of "Equal Pay!"

The players did indeed achieve equitable pay with their male counterparts, coming to a historic collective bargaining agreement with U.S. Soccer in 2022. As part of the deal, the men and women on the national teams will split World Cup prize money.

On the field, the team settled for a disappointing bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics two summers ago. Afterward, U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski turned his attention to developing young talent.

Among the youngsters is 18-year-old phenom Alyssa Thompson and up-and-comer Trinity Rodman, the 20-year-

old daughter of former NBA star Dennis Rodman.

There's also Sophia Smith, who has made a quick ascent with the national team and with her club, the Portland Thorns of the National Women's Soccer League. Just 22, she was named NWSL Most Valuable Player and U.S. Soccer's Player of the Year last year.

Smith was left off the roster for the Tokyo Games. Andonovski said it was a tough conversation when he let her know his decision, but he's been impressed with how she responded.

"She had to face some adversity, she had to face some tough times. I know I've had some tough conversations with her, but from every conversation and every moment she just rose above and was better," Andonovski said. "Every time it seemed like she had a setback or she had a tough moment, she took it as an opportunity to grow and get better and that's why she's where she's at now. She

performs very well. We're very happy with where she's at, but I don't think we've seen the best of Sophia Smith."

Two other young players who were also part of Andonovski's plans for the future, Catarina Macario and Mallory Swanson, won't join the team in Australia and New Zealand because of injuries.

Swanson, 25, was the team's top scorer this year before she injured the patellar tendon in her left knee during an exhibition match against Ireland in early April.

Macario, 23, tore an ACL last year while playing for the French club Lyon. She tried to recover in time — she was even treated in Qatar at Aspetar, one of the world's leading orthopedic hospitals — but ultimately time ran out on her return.

Arguably the biggest absence for the United States is captain Becky Sauerbrunn, who announced that a right foot injury suffered in April will keep her out of the World Cup.

ACL injuries are keeping stars out of biggest show

Associated Press

Some of the biggest names in the game won't be playing in the Women's World Cup because of what feels like an epidemic of ACL injuries — and players are asking why.

Netherlands forward Vivianne Miedema, England's Leah Williamson and Beth Mead, Canada's Janine Beckie and rising U.S. star Catarina Macario are among those sidelined for the tournament starting July 20 in Australia and New Zealand.

"I think it's a multifaceted issue. I don't know if I'm the expert in it, even though I've experienced it," said U.S. midfielder Andi Sullivan, who tore her ACL in college at Stanford.

"There's so many different

factors that could contribute to that and I think we are a little bit behind on the research as to why, so hopefully now the prevalence will kind of wake people up," Sullivan added. "This is an issue we need to pay attention to and look more into preventing and how to handle it better."

Last year it was estimated that nearly 60 players in the world's top professional women's leagues were sidelined because of anterior cruciate ligament injuries. Among them was Spain's Alexia Putellas, who injured her ACL just before the Euros last July.

Putellas, who will play for Spain at the World Cup, partnered with FIFPRO, the international players' union, to call

attention to the outbreak of ACL injuries and demand a closer look at possible contributing factors including workload, medical care, field conditions and even equity.

Studies have shown women are up to eight times more likely to suffer ACL injuries in sports involving sudden changes of direction, like soccer and basketball, than their male counterparts. Dr. Mark Cullen, the team physician for the University of New Hampshire who specializes in orthopedic surgery, says women have wider hips which impacts knee mechanics.

"They also tend to land a little bit more stiff-legged and don't absorb the forces as well as their male counterparts, and

that puts more force on the ACL and contributes to the tears," Cullen said.

Katie Rood, who plays professionally in Scotland, was hoping to make New Zealand's roster and play in soccer's biggest tournament on home soil. But she recently announced that she had joined the "ever-growing ACL club."

Miedema won't be ready in time to help the Netherlands when it returns to the Women's World Cup after finishing as runner-up to the United States four years ago in France. She is one of four players from Arsenal in the Women's Super League currently sidelined by ACL injuries. The list includes Williamson, who tore her ACL in April.

Jabeur, Vondrousova in Wimbledon final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Ons Jabeur came back from a set and a break down to defeat Aryna Sabalenka 6-7 (5), 6-4, 6-3 on Thursday and reach the Wimbledon final for the second consecutive year.

This will be the third title match in the past five Grand Slam tournaments for Jabeur. The 25-year-old from Tunisia was already the only Arab woman and only North African woman to get to a major final.

So far, she is 0-2 at that stage after losing to Elena Rybakina at the All England Club last July and to Iga Swiatek at the U.S. Open.

The sixth-seeded Jabeur's victory Thursday, which came by collecting 10 of the last 13 games, prevented the second-seeded Sabalenka from replacing Swiatek at No. 1 in the rankings. Sabalenka came into the match with a 17-1 record at majors in 2023, including a trophy at the Australian Open.

Jabeur's opponent for the championship on Saturday will be Marketa Vondrousova.

