

DOD eyes drug safety testing on meds

Bloomberg

U.S. military officials are so concerned about the quality of generic drugs that the Department of Defense is devising a program to test the safety of widely used medicines.

Defense officials are in talks with Valisure, an independent lab, to test the quality and safety of generic drugs it purchases for millions of military members and their families, according to several people familiar with the matter who asked not to be named as the details aren't public.

The move raises questions about the Food and Drug Administration's ability to adequately police generic medicines. With mounting drug shortages, most of which are caused by quality problems, military officials have gone so far as to call vulnerabilities in the drug supply chain a national security threat.

The FDA is responsible for ensuring that America's drugs are safe, but it's gotten harder for the agency to police quality because generic drugmakers have shifted operations to India and China where costs are lower and the U.S. has little oversight. The Pentagon's proposed program isn't currently targeting the expensive, brand-name drugs advertised on TV, but rather the older copycat drugs that make up more than 9 out

of 10 prescription medications that Americans take.

Aware of growing quality problems, the White House has convened a task force that's exploring whether testing could be expanded more broadly in the U.S. If the Pentagon pilot is successful, it could serve as a model for Medicare or the Department of Veterans Affairs, people familiar with the matter said. But there are tensions in Washington: In conversations with the White House, the FDA has pushed back against additional quality checks, questioning the accuracy of third-party labs like Valisure.

The agency said it stands behind medicines sold in the U.S. and Americans can be confident about their quality.

Drugmakers are required to test their drugs for impurities. The industry doesn't share results with the FDA, rather companies keep files that agency inspectors comb through when they visit drug production plants once every year or two. Over the last decade, FDA inspectors have found many manipulated test results. The agency can ask a plant to shut down if it finds major problems. This can lead to or exacerbate drug shortages, which is an acute problem in the U.S. right now.

The FDA said in 2019 that 62% of drug shortages were caused by quality issues.

Sometimes even the threat of a shortage can force the U.S. to accept drugs from low-quality suppliers that, under other conditions, would have been cut off. Drug shortages are currently at a five-year high in the U.S. and climbing.

The idea for the Pentagon's drug testing program was motivated by weaknesses in the pharmaceutical supply chain exposed by the COVID crisis. A recent congressional mandate also required military officials to further investigate the threat of America's increasing reliance on overseas manufacturers.

"They're taking that risk very seriously," said Valisure Chief Executive Officer David Light, who declined to comment specifically on the department's plans to partner with his company.

The Defense Department didn't comment on a detailed list of questions sent by Bloomberg News.

The Pentagon's proposed program follows a similar one quietly launched by Kaiser Permanente, details of which have never been reported. Kaiser, which serves 12.7 million Americans, started working with Valisure on additional drug quality checks more than two years ago, said Sean Buhler, Kaiser's vice president of pharmacy strategic sourcing and procurement.

Ukraine claims it recaptured a fourth village

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian military officials said Monday their troops have retaken another southeastern village from Russian forces, among the first — small — successes in stepped-up counteroffensive operations as the war drags on into its 16th month.

Western analysts and military officials have cautioned that an effort to rid Ukraine of entrenched, powerfully armed and skilled Russian troops could take years, and the success of any Ukrainian counter-

offensive is far from certain.

Despite their small size, capturing the villages is an incursion into the first line of Russian defenses and could allow Ukrainian forces to try a deeper thrust into occupied areas. Russian forces now control land totaling about one-fifth of Ukraine's total territory, though that's far less than they held before blistering Ukrainian counteroffensives last year that retook the northern city of Kharkiv and southern city of Kherson.

On Saturday, Ukrainian Pres-

ident Volodymyr Zelenskyy said "counteroffensive, defensive actions are taking place" without specifying whether it was an all-out counteroffensive, a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that the counteroffensive had started and Ukrainian forces were taking "significant losses." He did not elaborate, and Ukrainian authorities have not publicly specified losses among their troops.

Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar wrote on Telegram that Ukraine's flag was

again flying over the village of Storozhiv. A day earlier, Ukrainian officials said they had taken three other small villages — Blahodatne, Makarivka and Neskuchne — south of the town of Velyka Novosilka in the eastern Donetsk region.

The small villages — Blahodatne, for example, had a pre-invasion population of about 1,000 people — are located in the so-called "Vremivka salient," a section of the front line where the Russian-controlled area protrudes into territory held by Ukraine.

7th Fleet task force gets new commander

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP COURTNEY, Okinawa — The admiral who helmed a trial of new Navy and Marine Corps warfare concepts in the Indo-Pacific region handed his task force command over to a successor last week.

Rear Adm. Derek Trinqué passed responsibility for Task Force 76/3, also known as Expeditionary Strike Group 7, to Rear Adm. Christopher Stone during a ceremony at the Camp Courtney Chapel on Friday. About 100 Marines and sailors watched from wooden pews.

