

Dems say Biden should prove he can win

The Washington Post

Democratic leaders called on President Joe Biden and his campaign to provide convincing evidence of a viable path to victory amid a steady tide of bad battleground state polling and growing concerns that he cannot defeat former President Donald Trump in November.

The calls came as top union leaders expressed grave concerns about his candidacy, more members of Congress and other Democrats called on him to step aside, and even members of Biden's senior campaign staff began to exchange doubt about his prospects.

In a closed-door meeting Wednesday, some of the country's union leaders — many of whom are strident backers of Biden — said Americans' doubts about Biden's ability to do the job were damaging his candidacy and repeatedly

asked Biden campaign officials for their plan to defeat Trump, according to two people familiar with their comments, who like others for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity to share private comments. Two of the most outspoken leaders were Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants, and Shawn Fain, the president of the United Auto Workers, two of Biden's biggest labor allies.

In a statement later Wednesday, AFL-CIO leadership "unanimously voted to reaffirm its commitment" to Biden, saying, "No president has been more invested in helping workers than Joe Biden."

Senior campaign staff have started to take a more pessimistic view of Biden's chances, even as they continue to fan out to push the campaign forward and reassure allies of the presi-

dent's potential to rebound.

"Overwhelmingly a majority of senior campaign staff are despondent and don't see a path," said a Democratic strategist familiar with the conversations. A second person familiar with the discussions did not dispute the description.

"We can either worry or we can work, and this team is doing the work that wins elections," Biden campaign spokesman Kevin Munoz said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Democrats say the defections are likely to increase in coming days, with lawmakers and donors privately signaling that, by the end of the week, they may publicly call for Biden to drop out. They argue they do not want to embarrass Biden during the ongoing NATO summit in Washington while also giving him time to decide on his own to exit the race.

On Wednesday, Sen. Peter

Welch of Vermont became the first Democratic senator to call on Biden to drop out, writing in a Washington Post op-ed that he should do so "for the good of the country" because of the danger posed by Trump. In addition, Rep. Pat Ryan, D-N.Y., one of the party's most vulnerable members; Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore.; and Antonio Delgado, the lieutenant governor of New York, also called on Biden to step aside.

At the first presidential debate with Trump on June 27, Biden was unable to complete sentences, often spoke haltingly and, at times, seemed confused about what question he was trying to answer. Democrats panicked over the performance, raising questions about his ability to serve another four years as president and renewing questions about the 81-year-old's mental acuity.

NATO alliance moves to bolster Ukraine defense

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden reaffirmed his commitment to Ukraine's defense on Thursday, announcing a new military aid package on the final day of a NATO summit shadowed by concerns about growing Chinese and North Korean support for Russia's invasion but also angst among Democrats about the American leader's ability to serve another four years.

"We will stay with you, period," Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a meeting.

Biden touted the package as his eighth since taking office, with this latest one consisting of

\$225 million of support, including an additional Patriot missile system to bolster Ukraine's air defenses against a deadly onslaught of Russian airstrikes.

The Patriot air defense system, the second the U.S. has provided to Ukraine, is one of several Biden announced this week at the NATO summit and is part of a swell of pledges to get weapons to Ukraine to help it fend off Russian attacks, including one this week that hit a children's hospital in Kyiv.

Zelenskyy thanked Biden for inviting him to the summit and called the new security package "strong news."

But in his brief remarks to reporters at the start of the meet-

ing, the Ukrainian leader also signaled that he intended to press Biden on further lifting U.S. restrictions on the use of American weaponry.

"We need some quick steps ... to lift all limitations for our Ukrainian soldiers," Zelenskyy said.

Later in the evening, all eyes will be on Biden as he closes out the summit of 32 NATO leaders in Washington with a news conference. It will provide a fresh chance for him to prove to the American public that he's capable of serving another four years after his shocking debate flop threw the future of his presidency into doubt.

The flurry of final events at

the NATO summit come a day after NATO labeled China a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war against Ukraine. China in turn accused NATO of seeking security at the expense of others and it has warned the military alliance not to bring the same "chaos" to Asia.

"We appreciate the close partnership with your country, and not least because our security is not regional, it is global," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said as he welcomed South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol for the last day of the alliance's summit in Washington.

"This is clearly illustrated by the war in Ukraine," he added.

Navy missile defense site in Poland finally ready

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy ballistic missile defense site in Redzikowo, Poland, that's been in the works for more than a decade has finally been declared mission-ready by NATO.

"This is an important step for transatlantic security and NATO's ability to defend against the growing threat of ballistic missiles," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Wednesday during an alliance summit in Washington.

The missile defense site in

Poland is part of a broader European shield that includes another U.S. Aegis Ashore site in Romania and U.S. Navy destroyers out of Rota, Spain.

An early-warning mountain-top radar in Kurecik, Turkey, manned by the U.S. Army, is also part of the network.

The Poland site can defend against short- to intermediate-range ballistic missiles, NATO said.

