

No regrets for ex-Navy captain in book

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Three years after the Navy fired him for sounding the alarm on a COVID-19 outbreak aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, Brett Crozier in a new book sheds light on his final weeks in command.

Now a retired captain, Crozier was under a spotlight in March and April 2020, when the carrier, with COVID-19 racing through its decks, was ordered to Guam and its crew confined to the ship.

In “Surf When You Can: Lessons On Life, Loyalty and Leadership from a Maverick Navy Captain,” Crozier recounts nearly the entirety of his career, from his first days as a combat helicopter pilot to his last moments aboard the Theodore Roosevelt.

In a letter he emailed to his superiors March 30, 2020, Crozier begged them to permit his crew off the Theodore Roosevelt and into better accommodations and treatment. When the email was leaked to the San Francisco Chronicle, Crozier soon lost his job.

“The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating,” he wrote in the letter. “We

are not at war. Sailors do not need to die.”

About 1,200 sailors eventually tested positive for COVID-19 and one died after the crew was disembarked into hospitals and hotel rooms on Guam.

Crozier’s 239-page memoir, published Tuesday by Atria Books, makes clear that he regrets nothing.

“If I had to do it all over again, knowing only what we did at the time I sent it, I’d like to believe I’d do it,” he wrote. “It was a privilege to be the commanding officer of one of the greatest vessels in the history of modern warfare. But if I wasn’t willing to take a stand for my Sailors even if it meant potentially sacrificing my career, then I wasn’t qualified to lead them from the beginning.”

Crozier repeatedly refers to a lesson he learned as a lieutenant at Naval Air Station Barbers Point, Hawaii, where a line division chief, Ruben Garcia, laid out the three rules an officer should know.

“Number one, take care of your sailors. Number two, take care of your sailors. And number three, take care of your sailors,” Garcia told him.

That advice constantly informed Cro-

zier’s decisions, including his choice to send the email, according to his book.

Four days after Crozier hit “send,” Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly relieved him of command, citing a loss of trust and confidence in Crozier’s abilities and “exceptionally poor judgment” regarding the email.

Modly, too, was relieved of duty after audio of him disparaging Crozier in an address to the Theodore Roosevelt’s crew was leaked to the media.

Although the Navy disagreed with his methods and “fired me for doing what I thought was right,” Crozier wrote that at the time he clearly had to act.

Following his removal, the Navy started two investigations into the outbreak aboard the Theodore Roosevelt and ultimately decided that Crozier’s actions did not meet the expectations of command.

In addition to firing Crozier, the Navy withheld promotion for Crozier’s immediate superior at the time, Rear Adm. Stuart Baker, commander of the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group. Both men have since retired.

Chaplains at BALTOPS show need for trauma support

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

TALLINN, Estonia — In times of crisis or combat, a military chaplain can be a grounding force for sailors and Marines, re-orienting them to who they are and helping them recognize that they have the training to go on with the mission.

“It’s the sense of reconnecting with their identity, of reconnecting with what they know to be certain, know to be true in the situation,” said U.S. Navy Capt. Brian Weigelt, the chaplain for U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet. “A traumatic event often will challenge what we think is true.”

Weigelt and 18 other NATO chaplains participating in the annual U.S.-led maritime exercise BALTOPS, which ends Friday, have been testing that ability to help service members across the alliance. Officials say the effort is recognition that overall

readiness requires spiritual strength.

The U.S. Navy increasingly is relying on chaplains as it seeks to address the mental and emotional toll that the work environment takes on its personnel. In 2021, the service announced it would assign a chaplain to every destroyer in the fleet. It has since started deploying more chaplains on ships as part of suicide prevention efforts.

“Steady-state operations at sea are taxing,” Weigelt said. “It’s a grueling life even in the best of times.”

Over the past two weeks, priests, pastors and other religious leaders have met with crew members of other ships and nations to become familiar with their needs. The visits create an opportunity to build the trust required to care for service members in crisis or combat, Weigelt said.