Vondrousova became the first unseeded women's finalist at Wimbledon since Billie Jean King in 1963 by eliminating Elina Svitolina 6-3, 6-3 earlier Thursday.

Jabeur trailed 4-2 in the sec-

ond set when she began to turn things around. But not before Sabalenka came within a point from leading 5-3 after Jabeur put a forehand into the net and fell onto her back on the grass of Centre Court.

She dusted herself off and broke to take that game and begin her big comeback. When she delivered a backhand return winner to force the match to a third set, Jabeur held her right index finger to her ear, then raised it and wagged it as she strutted to the changeover.

Sabalenka's shots repeatedly missed the mark down the stretch: She ultimately finished with 45 unforced errors

to 14 for Jabeur.

In the first semifinal, Vondrousova reeled off seven consecutive games in one stretch. She is ranked 43rd and reached the second Grand Slam final of her career after getting that far as a teenager at the 2019 French Open.

Ranked No. 76 and an unseeded wild-card recipient, Svitolina returned to the tour from maternity leave just three months ago. After surprisingly beating Swiatek in the quarterfinals, she was trying to become the first woman from Ukraine to make it to the title match at a major tournament.

PGA Tour players say Monahan must rebuild trust

Associated Press

GULLANE, Scotland — PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan returns to work next week, and some top players believe he has to regain their trust after leaving members in the dark over an about-face deal with the Saudi Arabia wealth fund behind LIV Golf.

"I'd say he has a lot of tough questions to answer in his return," Xander Schauffele said Wednesday at the Scottish Open, where he is the defending champion. "And, yeah, I don't trust people easily. He had my trust and he has a lot less of it now."

"So I don't stand alone when I say that."

A week after Monahan announced a commercial partnership with the Public Investment Fund, the tour said a "medical situation" led Monahan to turn over daily operations of the tour to two executives.

He sent a memo to players last week saying he would resume his role July 17. Monahan did not take part in the Senate hearing Tuesday in which documents outlined some of the conversations that led to the framework agreement.

Players were sent a 275-page file of the documents Congress obtained ahead of the three-hour hearing. Some watched part of it or read through a few excerpts of the documents. Jordan Spieth chose to play golf at North Berwick instead.

When asked if Monahan would have trust issues with the players, Spieth replied: "Quite a bit, just based on conversations I've

had with players. And I think he realizes that. I'm sure he's preparing for a plan to try and build it back."

Scottie Scheffler said he watched part of the hearing and didn't learn very much. Then again, the world's No. 1 player isn't sure how much he knew in the first place.

Monahan and two board members — Jimmy Dunne and board chairman Ed Herlihy — negotiated the agreement announced June 6 with the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia.

"As a player on tour, we still don't really have a lot of clarity as to what's going on, and that's a bit worrisome," Scheffler said. "They keep saying it's a player-run organization, and we don't really have the information that we need. I watched part of it yesterday. Didn't learn anything."

Rory McIlroy chose not to say anything.

McIlroy has been seen as the strongest voice in the PGA Tour's battle against Saudi-funded LIV Golf. He said he felt like a "sacrificial lamb" when he spoke to the media a day after the deal was announced, during the Canadian Open.

McIlroy gave two television interviews ahead of the Scottish Open, which started Thursday at The Renaissance Club. And then he walked past a dozen reporters. When asked if he had time to talk, his manager intervened to say McIlroy wouldn't be speaking about the hearing.

McIlroy's name surfaced in a Dec. 8 email to Dunne from Roger Devlin, a Brit-

ish businessman involved on the PIF side of helping repair the fractured state of golf. Devlin said he arranged for McIlroy to meet with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the governor of PIF, last November in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Devlin described the meeting as "very cordial and constructive."

"Rory made it clear that in accepting the meeting he was speaking only for himself although he believes his views are broadly shared by Tiger (Woods) and the other top players," Devlin wrote. "He also emphasized he was seeking no personal financial gain, he was simply trying to unify the game."

Schauffele said he glanced through some of the documents and started to watch a link to the hearing until he decided sleep was more important.

He referred to this as "one of the rockier times" on the PGA Tour but said it would be less unsettling if the players stick together. But his biggest beef was more transparency and players being more involved.

"There isn't much communication right now and things are a little bit unsettling and there is a bit of a divide between management and the players, if you want to call it that," he said. "And my hope is that a positive thing coming from that will be more communication, more transparency, and sort of understanding which direction the tour will go with us being sort of the ambassadors of it."

LeBron returning to Lakers next season

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James will play another season for the Los Angeles Lakers.

The 38-year-old superstar announced his intentions on stage at The ESPYS on Wednesday night after accepting the record-breaking performance award for becoming the NBA's career scoring leader.

At the end of last season, in which he surpassed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's mark, James had said he wasn't sure if he would be back.