"Ballistic missiles have been widely used in conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East," Stoltenberg said. "As a defen-

sive alliance, we cannot ignore that threat. Missile defense is an essential element for NATO's core task of collective defense."

While the Navy's site in in Deveselu, Romania, has been operational since 2016, it's taken many years for the mission in Poland to follow suit.

The initiative is part of a U.S. missile defense effort known over the years as the European Phased Adaptive Approach, which was established in 2009 to counter Iranian ballistic missile threats.

The Poland part of the project was supposed to be ready around 2018, but repeated technical and construction problems at the site delayed the mission.

Navy officials said in December that the system was getting final technical upgrades to make it fully functional and ready to operate under NATO command and control in 2024.

The system, designed to detect, track and intercept ballistic missiles in flight, has been a source of tension with Moscow over the years.

Houthis fired Iran missile at Norwegian-flagged ship

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen's Houthi rebels likely fired an Iranian-made anti-ship cruise missile at a Norwegian-flagged tanker in the Red Sea in December, an assault that now provides a public, evidence-based link between the ongoing rebel campaign against shipping and Tehran, the U.S. military said.

A report by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency released Wednesday linked the attack on the Strinda, which set the vessel ablaze, to Tehran, the Houthi's main backer in Yemen's nearly decadelong war. The findings correspond with those of a Norway-based insurers group that also examined debris found on the Strinda.

It comes as the Houthis continue their monthslong campaign of attacks over the Israel-Hamas war, targeting ships in the Red Sea corridor, disrupting the \$1 trillion flow of goods passing through it annually while also sparking the most intense combat the U.S. Navy has seen since

World War II.

The Strinda was coming from Malaysia and was bound for the Suez Canal and then on to Italy with a cargo of palm oil when it was struck by a missile Dec. 11. The attack sparked a major fire on board that the crew later extinguished without anyone being hurt.

Debris found on board later was analyzed by the U.S. military. The DIA compared the pieces of the engine from the missile found on board to the Iranian Noor anti-ship ballistic cruise missile.

"The Iranian Tolu-4 turbojet engine, used in the Noor (missile), has unique features — including the compressor stage and stator — that are consistent with engine debris recovered from the ... Houthi attack on the M/T Strinda," the DIA report said. A stator is the stationary portion of an engine.

Those pieces match images of a Tolu-4 engine that Iran displayed at the International Air and Space Show in Russia in 2017, the DIA said. Visually, the engines bore similarities in the photographs.

Coast Guard spots Chinese naval ships off Alaska island

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A U.S. Coast Guard cutter on routine patrol in the Bering Sea came across several Chinese military ships in international waters but within the U.S. exclusive economic zone, officials said Wednesday.

The crew detected three vessels approximately 124 miles north of the Amchitka Pass in the Aleutian Islands, the Coast Guard said in a statement. A short time later, a helicopter aircrew from Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak spotted a fourth ship approximately 84 miles north of the Amukta Pass.

All four of the People's Republic of China vessels were "transiting in international waters but still inside the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone," which extends 200 nautical miles from the U.S. shoreline, the statement said.

"The Chinese naval presence operated in accordance with international rules and norms," said Rear Adm. Megan Dean, Seventeenth

Coast Guard District commander. "We met presence with presence to ensure there were no disruptions to U.S. interests in the maritime environment around Alaska."

U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Kimball is a 418-foot ship based in Honolulu.

This wasn't the first time Chinese naval ships have sailed near Alaska waters. In September 2022, the Kimball spotted guided missile cruiser from China in the Bering Sea. And in Sept. 2021, Coast Guard cutters in the Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean encountered Chinese ships, about 50 miles off the Aleutian Islands.

The U.S. military routinely conducts what it calls freedom of navigation operations in disputed waters in Asia that China claims as its own, deploying Navy ships to sail through waterways such as the South China Sea. The United States has said freedom of navigation in the waters is in America's national interest.

USS San Diego heading to Sasebo, 7th Fleet

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship USS San Diego will be replacing USS Green Bay at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, the Navy announced recently.

USS San Diego, currently homeported at its namesake Naval Base San Diego, will join the U.S. 7th Fleet at an unannounced date, according to a Navy news release emailed to Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

“For operational security reasons, we do not discuss [ships’] movements,” base spokesman Aki Nichols told Stars and Stripes

by email on Wednesday.

Sasebo base commander Capt. Michael Fontaine “looks forward to welcoming USS San Diego, her crew, and their families to the Sasebo community, and we stand ready to support her as part of our forward deployed fleet,” Nichols said.

Sasebo is home to the America Amphibious Ready Group, which includes the Green Bay and is led by the amphibious assault ship USS America.

Green Bay has been deployed to Sasebo for a decade and will return to the United States at its new homeport of San Diego, the release said.

The National Defense Authorization Act mandates that U.S. Navy ships may not deploy to Japan for more than 10 years, making this departure a permanent change of station for the Green Bay crew and their family members.