They also offer the training needed so chaplains can ensure sailors and Marines receive the support they need across reli-

gious and service affiliations, and language and cultural barriers, the Navy said in a statement Tuesday.

For example, chaplains may be called on to help in a crisis, such as a suicide or man overboard situation. Last year, the training included flying a Belgian chaplain to a British ship in order to tend to sailors during a simulated mass casualty, he said.

Chaplains also planned to gather participants from across the ranks for focus groups designed to start conversations about the trauma associated with the simulated scenarios in the exercise.

Participants will be challenged to think and talk about how they may respond, Weigelt said.

“Realistic training is essential for preparation for what we could possibly be called upon to do,” he said. “So injecting as much realism into the scenario as possible is essential.”

Hawaii fuel leak lawyers look to question admiral

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

Lawyers for families affected by a Navy fuel spill in Hawaii want to question the admiral in charge of U.S. Pacific Fleet, according to recent federal court filings.

The number of people suing the U.S. government over the November 2021 spill at Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility doubled with this week's filing, which alleged new details. It's the fourth updated complaint since the original was filed in September.

Their attorneys also moved to stop the government from shielding Adm. Samuel Paparo, who was nominated Tuesday to become the next chief of naval operations, from being deposed in the case.

The federal lawsuit springs from a leak of aviation fuel into three wells providing water to homes of mostly military families on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. About 93,000 people were drawing

from contaminated water for bathing, drinking and meal preparation; many of them complained of illness and were evacuated to temporary housing.

Paparo took responsibility publicly as the scope of the spill began to unfold, according to the plaintiff's motion filed May 30 in federal court in Honolulu. A hearing is scheduled for Wednesday, according to the online court docket.

"All organizations within this response report directly to me and I am accountable for this fix," the plaintiffs' filing quotes Paparo as saying Dec. 21, 2021.

The admiral played a "hands-on role" during the jet fuel affair and should be deposed, the plaintiffs' motion states.

"There is no reason under law or logic to prevent Plaintiffs' from finding out the essential facts that only Admiral Paparo knows. The Government's motion must be denied," the motion states.

The case trial is scheduled for March.

US, Japan won't share drone data with Taiwanese

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department has denied a recent report that it's planning to help Japan and Taiwan exchange real-time data from reconnaissance drones.

The Financial Times reported June 9 that the United States would tie four MQ-9 drones Taiwan plans to purchase into the same system the Pentagon shares with the Japan Self-Defense Forces. The report cited four unidentified people familiar with the project.

But representatives for the U.S. Department of Defense, the Japanese Ministry of Defense and Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense have denied the claim.

"The DOD is not currently planning to facilitate MQ-9 data sharing between Taiwan and Japan," DOD spokesman Lt. Col. Martin Meiners told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday.

Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada made a similar denial when asked at a June 9 news conference in Tokyo about sharing drone data.

"There is no fact that we are considering the plan you pointed out," he said.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense tweeted June 8 that it has no knowledge of the plan.

Taiwan agreed to purchase four MQ-9B SeaGuardian surveillance drones from the U.S. for \$555 million, with the first to be delivered in 2025, Taiwanese media reported in August.

The SeaGuardian is the naval version of General Atomics' MQ-9A Reaper with a specialized focus on maritime surveillance and increased endurance, while sacrificing maximum speed, altitude and payload capacity.

Any sort of intelligence sharing with Taiwan is a good thing, especially after the U.S. and its allies subjected the Taiwanese military to more than 40 years of near-isolation, according to Grant Newsham, a senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo.

Data-sharing would be a step toward a "common operating picture" important for military operations, he told Stars and Stripes by email Tuesday.

Army reaches retention goal for 2023 amid recruiting problems

BY DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army already has met its goal for 2023 of keeping more than 50,000 troops in its ranks as the military struggles with attracting enough recruits, the service's top enlisted soldier said.

"Once soldiers join the military, they want to stay," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston said Wednesday at a ceremony commemorating the service's 248th birthday.