"In that moment I'm asking myself if I can still play without cheating the game. Can I give everything to the game still? The truth is I've been asking myself this question at the end of the season for a couple years now. I just never openly talked about it," James said.

"I don't care how many more points I score or what I can and cannot do on the floor. The real question for me is can I play without cheating this game? The day I can't give the game everything on the floor is the day I'll

be done. Lucky for you guys, that day is not today."

The crowd at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood let out a huge cheer.

"So, yeah, I still got something left," James said. "A lot left."

He was presented his trophy by wife Savannah, sons Bronny and Bryce and daughter Zhuri. In her introductory remarks, Savannah said, "I think LeBron James is the baddest ..."

She began to say an expletive but cut herself off as Zhuri exclaimed, "Mom!"

James later returned and was joined by Chris Paul and Dwyane Wade to honor Carmelo Anthony, who recently retired after a 19-year career.

Earlier, Chicago White Sox reliever Liam Hendriks told the audience that he pitched much of the 2022 season with non-Hodgkin lymphoma before being diagnosed with an advanced stage of the disease.

He accepted the Jimmy V Award for Perseverance. The 34-year-old Australian was declared cancer-free in late April

and returned to the mound a month later.

"That was an eye-opener. I didn't feel too many symptoms but I had some lumps around. It just shows you the power of the mind. When you don't think anything's wrong and you believe that you can do anything, you can do anything," Hendriks said.

The U.S. women's soccer team was honored with the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage for its fight to receive equal pay. The players sued U.S. Soccer in 2019 and last year reached agreement on a deal that splits men's and women's pay equally.

Briana Scurry, goalkeeper for the national team from 1994-2008, saluted the 1985 team.

"They are the foundation of this entire community of giants," she said.

Patrick Mahomes was honored as best men's sports athlete, while skier Mikaela Shiffrin received the women's sports honor.

The Kansas City Chiefs quarterback has won two Super

Bowls in his five seasons and was named MVP of the game each time, including this past February. He turns 28 in September.

"It was an incredible season. There was many ups, many downs," Mahomes said. "I appreciate my teammates, my coaches, the guys that are here. I go back to camp next Tuesday, so this is a great award. But we're going to do this thing again, we're going to keep this thing rolling."

Shiffrin won her 87th World Cup race in March, breaking the mark set by Ingemar Stenmark for the most such wins by any skier. She went on to win an 88th Cup race, as well as the overall season title.

"This season was absolutely incredible and there was a lot of talk about records and it got me thinking, why is a record actually important?" Shiffrin said. "I just feel like it's not important to break records or re-set records. It's important to set the tone for the next generation, to inspire them."

Panama upsets US, advances to Gold Cup final

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — After winning the CONCACAF Gold Cup with its junior varsity two years ago, the United States failed to repeat.

Adalberto Carrasquilla converted the decisive penalty kick after Cristian Roldan was stopped in his attempt, and Panama beat the Americans 5-4 in a shootout following a 1-1 tie on Wednesday night to reach the CONCACAF Gold Cup final against Mexico.

"There's a lot of learning lessons that we're all going to take away as we now continue our preparation to the path of 2026," U.S. interim coach B.J. Callaghan said, looking ahead to the Americans co-hosting the World Cup.

"You had some older senior guys that had experience that we challenged to take on more leadership roles, mentorship roles, and that came out," Callaghan said. "And then we had a group of young players, whether they are U-20 — had played at the U-20 — or Olympic age, and all striving to become part of that roster in 2026."

Iván Anderson put No. 57 Panama ahead in the ninth minute of extra time with his first international goal, and Jesús Ferreira tied the score six minutes later for the 11th-ranked U.S.

Panama reached the final for the third time after losing to the U.S. in 2005 and 2013. Mexico, an eight-time champion, beat Jamaica 3-0 in Las Vegas.

The U.S., a seven-time winner

of the championship of North and Central America and the Caribbean, failed to reach the final for the first time since losing a 2015 semifinal to Jamaica. The Americans have not won consecutive Gold Cups since 2005 and '07.

The game marked the finale of Callaghan, who led the U.S. to five wins, one loss and one draw as the Americans' second interim coach this year. Gregg Berhalter returns for the Sept. 9 exhibition against Uzbekistan.

The U.S. had just 34% possession in the first half.

"The first half is my fault," Callaghan said. "I didn't set the team up the way they should have been set up."

American Cade Cowell hit a post about 20 seconds in and that

was the closest to a goal until Panama went ahead nine minutes into extra time.

Carrasquilla played a through pass to Anderson, who was kept onside by DeAndre Yedlin. Anderson took a touch and played the ball past onrushing goalkeeper Matt Turner, then kicked the ball into the open net for his first international goal.

Turner, who saved two penalty kicks against Canada, was the only U.S. player on the field who saw extensive time at last year's World Cup.

Ferreira scored six minutes later after Matt Miazga played a long pass to Jordan Morris, who headed the ball into the penalty area. Ferreira volleyed the ball with his right shin from 16 yards.