Trinqué took command in September of the revamped strike group, which included elements of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, ahead of

exercises Noble Fusion at undisclosed spots across the Indo-Pacific and Kamandag in the Philippines. Navy and Marine Corps leadership ordered the 18-month experiment to increase readiness and test “naval integration concepts” at-sea and on shore. Task Force 76/3 is an experimental “proof of concept,” not a permanently established command, according to an October news release from the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

“Task Force 76/3 is what we believe naval integration should look like for our mission and our forces in the Indo-Pacific region,” Brig. Gen. Fridrik Fridriksson, deputy task force commander, said in the release. “We are going to be real

and honest with ourselves, so we can provide better prepared forces for the full range of operations, from humanitarian and disaster response to high-intensity conflict.”

Task Force 76/3 is responsible for “rapid mobilization in the event of crisis, conflict or natural disaster” in the 7th Fleet, the unit website states. That area encompasses more than 48 million square miles from the Kuril Islands in the north to the Antarctic, and from the International Date Line to the India-Pakistan border.

The task force is made up of approximately 5,500 sailors, along with aircraft, landing craft and ships stationed across the Indo-Pacific region. It is

headquartered at White Beach Naval Facility on Okinawa, but its ships are based mostly in Sasebo, on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands. The vessels travel south to Okinawa to pick up the Marines before going out on patrol.

Stone, a 1994 U.S. Naval Academy graduate and a Texas native, arrives from the Pentagon, where he served as special assistant to Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the vice chief of naval operations.

“The team here has broken through and established something new,” he told *Stars and Stripes* after the ceremony. “Our opportunity is to be able to build upon that and take it to the next level.”

Major air deployment exercise begins in Germany

Associated Press

BERLIN — An air deployment exercise billed as the biggest in NATO’s history and hosted by Germany got underway on Monday. The Air Defender 2023 exercise that is set to run through June 23 was long-planned but serves to showcase the alliance’s capabilities amid high tensions with Russia.

The first planes took off on Monday morning from airfields in northern Germany. Some 10,000 participants and 250 aircraft from 25 nations will respond to a simulated attack on a NATO member. The United States alone is sending 2,000 U.S. Air Na-

tional Guard personnel and about 100 aircraft.

“The exercise is a signal — a signal above all to us, a signal to us, the NATO countries, but also to our population that we are in a position to react very quickly ... that we would be able to defend the alliance in case of attack,” German air force chief Lt. Gen. Ingo Gerhartz told ZDF television.

Gerhartz said he proposed the exercise in 2018, reasoning that Russia’s annexation of Crimea underlined the need to be able to defend NATO. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has jolted NATO into pre-

paring in earnest for the possibility of an attack on its territory. Sweden, which is hoping to join the alliance, and Japan are also taking part in the exercise.

Assessments of the extent to which the exercise will disrupt civilian flights have varied widely. Matthias Maas, the head of a German air traffic controllers’ union, GdF, has said it “will of course have massive effects on the operation of civilian aviation.”

Gerhartz disputed that claim. He said Germany’s air traffic control authority has worked with the air force to keep disruption “as small as possible.”

Sailor airlifted off destroyer dies of unspecified causes

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A Navy sailor who had been in the service for almost 25 years died following an airlift off a destroyer that is part of a carrier strike group operating in the North Sea, officials announced over the weekend.

Chief Petty Officer Caprice Pryor was medevaced from the USS Ramage on Thursday and died the same day, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet

said in a statement Saturday.

The Navy did not give a cause of death or offer additional details, saying only that an investigation was underway.

“Chief Pryor made a lasting impact on the sailors he led aboard Ramage, and his contributions to the U.S. Navy are immeasurable,” Rear Adm. Erik Eslich, commander of the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, said in the statement.

Aleisia Pryor, who identified herself as

a sister of the sailor, said in a public post on her Facebook page Saturday that she didn’t have many details about Pryor’s death but believed “it was from a broken heart.”

“We lost our mother almost 3 months ago to the day of his passing,” she said.

On his Facebook page, Pryor said he was from Chicago and was married.

A gunner’s mate, Pryor reported to the Ramage in July 2022.

Trump, allies escalate attacks on criminal case

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump and his allies are escalating efforts to undermine the criminal case against him and drum up protests as the former president braces for a history-making federal court appearance this week on dozens of felony charges accusing him of illegally hoarding classified information.

Trump's Tuesday afternoon appearance in Miami will mark his second time in as many months facing a judge on criminal charges. But unlike a New York case some legal analysts derided as relatively trivial, the Justice Department's first prosecution of

a former president concerns conduct that prosecutors have said jeopardized national security and that involves Espionage Act charges carrying the threat of a significant prison sentence in the event of conviction.

Ahead of his arraignment, Trump ratcheted up the rhetoric against the Justice Department special counsel who filed the case, calling Jack Smith "deranged" and his team of prosecutors "thugs" as he repeated without any evidence his claims that he was the target of a political persecution.

He called on his supporters to join a planned protest at the Mia-

mi courthouse Tuesday, where he will be arraigned on the charges.

"We need strength in our country now," Trump said, speaking to his longtime friend and adviser Roger Stone in an interview on WABC Radio. "And they have to go out and they have to protest peacefully. They have to go out."

"Look, our country has to protest. We have plenty of protest to protest. We've lost everything," he went on.

He also said there were no circumstances "whatsoever" under which he would leave the 2024 race, where he's so far been dominating the Republican primary.