Grinston first acknowledged the Army has surpassed this year's target at a birthday celebration held at Fort Belvoir, Va., on Saturday.

The Army's retention goal for fiscal 2023, which ends Sept. 30, is 55,100 soldiers, according to congressional testimony in March by Army Undersecretary Gabe Camarillo. Last year, the Army also

surpassed its retention goal by keeping more than 58,000 soldiers in the service.

The Army's success in retaining soldiers supports a message that military recruiters have been trying to spread for years that more people would serve if they only knew how much they would like military life.

Gen. James McConville, chief of staff of the Army, reenlisted a group of 30 soldiers during Wednesday's ceremony.

"We have to put our people first," Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said. "We can't take for granted the willingness of young Americans to volunteer to serve, nor can we stop looking for ways to figure out how to improve our recruiting efforts."

Though the Army has been meeting its retention goals, hitting recruiting targets has been a problem. The Army hopes to enlist 65,000 new soldiers before fiscal 2023 ends, but Wormuth has acknowledged that will be a tough goal to meet.

US sends F-22s to Mideast over Russian actions

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military has deployed F-22 Raptor fighter jets to the Middle East, following months of complaints that Russian aircraft have been buzzing U.S. bases in Syria and violating protocols developed to prevent fighting between American and Russian forces.

The deployment of Raptors flown by the 94th Fighter Squadron out of Langley Air Force Base, Va., comes in response to “increasingly unsafe and unprofessional behavior by Russian aircraft in the region,” a statement Wednesday by U.S. Central Command said.

“Their regular violation of agreed upon airspace deconfliction measures increases the risk of escalation or miscalculation,” Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla, the commander of CENTCOM, said in the statement.

Since late February, fighter jets and surveillance drones from Russia have been flying regularly above U.S. positions in Syria and sometimes have attempted to goad

American pilots into dogfights, U.S. generals have said.

“They’re not operating like a professional air force anymore,” Lt. Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, head of U.S. Air Forces Central, told Stars and Stripes in an interview last week.

Some of the Russian planes were carrying air-to-ground weapons as they flew over U.S. bases and all were equipped with sensors that most likely are used to gather information on U.S. positions, Grynkeiwich said.

Some 900 U.S. troops are deployed to Syria in a mission focused on opposing Islamic State.

Russian forces are also in Syria, where they back the government of President Bashar Assad.

While Russian and U.S. forces in Syria have both declared the need to defeat ISIS, their backing of opposing Syrian groups has led to deconfliction protocols meant to avoid a direct conflict that could lead to a larger war.

“Our No. 1 objective is of course to protect our troops, but close behind it is to avoid esca-

lation,” Grynkeiwich said last week.

A statement in May by U.S. Air Forces Central said the deconfliction protocols include agreements on areas where the U.S. and Russia have agreed to notify each other prior to transiting.

They also include details on standoff distances from aircraft and ground forces, and an agreement not to conduct armed overflights of ground forces.

In May, the U.S. accused Russia of 85 protocol violations since March 1. Of those, 26 were armed overflights.

Russian military leaders, meanwhile, accuse U.S. pilots of violating agreements that separate Syria’s airspace, the Saudi Arabia-based Al Arabiya English reported June 1.

Grynkeiwich said last week that Russian leaders have not been receptive to U.S. complaints recently.

“They’re not reciprocating as they used to, so deconfliction doesn’t work,” Grynkeiwich said. “Then your next best bet is to make sure that you’re in a position to defend yourself.”

Soldier is guilty of trying to contact ISIS to harm troops

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A U.S. Army soldier duped into thinking he was communicating online with a terrorist when it was really an FBI employee pleaded guilty Wednesday to seeking to tell terrorists how to ambush U.S. soldiers in the Middle East.

Cole Bridges, 22, entered pleas in Manhattan federal court to trying to provide material support to terrorists and trying to murder U.S. military service members. He could face up to 20 years in prison on each of the two charges at a Nov. 2 sentencing.

Bridges, of Stow, Ohio, has been incarcerated since his January 2021 arrest, which occurred while he was based in Fort Stewart, Ga., with the 3rd Infantry Division, where the private was a cavalry scout. He joined the Army in September 2019.