“The forward presence of San Diego supports the United States’ commitment to the defense of Japan, enhances the national security of the United States and improves its ability to protect strategic interests,” the release states.

Amphibious transport dock ships support amphibious assault, special operations or expeditionary warfare missions and

serve as secondary aviation platforms for amphibious operations, according to the Navy.

The San Diego carries a ship’s company of 360 officers and crew with room for 440 embarked Marines, according to the Navy.

In March 2023 the amphibious dock landing ship USS Ashland also departed Sasebo for San Diego.

“This posture allows the most rapid response times possible for maritime and joint forces and brings our most capable ships with the greatest amount of striking power and operational capability to bear in the timeliest manner,” the release said.

Navy receives destroyer named for Medal of Honor recipient

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

A warship named in honor of a legendary Marine Corps Medal of Honor recipient was delivered to the Navy this week.

The USS John Basilone, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, has been transferred to a pre-commissioning unit in Bath, Maine, according to a Navy statement Monday.

The destroyer will be homeported in Mayport, Fla., the Navy said. No timeline has been released for when the trip there will begin.

“The future USS John Basilone will bring significant capability to the fleet and strengthen our advantage at sea,” Capt. Seth Miller, a class program manager for the ship, said in a Navy statement.

The ship was christened by then-Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus in 2016 at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

Gunnery Sgt. John Basilone served during World War II and was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism at Guadalcanal in 1942 and later the Navy Cross for his actions at Iwo Jima.

After receiving the Medal of

Honor, Basilone was sent back to America to sell war bonds and make public appearances, while his requests to return to the front were denied. The Marine Corps eventually relented and sent him to Iwo Jima, where the Marines made landfall on Feb. 19, 1945.

Basilone’s Navy Cross citation says he “boldly defied the smashing bombardment of heavy caliber fire to work his way around the flank and up to a position directly on top of the blockhouse and then, attacking with grenades and demolitions, single-handedly destroyed the entire hostile strong point and its defending garrison.”

While pushing forward to an airfield, Basilone was killed instantly by a bursting mortar shell, according to the citation.

The newly acquired destroyer is the second ship to bear Basilone’s name. The first was a Gearing-class destroyer commissioned in 1949 and struck from the Navy list in 1977.

USS John Basilone is a Flight IIA destroyer that can combat threats underwater, on the surface and in the air. The ship is tentatively set to commission later this year.

Report: Details of water leak at base withheld by US, Japan

By SETH ROBSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — The American and Japanese governments agreed to withhold from local authorities the details of a contaminated water spill last year at the home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo, a Japanese newspaper reported Wednesday, citing unnamed officials.

The spill of around 167 gallons occurred at the receiving dock at the Yokota Community Center, where the base commissary and exchange are located, on Jan. 25, 2023, the Tokyo Shimbun reported.

The water, which flowed onto concrete, contained high levels of PFAS, short for poly and perfluoroalkyl substances, according to the newspaper. PFAS, a class of chemicals used in non-stick coatings on cookware and in firefighting foam, is linked to an increased risk of certain tumors of the liver, testicles, breasts and pancreas, according to the American Cancer Society.

U.S. Forces Japan told Japan’s Ministry of Defense that “there was no leakage outside

the base” because workers blocked a discharge outlet and mopped up the contaminated water, according to Tokyo Shimbun.

USFJ spokesman Gunnery Sgt. Jonathan Wright in an email Thursday said the command “remains committed to protecting the health of our personnel, their families, and the surrounding communities in which we live and serve.”

U.S. officials reported seven leaks at Yokota between 2010 and 2022 to the ministry, which explained them to local governments, the newspaper reported.

However, U.S. and Japanese officials agreed not to publicly release information about the January 2023 spill, according to the newspaper.

The U.S. military provided information about the accident to the Japanese government at a meeting of the two nations’ Environment Subcommittee in March, the newspaper reported.

The subcommittee was coordinating a release of information to local governments, but in a meeting last month, it agreed to withhold the accident details, the newspaper reported.

Hurricane floods Vermont exactly year after disaster

Associated Press

PLAINFIELD, Vt. — The remnants of Hurricane Beryl brought flooding to Vermont that prompted frantic evacuations, knocked down bridges and washed away an apartment building. The disaster came a year to the day after catastrophic rainfall inundated parts of the state.

Roads were flooded, washed out or covered with debris after heavy rain that started Wednesday and persisted into Thursday. Rescues were reported Wednesday night, and some communities were under evacuation orders.

In Plainfield, residents of a six-unit apartment building had only 15 minutes to evacuate before the entire structure was swept away by floodwaters that also took out at least seven bridges and left many roads impassable and people stranded, said town Emergency Management Director Michael Billingsley. One car was swept away, but the occupant escaped, he

said.

In the small community of Moretown, the damage appeared worse than it was a year ago, and the school was among buildings once again damaged by floodwaters, said Tom Martin, chair of the town board.

Workers hoped to install a temporary bridge Thursday on the main artery that provides access to the community, he said.