Other Trump supporters have rallied to his defense with similar language, including Kari Lake, the unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial candidate in Arizona who pointedly said over the weekend that if prosecutors "want to get to President Trump," they're "going to have to go through me, and 75 million Americans just like me. And most of us are card-carrying members of the NRA."

Trump flew to Miami on Monday and planned to spend the day in Florida, huddled with advisers. After his court appearance, he will return to New Jersey, where he's scheduled a press event to publicly respond to the charges.

Tesla's Autopilot leads to increase in crashes

The Washington Post

SAN FRANCISCO — The school bus was displaying its stop sign and flashing red warning lights, a police report said, when Tillman Mitchell, 17, stepped off one afternoon in March. Then a Tesla Model Y approached on North Carolina Highway 561.

The car — allegedly in Autopilot mode — never slowed down.

It struck Mitchell at 45 mph. The teenager was thrown into the windshield, flew into the air and landed face down in the road, according to his great-aunt, Dorothy Lynch. Mitchell's father heard the crash and rushed from his porch to find his son lying in the middle of the road.

"If it had been a smaller child," Lynch said, "the child would be dead."

The crash in North Carolina's Halifax County, where a futuristic technology came barreling down a rural highway with devastating consequences, was one of 736 U.S. crashes since 2019 involving Teslas in Autopilot mode — far more than previously reported, according to a Washington Post analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Adminis-

tration data. The number of such crashes has surged over the past four years, the data shows, reflecting the hazards associated with increasingly widespread use of Tesla's futuristic driver-assistance technology as well as the growing presence of the cars on the nation's roadways.

The number of deaths and serious injuries associated with Autopilot also has grown significantly, the data shows. When authorities first released a partial accounting of accidents involving Autopilot in June 2022, they counted only three deaths definitively linked to the technology. The most recent data includes at least 17 fatal incidents, 11 of them since last May, and five serious injuries.

Mitchell survived the March crash but suffered a fractured neck and a broken leg and had to be placed on a ventilator. He still suffers from memory problems and has trouble walking. His great-aunt said the incident should serve as a warning about the dangers of the technology.

"I pray that this is a learning process," Lynch said. "People are too trusting when it comes to a piece of machinery."

Mother of 6-year-old shooter expected to admit to charges

Associated Press

The mother of a 6-year-old boy who shot his teacher in Virginia is expected to plead guilty in federal court Monday to using marijuana while possessing a firearm, which is illegal under U.S. law.

Deja Taylor is accused of lying about her marijuana use on a form when she bought the gun, which her son later used to shoot Abby Zwerner in her classroom. The first-grade teacher was seriously wounded and has endured multiple surgeries.

The federal case against Taylor is separate from the charges she faces on the state level: felony child neglect and reckless storage of a firearm. A trial for those counts is set for August.

Both cases are among the repercussions that followed the January shooting, which shook the city of Newport News near the Atlantic Coast.

The federal charges against Taylor, 25, appear to be relatively rare. And the case comes at a time when marijuana is legal in many U.S. states, including Virginia.

Marijuana is still a controlled substance under U.S. law and is

strictly regulated by federal authorities. Court documents do not detail exactly how federal investigators built their case against Taylor, who came under intense scrutiny after the shooting.

Federal authorities have alleged Taylor knew "she was an unlawful user" of marijuana when she bought the gun last year and denied her use on the form, court documents stated.

Federal law generally prohibits people from possessing firearms if they have been convicted of a felony, been committed to a mental institution or are an unlawful user of a controlled substance, among other things.

The federal case against Taylor carries up to 25 years, although sentencing guidelines call for 18 months to 24 months in prison, her lawyers said. She faces up to six years in prison if she is convicted on the state charges.

The attorney for Taylor in the state case, James Ellenson, has said Taylor believed her gun was secured on a high closet shelf with a trigger lock before the shooting occurred. He said last month it was still unclear how the boy got the gun.

US looks to rejoin UNESCO, counter China

Associated Press

PARIS — U.N. cultural and scientific agency UNESCO announced Monday that the United States plans to rejoin — and pay more than \$600 million in back dues — after a decade-long dispute sparked by the organization's move to include Palestine as a member.

U.S. officials say the decision to return was motivated by concern that China is filling the gap left by the U.S. in UNESCO policymaking, notably in setting standards for artificial intelligence and technology education around the world.

The U.S. and Israel stopped funding UNESCO after it voted to include Palestine as a member state in 2011, and the Trump administration decided in 2017 to withdraw from the agency altogether the following year, citing

long-running anti-Israel bias and management problems.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma submitted a letter last week to UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay formalizing the plan to rejoin. Verma noted progress in depoliticizing debate about the Middle East at UNESCO and reforming the agency's management, according to the hand-delivered letter, obtained by AP.

Applause rang out in the solemn UNESCO auditorium as Azoulay announced the plan to ambassadors at a special meeting Monday, and delegate after delegate stood up to welcome the news. The return of the U.S., once the agency's biggest funder, is expected to face a vote by its 193 member states next month, according to a UNESCO diplomat.

The decision is a big financial boost to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, known for its World Heritage program as well as projects to fight climate change and teach girls to read.