According to court documents, Bridges was 19 when he began researching and consum-

ing online propaganda promoting jihadis in 2019.

Authorities said he expressed support on social media for the Islamic State militant group and for jihad before he began communicating in October 2020 with an FBI employee posing as an ISIS supporter who was in contact with the group’s fighters in the Middle East.

At his plea hearing, Bridges acknowledged that he tried to provide material support to ISIS members.

“The support I provided included tactical advice, hand-drawn diagrams of potential troop maneuvers, pages from the Army Field Manual regarding troop movements and combat tactics, and a propaganda video,” he told Judge Lewis J. Liman.

In court papers, investigators said Bridges, also known as Cole Gonzales, expressed frustration with the U.S. military during his online chats.

Red tape delays reimbursements for pet PCS moves until January

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

Families moving to their next duty stations this year are unlikely to be reimbursed for the cost of moving their pets, according to a Marine Corps news release.

Money to pay that expense is wending its way through Washington’s bureaucratic pipeline.

Buried in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2023 is a provision to permit the military to reimburse service members’ pet relocation costs up to \$550 within the U.S. and a maximum of \$4,000 outside the continental United States. The Marine Corps released a statement June 9 “to manage expectations” prior to the start of this year’s peak moving season. The program won’t take effect until January, according to the statement.

“I think it’s great that the Marine Corps released something on an official platform,” Liz Hensel, founder of LeaveNoPawsBehind USA, told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday. “Because it

just shows that we are moving forward in the right direction.”

The group assists families with resources and pet transportation costs to and from overseas.

“I’ve been advocating for this change for the last four years,” Hensel said. “Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) said, ‘Yes, let’s do something about this,’ and then we were able to make this legislative change.”

The Marine Corps release laid out the process for getting the pet entitlement to the Department of Defense Joint Travel Regulations.

“It must first be approved by the Services’ Military Advisory Panel members, Service Principals, and then finally by the Chairman of the Per Diem, Travel, and Transportation Allowance Committee,” the release said.

The reimbursement is at the final approval level, a Department of Defense spokeswoman said Wednesday. She could not say when the approval process would be completed.

Penny indicted in Neely's subway death

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A man charged with manslaughter for putting an agitated New York City subway rider in a fatal chokehold has been indicted by a grand jury, an expected procedural step that will allow the criminal case to continue.

Daniel Penny was charged by Manhattan prosecutors in the May 1 death of Jordan Neely, a former Michael Jackson impersonator who struggled in recent years with homelessness and mental illness.

Grand jury proceedings are secret and spokespeople for Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg declined to comment Wednesday, but the indictment was confirmed by New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

"I appreciate DA Bragg conducting a thorough investigation into the death of Jordan Neely. Like I said when the DA first

brought charges, I have the utmost faith in the judicial process, and now that the Grand Jury has indicted Daniel Penny, a trial and justice can move forward," Adams said in a statement.

Neely was shouting at passengers and begging for money when Penny pinned him to the floor of the moving subway car with the help of two other riders. Penny, a former U.S. Marine, then held Neely in a chokehold that lasted more than three minutes.

Penny has said he was protecting himself and other passengers, claiming Neely shouted "I'm gonna' kill you" and that he was "ready to die" or go to jail for life.

A freelance journalist who recorded Neely struggling to free himself, then lapsing into unconsciousness, said he was acting aggressively and frightening people but hadn't assaulted anyone. Neely was Black. Penny is white.

Penny's lawyers, Steven Raiser and Thomas Kenniff, said in a statement that Penny didn't mean to kill Neely, just hold him for police.

"While we respect the decision of the grand jury to move this case forward to trial, it should be noted that the standard of proof in a grand jury is very low and there has been no finding of wrongdoing. We're confident that when a trial jury is tasked with weighing the evidence, they will find Daniel Penny's actions on that train were fully justified," Raiser said.