Across the state, emergency workers assessed damage Thursday morning, and Billingsley said it could take several days to know the full extent. Areas of central Vermont, which was hit hard by last July's flooding, suffered some of the heaviest damage. Roads and homes were also reportedly flooded in the city of Barre.

There were no immediate reports of any deaths in Vermont. State emergency managers had urged residents Wednesday to seek higher ground if floodwaters approached and said rescue teams and the National Guard were at the ready.

Pressure is mounting to restore power to Houston

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Pressure mounted Wednesday on Houston's power utility as millions of residents still had no electricity nearly three days after Hurricane Beryl made landfall, stoking questions over how a city that is all too familiar with destructive weather was unable to better withstand a Category 1 storm.

With frustration growing as Houston residents spent another sweltering day in search for places to cool off, fuel up and grab a bite to eat, a CenterPoint Energy executive faced a barrage from city leaders who wanted to know why it was taking so long to get the lights back on again. Mayor John Whitmire bluntly called on the utility to do a better job.

"That's the consensus of Houstonians. That's mine," Whitmire said.

Late Wednesday, CenterPoint Energy said it had "restored more than 1 million of the 2.26 million customers impacted by Hurricane Beryl in the first 55 hours of its restoration efforts, and continues to focus on restoring customers without power."

"Based on its continued progress, the company expects to have an additional 400,000 customers restored by the end of the day on Friday, July 12 and an ad-

ditional 350,000 customers restored by the end of the day on Sunday, July 14," the utility's statement said.

Beryl came ashore as a Category 1 hurricane, the weakest type, but has been blamed for at least seven U.S. deaths — one in Louisiana and six in Texas. Earlier, 11 died in the Caribbean.

The storm's lingering impact for many in Texas, however, was the wallop to the power supply that left much of the nation's fourth-largest city sweltering days later in hot and humid conditions that the National Weather Service deemed potentially dangerous.

"Maybe they thought it wasn't going to be so bad, but it's had a tremendous effect. They needed to be better prepared," construction worker Carlos Rodriguez, 39, said as he gathered apples, oranges and ready-to-eat meal packs at a food distribution center. His family, with two daughters ages 3 and 7, was struggling, he said.

Power outages peaked at 2.7 million customers after the storm made landfall Monday, according to PowerOutage.us.

As of late Wednesday afternoon there were 1.6 million customers without power in the Houston area, including 1.3 million CenterPoint customers.

Wildfire risk rises as heat wave dries out West

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Authorities in Western states warned of the rising risk of wildfires as hot conditions and low humidity dry out the landscape amid a protracted heat wave that was expected to bake much of the U.S. again Thursday.

California's top fire official said Wednesday that so far this year the state has responded to more than 3,500 wildfires that have scorched nearly 325 square miles of vegetation —

five times the average burned through July 10 in each of the past five years.

"We are not just in a fire season, but we are in a fire year," Joe Tyler, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, said at a news conference.

California crews working in scorching temperatures and single-digit humidity were battling at least 19 major wildfires Wednesday.

Several wildfires were also

burning in Oregon, including one about 111 miles east of Portland that blew up to 11 square miles Wednesday due to hot temperatures, gusty winds and low humidity, according to the state fire marshal.

Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek issued an emergency authorization allowing additional resources to be deployed against fires breaking out as the state has seen record daily high temperatures.

More than 142 million people

around the U.S. were under heat alerts Wednesday.

Las Vegas on Wednesday recorded its record fifth consecutive day of temperatures sizzling at 115 or greater.

On the other side of the nation, the weather service warned of major-to-extreme heat risk over portions of the East Coast.

An excessive heat warning remained in place Wednesday for the Philadelphia area, northern Delaware and nearly all of New Jersey.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ballot question would let rideshare drivers unionize

MA BOSTON — Drivers for ride-hailing companies in Massachusetts are pushing ahead with what they describe as a first-of-its-kind ballot question that could win them union rights if approved.

The push comes despite a landmark settlement last month guaranteeing that Uber and Lyft drivers will earn a minimum pay standard of \$32.50 per hour in Massachusetts.

Supporters of the measure last week delivered the final batch of signatures needed to land a spot on the November ballot.

April Verritt, president of the Service Employees International Union, said the tens of thousands of Uber and Lyft drivers working in Massachusetts deserve the collective bargaining benefits of unions.

The group is working on a similar effort in California.

Order seeks cellphone restrictions in schools

VA FALLS CHURCH — Virginia on Tuesday joined a growing number of states that are pushing for cellphone restrictions in public schools, citing concerns over students' academic achievement and mental health.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued an executive order to establish state guidance and model policies for local school systems to adopt by January.

"Studies indicate that students who use their phones during class learn less and achieve lower grades," Youngkin's order stated. It also cited an

"alarming mental health crisis" among adolescents, which is partly driven by cellphones and social media.

Last year, Florida became the first state to crack down on phones in school with a new law. Indiana and Ohio passed their own laws this year.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 76% of public schools prohibited "non-academic cell phone use" during the 2021-22 school year.