China's ambassador to UNESCO, Jin Yang, said his country "appreciates" UNESCO's efforts to bring the U.S. back, saying its absence had a "negative impact" on the agency's work.

"Being a member of an international organization is a serious issue, and we hope that the return of the U.S. this time means it acknowledges the mission and the goals of the organization," the ambassador said.

Since her election in 2017, Azoulay has worked to address the reasons the U.S. left, through budget reforms and building consensus among Jordanian, Palesti-

nian and Israeli diplomats around sensitive UNESCO resolutions. Azoulay — who is Jewish — won broad praise by UNESCO ambassadors for her personal efforts to address U.S. concerns around Israel in particular.

The U.S. decision to come back "is the result of five years of work, during which we calmed tensions, notably on the Middle East, improved our response to contemporary challenges, resumed major initiatives on the ground and modernized the functioning of the organization," Azoulay told The Associated Press. She met with Democrats and Republicans in Washington to explain those efforts, according to a UNESCO diplomat. UNESCO diplomats expressed confidence that the decision to return is for the long term, regardless of who wins the 2024 presidential election.

Berlusconi, scandal-scarred ex-Italian leader, dies at 86

Associated Press

MILAN — Silvio Berlusconi, the boastful billionaire media mogul who was Italy's longest-serving premier despite scandals over his sex-fueled parties and allegations of corruption, died Monday, according to his television network. He was 86.

Mediaset announced his death with a smiling photo of the man on its homepage and the headline: "Berlusconi is dead."

Berlusconi died at Milan's San Raffaele Hospital, where he had been treated for chronic leukemia. Supporters applauded as his body arrived later at his villa outside the city in a black van. A state funeral will be held Wednesday in the city's Duomo cathedral, according to the Milan Archdiocese.

A onetime cruise ship crooner, Berlusconi used his television networks and immense wealth to launch his long political career, inspiring both loyal

ty and loathing.

To admirers, the three-time premier was a capable and charismatic statesman who sought to elevate Italy on the world stage. To critics, he was a populist who threatened to undermine democracy by wielding political power as a tool to enrich himself and his businesses.

His Forza Italia political party was a coalition partner with current Premier Giorgia Meloni, a far-right leader who came to power last year, although he held no position in the government.

When former President Donald Trump launched his political career, many drew comparisons to Berlusconi, noting they both had long business careers before entering politics, sought to upend the existing order, and grabbed attention for their over-the-top personalities and lavish lifestyles.

US vows safety reviews at all major freight railroads

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — The Federal Railroad Administration recently completed a review of Norfolk Southern's safety culture in the wake of February's fiery derailment in Ohio, and officials plan to follow up with similar investigations of all the major freight railroads over the next year.

A report will be released soon on what investigators found at Norfolk Southern after the Feb. 3 derailment — which prompted the evacuation of half of East Palestine, Ohio — and several other recent derailments. That crash near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border sparked intense interest in railroad safety nationwide and prompted proposed reforms in Congress.

The head of the FRA, Administrator Amit Bose, said in a letter to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer recently that in addition to individual reports on Union Pacific, BNSF, CSX, Canadian Na-

tional and Canadian Pacific Kansas City, the agency will also produce an industrywide report on common issues and trends.

Railroad unions have been raising concerns that operating changes the railroads have made over the past six years have made the trains that haul hazardous materials and goods of all kinds across the country more dangerous. The unions say the deep staff cuts railroads have made, combined with their increasing reliance on longer trains, have increased the chance of safety problems. They say inspections are being rushed, preventive maintenance may be neglected and overworked employees are more likely to be fatigued.

The railroads have defended their practices and said they haven't sacrificed safety to become more efficient. The industry also emphasizes that it remains the safest way to transport hazardous materials over land.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City to pay \$45M to man paralyzed in police van

CT NEW HAVEN — The city of New Haven, Conn., has agreed to a \$45 million settlement with Randy Cox, who was paralyzed while being transported handcuffed and without a seat belt in the back of a police van following his arrest last year, the city's mayor and attorneys said Saturday.

The agreement was reached Friday evening following a day-long conference with a federal magistrate judge, Mayor Justin Elicker said. It came two days after the city fired two police officers who authorities said treated Cox recklessly and without compassion.

Cox, 36, was left paralyzed from the chest down June 19, 2022, when the police van he was riding in braked hard, sending him head-first into a metal partition while his hands were cuffed behind his back. Cox had been arrested on charges of threatening a woman with a gun, which were later dismissed.

New Haven police have since adopted reforms that include making sure all prisoners wear seat belts. The state Senate on June 5 gave final approval to legislation that would require seat belts for all prisoners being transported.

Implosion ends decades of stink from incinerator

MI DETROIT — In a boom, a low rumble and a vibrating crash, the looming smokestack of a shuttered trash incinerator whose stench sickened and angered Detroit residents for decades came down in a controlled implosion Sunday

morning.

Reducing the smokestack to rubble is almost the final phase in the facility's yearlong demolition, which should be completed by July, according to the city.