Neely's death prompted protests by many who saw it as an example of racial injustice, but some people have rallied around Penny, including several of the Republican candidates for president.

A fund set up to pay for Penny's legal defense has raised more than \$2.8 million, according to his lawyers.

Temporary road will be built to quickly reopen I-95

The Washington Post

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation will build a temporary road atop backfill to patch the gap in Interstate 95 left by a bridge collapse in northeast Philadelphia, officials announced Wednesday.

Gov. Josh Shapiro said the approach is the fastest way to get I-95 safely reopened. Recycled glass aggregate will be shipped to the site under police escort to fill the area that had been spanned by a pair of bridges. Permanent bridges will be constructed later.

"I want to get this road reopened as quickly as possible," Shapiro said.

The costs of the project are still being calculated and Shapiro repeatedly declined to say when the temporary or permanent roads

might open. The governor said the public will be able to watch progress on a live camera feed.

The northbound section of the bridge collapsed Sunday after a truck carrying 8,500 gallons of gasoline rolled and caught fire underneath, killing the driver. The southbound bridge was deemed unsafe and is being demolished. The incident is under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board, but experts say the heat of the fire was probably enough to compromise the steel supporting the bridge.

The closed portion of the highway saw about 160,000 vehicles a day. Its closure is putting trucks on long detours and snarling commutes in Philadelphia, adding to the ur-

gency of reopening the road.

NTSB spokeswoman Sarah Sulick on Wednesday said investigators and representatives from federal trucking and hazardous materials agencies visited Penn Tank Lines, the company that operated the truck, to gather information. Sulick said the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's records show the company was in good standing and authorized to transport hazardous materials.

The Federal Highway Administration has released \$3 million in emergency funds, officials announced Wednesday, while an emergency declaration Shapiro signed Monday made \$7 million in state funds available.

Germany to give \$1.4B globally to Holocaust survivors

Associated Press

BERLIN — The organization that handles claims on behalf of Jews who suffered under the Nazis said Thursday that Germany has agreed to extend another \$1.4 billion overall for Holocaust survivors around the globe for the coming year.

The compensation was negotiated with Germany's finance ministry and includes \$888.9 million to provide home care and supportive services for frail and vulnerable Holocaust survivors.

Additionally, increases of \$175 million to symbolic payments of the Hardship Fund Supplemental program have been achieved, impacting more than 128,000 Holocaust survivors globally, according to the New York-based Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, also referred to as the Claims Conference.

The Hardship Fund Supplemental payment was originally established to be a one-time payment, negotiated during the COVID-19 lockdowns and eventually resulted

in three supplemental payments for eligible Holocaust survivors. This year, Germany again agreed to extend the hardship payment, which was set to end in December 2023, to 2027. The amount for each of the additional years was set at approximately \$1,370 per person for 2024, \$1,425 for 2025, \$1,480 for 2026 and \$1,534 for 2027.

The survivors receiving these payments largely are Russian Jews who weren't in camps or ghettos, and aren't eligible for pension programs, the Claims Conference said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Aid sought for vineyards, orchards hit by late frost

VT SHELBURNE — Vineyards and apple orchards across the Northeast are still gauging damage from a late-season frost in May that wiped out a third to most of the crop for some growers who say it's the worst frost damage they have ever seen.

Some states are seeking federal disaster declarations, which would make low-interest loans and other programs available to affected growers, while agriculture officials across the region are contemplating together asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture for direct aid to farmers.

In southern Vermont, Scott Farm Orchard lost up to 90% of its apple crop when the temperature dipped to 25 degrees Fahrenheit for five hours on May 18.

Town pays tribe to keep roads open 1 month more

WI MADISON — A northern Wisconsin town has agreed to pay a Chippewa tribe \$22,000 to keep reservation roads open to the public for another month.

The town of Lac Du Flambeau's easements on 1.25 miles of Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's reservation roads expired about a decade ago and negotiations to renew them have gone nowhere. The tribe finally barricaded the roads in January, preventing non-tribal property owners from accessing or leaving their homes except to buy food and other essential items like prescription drugs.