Gunman killed by rangers had threatened to shoot

WY CHEYENNE — A gunman killed by Yellowstone National Park rangers as he fired a semiautomatic rifle at the entrance of a dining facility with about 200 people inside had told a woman as he held her at gunpoint earlier that he planned to carry out a mass shooting, park officials said Tuesday.

Park rangers shot back and killed the man during the July 4 attack. Yellowstone officials identified the lone shooter Tuesday as Samson Lucas Bariah Fussner, 28, of Milton, Fla.

A park ranger who was wounded was released from a hospital but not identified.

Fussner worked for Xanterra Parks and Resorts, the main concessionaire for such facilities in Yellowstone, park officials said in a statement Tuesday.

Soon after midnight on July 4, law enforcement rangers heard that Fussner had held a woman against her will with a gun at a residence in Canyon Village, a lodging area. The woman reported that Fussner threatened to kill her and others, including

carrying out a mass shooting at July 4 events outside the park.

Around 8 a.m. Thursday, law enforcement rangers encountered Fussner as he approached and fired on a service entrance to the Canyon Lodge dining facility. Several of the rangers shot at Fussner, and he died at the scene, according to the statement.

Man charged with theft of car that had a baby inside

MS JACKSON — A Mississippi judge on Tuesday set bond at \$300,000 for a man accused of stealing a car with a 7-month-old baby inside.

James Wilson, 44, of Rankin County, was arrested Monday at a hotel in Jackson and charged with auto theft and kidnapping.

The Mazda sedan was unattended with its motor running when it was stolen Saturday evening from a gas station near Interstate 55 in north Jackson, police said. The car was found that night at a shopping center a few miles away, with the unharmed baby still inside. Police said she received a medical check as a precaution.

Wilson told news outlets Monday that he did not steal the car. Police said he is on probation for prior auto theft convictions.

LA to settle claims over fireworks detonation

CA LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles will pay more than \$21 million to settle claims by residents of a neighborhood where police bungled the detonation of a cache of illegal fireworks three years ago, injuring 17 people and displac-

ing dozens of others.

The City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved the payments, and the settlements will now go to Mayor Karen Bass for approval, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Police found an estimated 32,000 pounds of illegal commercial and homemade fireworks and other explosive materials at a home on East 27th Street on June 30, 2021. The LAPD bomb squad packed nearly 40 pounds of the most volatile and dangerous homemade fireworks into an armored containment vessel that was rated for only 33 pounds, according to a federal report. The fireworks were supposed to be detonated safely at the scene because they were too unstable to move, but the vessel exploded and debris rained down on scores of homes, businesses and vehicles.

'Uninvited guest' found at festival: A black bear

CO DENVER — An 80-pound black bear found hiding under a honeycomb shop at the Colorado Renaissance Festival was safely removed by wildlife officers and Douglas County deputies on Sunday.

Deputies found the "uninvited guest," a black bear festival attendee named Smoky, camped out under a building at the festival grounds in Larkspur, the sheriff's office said in a post on X. The bear was content to rest under the honeycomb shop and even found a ball to play with until Colorado Parks and Wildlife officers arrived to remove and relocate him, sheriff's officials said.

— From wire reports



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War steeling resolve of Ukrainian Olympians

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — For Ukrainian hurdler Anna Ryzhykova, each stride on the Paris Olympic track will have meaning far beyond the time she clocks.

Her competitions are no longer strictly an individual battle, but war on a different front. Her goal is not just gold, but also to rivet global attention on her country's fight for survival against Russia.

"You're not doing it for yourself anymore," she says. "Winning a medal just for yourself, being a champion, realizing your ambitions — it's inappropriate."

But the broader war is making it increasingly difficult for Ukraine, once a post-Soviet sports power, to get those headline-capturing medals, an Associated Press analysis found.

Figure skater Oksana Baiul won Ukraine's first Olympic

gold, at the 1994 Winter Games, just three years after Ukraine declared independence. The medal ceremony in Lillehammer, Norway, was delayed while organizers hunted for a recording of Ukraine's anthem, finally securing one from the Ukrainian team.

Pole vault star Sergei Bubka and the boxing Klitschko brothers — Vitali and Wladimir, the Olympic super-heavyweight champion in 1996 — were among other athletes who put the new nation on the sports map. At the Summer Games, Ukraine outperformed every former Soviet or Eastern bloc state — except Russia and, in 2000, Romania — and through to London in 2012, always finished among the top 13 nations, ranked by total medals won.

Ukrainian performances began dipping after 2014. Russia's

illegal annexation of Crimea that year was followed by eight years of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine by Moscow-backed armed separatists before it unleashed its even deadlier full-scale invasion in 2022 to subdue the whole country.

Ukraine's haul of 11 medals at the 2016 Rio Games was its smallest as an independent nation and it tumbled to a low of 22nd in the country rankings. Ukraine recovered to 16th at the pandemic-delayed Olympics in Tokyo in 2021, but just one of its 19 medals was gold — another new low.