The facility has stood near the interchange of Interstates 94 and 75 for more than 30 years, just a few miles northeast of downtown Detroit. Before closing in 2021, fumes and the rank odor of burning trash could be smelled for miles, but were strongest for residents of nearby streets. Detroit household trash is now trucked to landfills outside the city limits.

Catholic church cancels LGBTQ+ solidarity mass

PA DUQUESNE — A Roman Catholic Mass to be held in western Pennsylvania last weekend in solidarity with LGBTQ+ Catholics was canceled at the request of the diocese after protesting emails and calls, some of them threatening, officials said.

The Mass scheduled Sunday at Duquesne University was organized by Pittsburgh-based Catholics for Change in Our Church with the help of LGBTQ+ outreach ministries, said Kevin Hayes, the group's president. He said it was to be similar to those held monthly by the group at the Catholic university, some aimed at different groups such as Black or Hispanic parishioners, and similar to a Mass in solidarity with LGBTQ+ Catholics he said was held last year without incident.

Bishop David Zubik of the diocese of Pittsburgh said, however, that independent sponsors of the event promoted it with a flyer "that confused some and enraged others."

"This event was billed as a 'Pride Mass' organized to coincide with Pride Month, an annual secular observance that supports members of the LGBTQ community on every level, including lifestyle and behavior, which the church cannot endorse," Zubik said in a letter to priests, deacons and seminarians in the diocese.

Cops take hundreds of animal sanctuary pigs

FL CANTONMENT — Animal control officers rounded up more than 600 pigs from an animal sanctuary in Florida after their overwhelmed owner called for help.

It took nearly four days for officers in Escambia County to capture so many pigs on the 8-acre property used by In Loving Swineness Sanctuary, said John Robinson, the county's animal control director.

Last year, the sanctuary had about 150 miniature pigs that its owners were using to remove invasive cogon grass around the Florida Panhandle community of Cantonment, the Pensacola News Journal reported.

The captured pigs were divided up and trucked off to farms and other new homes outside the county.

Archdiocese to pay \$1M to settle sex abuse suit

MO ST. LOUIS — The Archdiocese of St. Louis will pay \$1 million to settle a lawsuit filed by a man who was sexually abused as a child by a priest who previously spent 12 years in prison for abusing another boy, an attorney for the victim said Friday.

The plaintiff was an altar boy

at Ascension Catholic Church in Chesterfield, Mo. The suit alleged he was abused by the Rev. Gary Wolken starting in 1993, when the boy was in fourth grade, and continuing through 1995. The lawsuit said the plaintiff repressed memories until he was an adult. The man's lawsuit, which did not use his name, was filed in 2018.

The archdiocese didn't immediately respond to messages Friday, but said in a statement to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that it hopes the settlement provides some comfort for the victim and his family.

Wolken is now 57. He was sentenced to prison in 2003 for sexually abusing another St. Louis-area boy from 1997 to 2000. He was in prison from 2003 to 2015. The archdiocese removed Wolken from ministry in 2002.

Juneteenth to be made official state holiday

NV CARSON CITY — Juneteenth is now a state holiday in Nevada, which is joining a growing number of states including Texas, New York, Virginia and Washington that honor the day when the last enslaved people in the United States learned they were free.

Republican Gov. Joe Lombardo signed the bill into law on Thursday, elevating the June 19 holiday from a day of observance to a state holiday, meaning many state employees can take the day off. It now joins holidays including New Year's Day, Veterans Day, July 4, Labor Day, Nevada Day and Christmas.

The measure passed by votes of 40 to 1 in the state Assembly and 19 to 2 in the state Senate.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Knights trying to keep focus off Cup

Associated Press

Chandler Stephenson knows what this is like.

Five years ago, he and his Washington Capitals teammates went into Las Vegas and won the Stanley Cup, beating the Golden Knights in Game 5 of the Final. Now he plays for the Golden Knights, who leave Florida on the verge of winning their first championship.

"It's a different game than the other ones: There's a lot more emotion, a lot more everything," Stephenson said. "It's one win away from a lot of dreams for a lot of guys."

A dream they're trying not to think about — at least not yet.

Vegas can hoist the Stanley Cup as soon as Tuesday by beating the Panthers on home ice. But the immediate task for players and coaches is not to dwell on how close they are.

Veteran defenseman Alex Pietrangelo, who captained the St. Louis Blues to their first title

in franchise history four years ago, said it's possible to overthink things.

His approach now?

"Try and get your brain away from it," Pietrangelo said. "Get some rest, spend some time with our families and get ready to go back to work."

The work so far has been nearly immaculate. Vegas has clearly been the better team in the Final against Florida, and absent a late comeback in Game 3 might have been flying home Sunday with the Cup.

But the job isn't done yet, and coach Bruce Cassidy knows all too well what it's like to be one win away. His Boston Bruins lost to Pietrangelo's Blues in seven games in 2019, so he's not satisfied with getting to this point, no matter how well his team has played thus far.

"We'll hit the ice and we'll work on some things we feel we can do better from the previous four games and keep our

rhythm up and get our touches in and heart rate up, etc., and prepare for the last one," Cassidy said Sunday. "I think our preparation this time will be similar to what we've done with every other game. We know it's a close-out game. I don't have to tell the players that. They know what's at stake."

At stake is the dream Stephenson and a few of his teammates have lived out. Pietrangelo, Ivan Barbashev, Alec Martinez and backup goaltender Jonathan Quick have lifted the Cup before, while the rest of their teammates who have played this postseason have not.

Many have been on long runs — the six original Knights players who lost to Stephenson and the Capitals in 2018 — plus guys such as captain Mark Stone, who reached Game 7 of the Eastern Conference finals in 2017 with Ottawa. Stone does not expect to alter his approach

after it has worked so well so far.

"We understand the magnitude of the process, but we're going to go home and take the game as if it's one game for us," Stone said after winning Game 4 Saturday. "We ain't changing anything. We'll make minor adjustments to our game, for sure, but we want to continue to play our brand of hockey and be ready to go."

The Panthers have to do something to change the tide of the series. They scored twice to cut into a three-goal deficit in Game 4, but their comeback fell short to put them on the brink of elimination.

Florida erased a 3-1 series deficit in the first round against Boston, which set NHL records for the most wins and points in a regular season. That experience becomes valuable now as the Panthers try to become the first team to win the Final after falling behind 3-1 since 1942.

Nuggets' Murray fulfills potential as versatile guard

Associated Press

DENVER — Even back when Jamal Murray was racking up 50-point games in the NBA bubble, Denver coach Michael Malone marveled as much over his Canadian point guard's pinpoint passes as his magnificent moves and fadeaway baskets.

"Well I've long said that Jamal is not just a scorer," declared Malone, who early on even had to convince Murray himself. "That's been my challenge to him."

Murray averaged 3.4 assists in his first season as Denver's starting point guard in 2017-18. That number jumped to 4.8 the next season and stayed there for two more years.

After missing the 2021-22 season while recovering from knee surgery, Murray averaged a career-high 6.2 assists in his return

to the lineup this season.

That number has climbed to 7.1 in the playoffs, thanks to the 10, 10, 10 and 12 assists Murray has posted against the Heat in becoming the first player in history to reach double-digit assist totals in each of his first four games in the NBA Finals.

Murray's whopping 42 assists are one more than Nikola Jokic has in this series, which Denver led 3-1 as of Monday when they were able to close it out at Ball Arena, securing the first championship in franchise history.

Just as impressive as Murray's dozen assists in Game 4 were his zero turnovers against Miami's relentless double-team pressure.

"That's a point god right there," Nuggets forward Aaron Gordon said. "Twelve assists, no turnovers, not forcing, hitting big shots, timely shots, and really

just being a floor general out there, being steady, rock solid, even when they're trapping, giving him different looks.

"He's making the right play, and that's what we need from him night in and night out."

Never had Murray been a better orchestrator of Malone's offense.

"It just felt like they were blitzing every pick-and-roll, just basically trying to limit my shot attempts, and I just wasn't fighting it," Murray said after that game. "We've got a squad. We've got a lot of guys that can come and impact the game, a lot of guys playing with confidence, so I'm not going to fight it. Make an easy pass, and that's why I've got four other guys out there."

"You don't have to fight it. I'm not on a team where I've got to force it or hold the ball too long.

I'll gladly give up if we're winning games."

Malone may have said it a lot, but he couldn't have said it better.

Together, Murray and Jokic are averaging a combined 53.4 points, 19.8 rebounds and 20.8 assists in the finals, making them an almost impossible pick-and-roll duo to decipher, much less defuse.

"That should be an affront to him, that people just look at him as a scorer," Malone said Sunday, "because ever since he became a starting point guard, he is charged with the responsibility of running this team, making every one of his teammates better, on top of being an aggressive scorer looking for his shot, on top of being a rebounder at his size and physicality, as well as being an engaged defender."

Truex wins for fourth time at Sonoma

Associated Press

SONOMA, Calif. — Martin Truex Jr. shows up at Sonoma Raceway each year brimming with the confidence only acquired by repeated success on a track.

Last summer, team owner Joe Gibbs admits he didn't give Truex a car capable of demonstrating his driver's mastery of this hilly road course.

One year and innumerable Toyota improvements later, Truex roared right back to Victory Lane in wine country.

Truex won at Sonoma for the fourth time in his NASCAR Cup Series career Sunday, passing Chase Elliott for the lead after a final-stage restart and holding off Kyle Busch.

The 42-year-old Truex confidently drove his Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota to another victory at the track where he also won in 2013, 2018 and 2019. Only Jeff Gordon has more victories (five) at Sonoma than Truex, who earned the 33rd win of his Cup career and his second in the last six races after winning at

Dover.

Truex went winless in 2022, and the subpar Toyota cars and setups took most of the blame. Gibbs particularly remembers last year's trip to Sonoma as "one of the worst races we've had in our race team" in terms of setup and performance.

Truex finished 26th in Northern California last year, but the experience didn't budge his confidence.

"I knew I can navigate around this track," Truex said. "Maybe I'm not the best driver at this track. I don't know. Maybe somebody else could go a tenth of a second faster in my car than I do. I doubt they could, but it's possible. But they're not going to be a second off like we were last year. When you're that far off, it's like, 'Yeah, that was dumb. What were we even thinking (with that setup)?' ... But I never thought we couldn't win again."