Part of the explanation is that fighting takes lives and resources. Just as important is the psychological burden the war imposes on athletes.

While honing their bodies and skills for Paris, they have wrestled with their consciences. Athletes have had to explain

to themselves and others why they are still competing when soldiers are dying and lives being ripped apart. Some are emerging from the journey with their priorities reordered and armed with new motivation to fight, through sport, for the broader national cause.

"Our victories are to draw attention to Ukraine," Ryzhykova said.

She ran on Ukraine's bronze medal-winning 400-meter relay team in the London Olympics in 2012, and placed fifth in her specialty in Tokyo, the 400-meter hurdles. Any medals she earns this summer will be for her country in a very real sense.

"Attention is drawn to you only when you win, when you perform, when you are on the podium," she said in an AP interview. "The higher you are, the more attention you attract."

USA Basketball's long road to Olympics off to good start

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Stephen Curry drove to the basket, laid the ball in, got fouled and ended up on the floor after drawing the contact.

He noticed he was near the on-court photographers, so he decided to go viral.

Curry posed for a few seconds — one hand on his hip, the other on the side of his head, while giving those cameras a wide-eyed look — before getting to his feet. The showman put on a show in his debut with the U.S. Olympic basketball team, scoring 12 points in 19 minutes and helping the Americans beat Canada 86-72 in their exhibition opener Wednesday night.

"Just having fun," Curry said. "Got to the basket and I slid across. I was trying to get back up, but I got stuck so I just wanted to pose and give myself a second. You know I like to have fun and enjoy myself, and it didn't take long for me to find an opportunity tonight."

There was a lot to like — and in fairness, plenty not to like — for the Americans in their first tune-up for the Paris Olympics.

First, they won. All 10 available players

contributed; they all got between 17 and 21 minutes except for Joel Embiid, who was limited to 12 only because of foul trouble. There were highlights — social media went wild for the Curry pose and a LeBron James chase-down block that led to a 3-pointer for Devin Booker — and there were plenty of mistakes that can be quickly cleaned up.

"We needed to set a tone for how we want to play," U.S. coach Steve Kerr said. "And I think we did that."

And now, the real work begins.

The team flies to Abu Dhabi — the next stop on the pre-Olympic tour — on Thursday for a few days of practices and two more exhibitions. Kawhi Leonard won't be on the flight; the Americans decided it wasn't in his best interest to try to play this summer, so they replaced him with Derrick White, who'll be on the way in a few days.

All that went down Tuesday night, as USA Basketball was also celebrating its 50th anniversary with a gala — and President Barack Obama was one of the speakers, telling the team about what it means to represent the country on the

Olympic stage.

"It's always a treat when you get to talk to one of the greatest people this world has ever seen, in my opinion," James said. "His vision, his mindset, his words are always resonating, in more ways than one. To be able to sit down with a former president, a friend of mine that I really call a dear friend, it's pretty awesome."

Obama was there Wednesday night, one of more than 20,000 people at the arena in Las Vegas to watch a glorified scrimmage. It was the biggest crowd for a game in the arena's history, USA Basketball said. There were "U-S-A! U-S-A!" chants, there were past gold medalists in the crowd, gold-medal-winning coaches like Mike Krzyzewski sitting courtside.

Like Kerr said, the night set a tone. And now the Americans leave the United States for a month, looking for a fifth consecutive gold.

"This is always a fun format when you get this collection of guys together," Curry said. "It's a test and a challenge to try and figure out the chemistry, just the flow and the rhythm."

So far, so good.

Military contingent seeks Olympic impact

BY MATT WAGNER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. service members are setting their sights on gold when the Olympics and Paralympics come to France later this summer, particularly when it comes to the shooting range.

Seven U.S. Army soldiers and at least two veterans qualified for the Games, held July 26 through Aug. 11 in Paris and other French cities. Three more active-duty soldiers will compete in the Paralympics from Aug. 28 to Sept. 8.

The Army Marksmanship Unit based at Fort Moore, Ga., will be sending a sizable contingent to France. The unit, created in 1956 by President Dwight Eisenhower, has earned 26 Olympic medals so far.

One Army veteran of that unit, Vincent Hancock, 35, is competing in his fifth Olympics and will push for his fourth gold medal after winning men's skeet in Beijing, London and Tokyo.

Four current members will test their mettle in a field of 340 across 15 events from July 27 to Aug. 5 at the Chateauroux Shooting Center.

Sgts. Ivan Roe and Sagen Maddalena will compete in two events.

Roe, a Montana native, is making his first Olympics ap-

pearance after qualifying in the men's 10-meter air rifle and 50-meter three-position, or small bore, events.

The 28-year-old was All-American seven times at Murray State University and joined the Army Marksmanship Unit in 2019.

Maddalena hails from Groveland, Calif., and is entering her second Games. She will be looking to make the podium after taking fifth place in the 50-meter small bore in Tokyo. She's adding the 10-meter air rifle this time around.