Elliott finished fifth in his return from a one-race suspension for deliberately wrecking Denny Hamlin at Charlotte. El-

liott, who has missed seven races this season, twice held the lead in the final stage before Truex blew past him on fresher tires.

Truex has seven top-10 finishes in his last nine races, reflecting Toyota's improvement for 2023.

"You come to Sonoma with Martin Truex, and you expect to win," crew chief James Small said. "Thankfully, today we gave him a car, and he was able to do that. ... We have a better understanding of the car on road courses now. Everything just makes more sense. We don't seem so stupid anymore. It's nice from our end that we can start using logic."

Joey Logano was third behind Busch, with Chris Buescher in fourth. Elliott had his third top-five finish of the year, but is still winless.

Truex and Busch, who was 2.979 seconds behind in his Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet, had the 11th 1-2 finish of their long Cup careers. They spent the previous four seasons

as teammates at JGR, and Truex also held off Busch to win at Sonoma in 2019.

"Not too bad," said Busch, who won last week's Cup race outside St. Louis. "Just wish we had a little bit more. I was just trying to keep him honest there at the end. ... It's good for us, because (Toyota is) so good on road courses. They've done the work. We did a good job keeping it competitive."

Truex appeared to be cruising toward victory before pole-sitter Hamlin spun after he made contact with the wall with 19 laps to go.

Hamlin's car slid sideways across the start-finish line.

Elliott led coming out of the caution with 15 laps left, but Truex surged up on fresher tires and reclaimed the lead for good.

"I really think he's confident when he comes here," Gibbs said. "It really feels like he's got a real feel with Sonoma. From time to time, drivers have a real confidence about some tracks, and he's like that here."

Taylor wins Canadian Open in unforgettable fashion

Associated Press

TORONTO — Nick Taylor tossed his putter into the air and jumped into the arms of caddie Dave Markle after he made a 72-foot eagle putt to become the first Canadian in 69 years to win his national open, and he doesn't remember any of it.

"I blacked out when that ball went in with Dave. So I'm curious to watch that, what we did," Taylor said.

Few who witnessed it will ever forget.

Taylor delivered a signature moment in Canadian sports when his uphill, left-to-right-breaking putt — the longest made putt of his PGA Tour career — hit the flagstick and dropped on the fourth hole of a playoff against Tommy Fleet-

wood for the RBC Canadian Open title.

"It's a tournament that we've circled on our calendar since probably junior golf," Taylor said. "To kind of break that curse, if you want to call it, is — I'm pretty speechless. I don't think it's going to sink in for quite some time what happened today."

Fellow Canadian players Mike Weir, Corey Connors and Adam Hadwin were among those who ran onto the green to congratulate him. Hadwin, Taylor's close friend, was tackled by a security guard while spraying champagne from a bottle.

"I've looked up to Mike Weir and watched him play golf for so long, and for him to be there was special," Taylor said.

With galleries cheering his every move and even serenading him with "O Canada" on one tee box, Taylor curled in an 11-foot birdie putt on the 18th hole to finish at 17-under 271 at Oakdale, walking backward with his fist raised as the ball dropped into the cup. He shot a 6-under 66 on Sunday.

"It was the most incredible atmosphere I've ever been a part of and it's not even close. I think even walking the first tee today, walking to the first green, there's ovations on every single tee and green," Taylor said. "When Tommy would miss and they would cheer, I kind of felt bad for him. But I knew just how pumped they were and they were trying to put every ounce of energy into it to help me pull

it through."

Fleetwood needed a birdie on the reachable par 5 to win in regulation, but he missed his tee shot right, laid up into an awkward lie in the right rough and two-putted for par to force the playoff in rainy conditions.

The players traded birdies on their first time playing No. 18 in the playoff. They both parred 18 and the par-3 ninth before heading back to 18.

Taylor's tee shot found a divot in the fairway, but he hit his second shot 221 yards to the front of the green, while Fleetwood laid up after his drive found a fairway bunker. Fleetwood hit his third shot to 12 feet, but didn't need to putt after Taylor's eagle putt hit the flagstick and dropped.

Rays' McClanahan 1st in MLB to 10 wins

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Shane McClanahan is making a serious case to be the American League starter again in next month's All-Star Game.

McClanahan became the first 10-game winner in the major leagues and the Tampa Bay Rays beat the Texas Rangers 7-3 on Sunday, taking two of three games in a matchup of the teams with the best records in baseball.

McClanahan (10-1) allowed three runs, all in the third inning, and four hits over seven innings. The 26-year-old left-hander retired his final 15 batters. He won a career-best 12 games in 28 starts last season.

"It's one of those things where, it's the farthest thing from my mind right now," McClanahan said of possibly starting for the AL in the midsummer classic in a second consecutive season. "We're a good ballclub. My only thought right now is to help this team to continue to win ballgames."

McClanahan is 5-0 with a 1.67 ERA in seven starts at home, all won by the Rays. His overall ERA is 2.18.

"Another really strong performance," Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said. "Mac competed really well today, and made some

big pitches."

Wander Franco homered for MLB-leading Tampa Bay (48-20), which improved to 31-7 at home. It's the best home start since the 1998 World Series champion New York Yankees went 32-6.

Pirates 2, Mets 1: Andrew McCutchen got his 2,000th hit, Jack Suwinski hit his 12th home run and host Pittsburgh sent New York to its eighth loss in nine games.

McCutchen became the 291st player and fifth active player to reach 2,000 hits when he laced a slider from Carlos Carrasco (2-3) to left field leading off the first.

Athletics 8, Brewers 6: Seth Brown and Brent Rooker hit back-to-back homers in the fourth inning and visiting Oakland completed its first series sweep of the season.

Kevin Smith also homered as the A's erased an early 2-0 deficit and won their fifth straight. This marks the first time they've had five consecutive victories within the same season since September 2021.

Rockies 5, Padres 4: Ryan McMahon hit a tying homer in heavy rain just before a 1-hour, 25-minute delay in the ninth inning and Nolan Jones hit a game-ending 472-foot drive just after

the resumption in host Colorado's win over San Diego.

Colorado's Coco Montes homered in his major league debut to spoil a strong start by Blake Snell, who struck out a season-high 12 in seven innings.

Red Sox 3, Yankees 2: Kiké Hernández hit a tiebreaking single in the 10th inning and visiting Boston beat New York with the help of a late error by second baseman Gleyber Torres.

Nationals 6, Braves 2: Dominic Smith and Jeimer Candelario hit two-run homers in the sixth inning as visiting Washington stopped a six-game skid and Atlanta's seven-game winning streak.

Angels 9, Mariners 4: Rookie Zach Neto had his first two-homer game, Shohei Ohtani kept up a hot June with three hits and host Los Angeles beat Seattle.

Orioles 11, Royals 3: Gunnar Henderson homered for the second consecutive game, and host Baltimore completed a series sweep and dealt Kansas City its sixth straight loss.

Phillies 7, Dodgers 3: Nick Castellanos homered, Trea Turner had three hits and host Philadelphia beat Los Angeles for its seventh win in eight games.

Blue Jays 7, Twins 6: Cavan Biggio hit a go-ahead, three-run

homer in the eighth inning and host Toronto overcame a five-run deficit to beat Minnesota and avoid a three-game sweep.

Diamondbacks 7, Tigers 5: Christian Walker hit a go-ahead double off Jason Foley (2-2) with two outs in a four-run ninth inning as NL West-leading Arizona won its fifth straight, completing a three-game sweep that extended host Detroit's losing streak to nine games.

Guardians 5, Astros 0: Shane Bieber (5-3) gave up three hits over seven innings and had nine strikeouts. Trevor Stephan and closer Emmanuel Clase pitched an inning apiece to finish the four-hitter for host Cleveland.

Marlins 6, White Sox 5: Bryan De La Cruz hit a two-run double in a three-run ninth inning as visiting Miami beat Chicago, winning for the eighth time in nine games.

Reds 4, Cardinals 3: Rookie Elly De La Cruz had two hits, reached base four times and scored the go-ahead run with a headfirst slide on an eighth-inning grounder, helping visiting Cincinnati past St. Louis.

Giants 13, Cubs 3: Joc Pederson and Thairo Estrada each hit two-run homers and drove in four runs as host San Francisco built a six-run lead through five innings and rolled past Chicago.

Oral Roberts earns surprise College World Series berth

Associated Press

No. 1 national seed Wake Forest was expected to make it to the College World Series. Oral Roberts? Not so much.

Yet it's on to Omaha for the Golden Eagles, who certainly look the part of a team deserving to be among the final eight in the NCAA Tournament after going on the road and sweeping through regionals and then winning a three-game super regional against Oregon.

ORU is the lowest seed to reach the CWS since Stony Brook in 2012. The feat is reminiscent of ORU's run to the Sweet 16 in the 2021 NCAA men's basketball tournament.

Now the team from the small evangelical school in Tulsa, Okla., will head to Omaha, Neb., to play TCU on Saturday at Charles

Schwab Field. Oral Roberts' only other CWS appearance was in 1978, when the team was known as the Titans and played as an independent.

"We're going to let it fly here in a week," coach Ryan Folmar said after his team's 11-6 win Sunday night. "We knew we had a good club coming into the year. We continued to get better and better and better, and we're playing well at the right time of year. We get an opportunity to keep playing, and that's pretty fun."

ORU has never been an easy out in the NCAA Tournament, but this team, out of the low-major Summit League, has overachieved against big-money baseball schools.

The Golden Eagles were a No. 4 regional

seed and beat Oklahoma State, Washington and Dallas Baptist to advance to play the Pac-12 Tournament champion Ducks.

After blowing an eight-run lead and losing the super regional opener — ending their 21-game winning streak — they rallied in the ninth inning for a walk-off victory Saturday and came back Sunday to knock out the Ducks.

ORU and TCU are joined in the CWS field by Wake Forest, No. 2 Florida, No. 5 LSU and No. 7 Virginia.

The eight-team field will be complete after a pair of Game 3s on Monday. Tennessee will play at Southern Mississippi and Texas visits Stanford looking to secure a third straight CWS.