The 30-year-old walked on at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and earned eight All-American selections in air rifle and small-bore shooting before joining the Army.

Along with Roe, two others from the Army Marksmanship Unit will make their Olympic debuts. Staff Sgts. Rachel Tozier, 32, and Will Hinton, 28, qualified in trapshooting.

Tozier, a Pattonsburg, Mo., native, joined the Army marksmanship program in 2017 and has earned 11 medals in international competitions.

Hinton, who is from the Atlanta metro area, made a U.S. junior world team in 2013. He switched from sporting clays to international-style trap in 2016 after joining the Army.

Keith Sanderson, 49, a Marine Corps and Army veteran, returns for his fourth Games in the 25-meter men's rapid-fire pistol.

Meanwhile, Capt. Sammy Sullivan made the women's rugby sevens squad for her first Olympic Games.

The 26-year-old West Point graduate will play the edge prop position for the Eagles during the tournament, held July 28-30 at the Stade de France in Paris.

The women's rugby team seeks the program's first medal since the introduction of the sport at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

The Eagles took fourth place in world series league stage and beat France, one of the nations in their pool 19-5 in a tournament in Hong Kong on April 7.

On the track, Army Reserve 1st Lt. Sam Kendricks won the pole vault at the U.S. trials last month in Eugene, Ore. He set a new meet record by clearing 19 feet, 5 inches.

Kendricks, 31, earned a bronze medal in Rio in 2016, but he missed out in 2021 with a positive COVID-19 test. He has won two world championships and is an 11-time U.S. champion. He's also ranked third on the World Athletics list.

Distance runner Staff Sgt. Leonard Korir, 37, is back at the

Games after missing out on qualifying for the Tokyo Games by just 3 seconds.

The former Iona College athlete took 14th place in the 10-kilometer race in 2016.

He placed third in the marathon at the U.S. Olympic trials. His race in Paris will take place Aug. 10.

Spc. Kamal Bey is competing in Greco-Roman wrestling in the 77kg weight class. The Colorado Springs, Colo., native received an Olympic quota spot following the vacated spots of Individual Neutral Athletes, or Olympic qualifiers with Russian and Belarussian passports who were deemed eligible and invited to compete in Paris.

Bey, 26, will compete Aug. 6-7 at the Champ-de-Mars Arena.

Soldiers coaching at the Games are former Olympians Master Sgt. Dennis Bowsher in the modern pentathlon and Sgt. 1st Class Spenser Mango in wrestling.

On the Paralympics side, Sgt. 1st Class John Wayne Joss III, 41, and Staff Sgt. Kevin Nguyen, 31, will be shooting in the R6 50-meter rifle prone SH1 event.

Sgt. 1st Class Elizabeth Marks, a 33-year-old swimmer, will try to repeat her impressive Tokyo Games haul of three medals — a gold, a silver and a bronze.

US men's team fires Berhalter after Copa America exit

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Gregg Berhalter was fired 10 months into his second stint as U.S. men's soccer coach, leaving the Americans searching for a leader less than two years before they host the World Cup.

Berhalter was dismissed Wednesday, nine days after his team's first-round exit from the Copa America flamed doubts he was the right person to remain in charge.

"The Copa America result is

extremely disappointing and I take full responsibility for our performance," Berhalter said in a statement. "Our approach and process was always focused on the 2026 World Cup, and I remain confident that this group will be one of the great stories in 2026."

After opening the Copa America with a 2-0 win over Bolivia, the United States lost to Panama 2-1 while playing most of the match a man short due to Tim Weah's ejection, then was

eliminated with a 1-0 defeat to Uruguay. The U.S. had seven wins, six losses and one draw in his second stint, leaving his overall record at 44 wins, 17 losses and 13 draws.

When Berhalter returned to the bench last September, he proclaimed the team's goal was "to change soccer in America forever." If that is to happen, it will be without him.

Sporting director Matt Crocker rehired Berhalter and will also make the recommendation

on his replacement. The team next plays in September friendlies against Canada and New Zealand.

USSF spokesman Neil Bueth would not make Crocker available to answer questions from The Associated Press.

"Our immediate focus is on finding a coach who can maximize our potential as we continue to prepare for the 2026 World Cup, and we have already begun our search process," Crocker said in a statement.

Paolini reaches 2nd straight Slam final

Associated Press

LONDON — Jasmine Paolini kept coming back, kept coming back, kept coming back, against Donna Vekic in what became the longest Wimbledon women's semifinal on record — after dropping the opening set, after being two games from defeat in each of the last two sets, after twice trailing by a break in the third.

And all the while, this is what Paolini kept telling herself Thursday: “Try, point by point” and “Fight for every ball.”

Paolini never had won a match at the All England Club until last week and now will participate in her second consecutive Grand Slam final, thanks to a rollicking 2-6, 6-4, 7-6 (10-8) victory over the unseeded Vekic across 2 hours, 51 minutes on Centre Court.

“This match,” said the No. 7-

seeded Paolini, a 28-year-old from Italy, “I will remember forever.”

As will many of the thousands who were present or the millions watching on TV.

“It was,” Paolini said, “a rollercoaster of emotions.”

Consider: Vekic, a 28-year-old from Croatia making her debut in a Slam semifinal, ended up claiming more points (118-111), delivering more winners (42-26) and breaking serve more often (4-3).

“She was hitting winners everywhere,” Paolini said.

But Paolini never went away, eventually converting her third match point when Vekic sent a forehand wide. This showing on the grass courts at Wimbledon follows Paolini's runner-up finish to Iga Swiatek on the red clay at the French Open last month.

Paolini is the first woman to

get to the title matches at Roland Garros and the All England Club in the same season since Serena Williams in 2016.

“These last months have been crazy for me,” Paolini said with a laugh.

In Saturday's final, she will face No. 31 Barbora Krejckova, who beat No. 4 Elena Rybakina 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 on Thursday. Krejckova is a major champ already, having won the French Open in 2021.

The men's semifinals are Friday.

Paolini's win was anything but easy for either woman. Exhausting would be a more appropriate word.

Vekic often was in obvious distress, crying between points and while sitting in her change-over chair late in the third set — because, she said afterward, of pain in an arm and a leg — and

often looked up at her guest box with a flushed face. She iced her right forearm between games.

“I thought I was going to die in the third set,” said Vekic, who repeatedly closed her eyes, sighed or shook her head during her news conference.

“I didn't know how,” she said, “I could keep playing.”

How surprising is Paolini's recent surge?

She never had managed to make it past the second round at any major tournament — losing in the first or second round in 16 appearances in a row — until she got to the fourth round at the Australian Open in January.

And then there's this: Paolini's career record at Wimbledon was 0-3 until this fortnight. Indeed, she did not own a single tour-level win on grass anywhere until a tuneup event at Eastbourne last month.

Alcaraz has same path to Wimbledon title as last year

Associated Press

LONDON — Carlos Alcaraz's ability to hit any type of shot, from any position on the court, on any surface, keeps fans on the edge of their seats.

Keeps other players guessing, too.

Alcaraz delights in all of that — he loves putting on a show just as much as he enjoys knowing he makes the guys on the other side of the net uncomfortable — and figures it can only help him in the Wimbledon semifinals against Daniil Medvedev on Friday.

It's beneficial, Alcaraz said, that opponents need to focus on whether he'll be “able to be back (in) the point or ... able to hit an unbelievable shot.”

“For me,” he said, “it's great that they're thinking about it.”

Alcaraz, the No. 3 seed, is seeking a second consecutive trophy at the All England Club and fourth Grand Slam title overall. His triumph last month

at the French Open made him, at 21, the youngest man to collect a major trophy on hard, grass and clay courts.

Medvedev, who is seeded No. 5 and defeated No. 1 Jannik Sinner in the quarterfinals, won the 2021 U.S. Open but is just 1-5 in major finals.

The other match Friday will be No. 2 Novak Djokovic, who has won seven of his men's-record 24 Slam championships at Wimbledon, against No. 25 Lorenzo Musetti, making his debut in a major semifinal.

“Against him, you are probably more stressed, because he's probably the best player ever — or one of the best players ever,” said the 22-year-old Musetti, who beat Taylor Fritz in five sets on Wednesday, while Djokovic got the day off because his foe, Alex de Minaur, withdrew with an injured hip.

“You walk on court with a different mentality,” said Musetti,

whose 1-5 record against Djokovic includes a five-set loss at this year's French Open that ended after 3 a.m. “If I play in a certain way, I could have my shot in the next round.”

Alcaraz vs. Medvedev is a rematch from last year's semifinals, when Alcaraz won in straight sets before getting past Djokovic in the final.

It also offers a contrast between a talented attacker (Alcaraz) and a consummate defender (Medvedev).

“The most difficult thing about facing Daniil, or the most special thing about him, is he can reach every ball,” Alcaraz said. “Well, he is like a wall. Every ball bounces back.”

Asked what Alcaraz's best quality is, Medvedev began this way: “To be honest, everything.”

That sounds like an exaggeration.

Might not be.

“That's where it's tough to

play against him, because you know whatever shot you hit, he can hit a winner from there. So you try to make his life difficult. You try to hit the shot as good as you can. Maybe he goes for it and he cannot make it,” said Medvedev, who has won just two of their previous six encounters.

“Carlos can do whatever, from any position,” Medvedev said, “and that's not easy to play against.”

Tommy Paul, the 12th-seeded American who lost to Alcaraz in the quarterfinals, put something else on the lengthy list of the Spaniard's attributes.

“He moves unbelievably well. He's probably the quickest player. It's very hard to get the ball by him,” Paul said. “Grass suits him. He moves incredible on the grass. It's not easy to change direction the way that he does. He stays pretty low. Yeah, I mean, it's not easy.”