The property owners sued the tribe in federal court in Febru-

ary seeking an order to open the roads permanently. That case is pending.

The tribe agreed in March to open the roads for 90 days in exchange for \$60,000 from the town. That deal expired Monday. Wisconsin Public Radio reported that the town agreed to pay the tribe \$22,000 for road access through July 12.

Playground slides doused with pool acid, injuring 2

MA LONGMEADOW — Two children suffered what were described as "burn-like injuries" after playing on slides that had been doused with acid at a Massachusetts park, authorities said.

Police and firefighters responded to Bliss Park in Longmeadow on Sunday morning for a report of a suspicious substance on the playground equipment, the fire department posted on social media. At about the same time, firefighters and emergency medical technicians went to a nearby home for a report of two children with burns who had just left the park.

"I let the kids go play. I didn't notice that there was liquid to collect at the bottom of the slide. I just assumed it was rainwater," their mother, Ashley Thielen, told Western Mass News in Springfield. "I didn't really think much of it, and then, my baby, who is 1, just started crying. That was when I knew this liquid that they were around wasn't water."

The acid left mostly superficial blisters and swelling on her children's skin, Thielen said.

Authorities determined that someone broke into a storage room where chemicals are kept at the park's swimming pool and

stole some muriatic acid. The acid was then poured on three slides, authorities said.

Prisoner faces 2nd life term for arranging killing

SC COLUMBIA — A South Carolina prisoner serving a life sentence for murder orchestrated killing a man he thought robbed a drug runner for a methamphetamine ring the inmate was running from behind bars, federal prosecutors said.

Daniel Allen Shannon was sentenced to life in federal prison earlier this month for the killing, but the only way he will end up in federal custody is if he is released from his life-without-parole sentence in state court from a 2001 murder.

Shannon ran his drug ring from prison using contraband cellphones.

Shannon, 43, pleaded guilty in federal court earlier this year to conspiring to distribute methamphetamine. A judge linked the 2019 killing of Cletis "Eddie" Baker in Kershaw County to the drug ring and accepted the proposed life sentence, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office.

US spends \$26M to find site for spent nuclear fuel

NM SANTA FE — Federal energy regulators have announced that they are spending \$26 million to find communities willing to accept a temporary federal site to store spent nuclear fuel while a permanent repository is completed.

Thirteen groups made up of industry, academic, nonprofit, government and community representatives will each get \$2

million to explore the most equitable approach to picking an interim site to store highly radioactive waste from nuclear power plants, according to a recent news release from the U.S. Energy Department.

This study is being conducted with the aim of creating a federal storage site independent of the two private sites proposed for southern New Mexico and Texas, which are embroiled in heated political and legal battles.

Endowment fund buys stake in iconic building

MI DETROIT — Michigan State University's \$3.9 billion endowment fund has become the majority investor in the Fisher Building, an iconic art deco style tower near downtown Detroit, the school announced Tuesday.

The fund is investing \$21 million in the building, two adjacent surface parking lots and a parking structure for a 79% ownership stake. The other owners are real estate developer and property manager The Platform and the MSU Federal Credit Union.

The 30-story Fisher Building is considered by many to be Detroit's largest work of art for its marble exterior, three-story arcade with hand-painted barrel-vaulted ceiling, spectacular mosaics, and extensive brass detailing. It was designed in 1928 by architect Albert Kahn and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Michigan State University's Research Foundation plans to open a startup incubator in the building this year.

— From wire reports

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Koepka thrives amid chaos at US Open

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Brooks Koepka is at a major and feeling as good as ever. His health. His trophy count. His mood.

Especially his mood.

Koepka all but shrugged at the chaos surrounding golf, an agreement between the PGA Tour and the Saudi national wealth fund that pays for LIV Golf, which turned enemies into friends. He remembers having breakfast at The Grove in Florida when he heard the news. And then he went out to practice for the U.S. Open.

"There's four weeks a year I really care about and this is one of them," he said. "And I want to play well."

But when he finished speaking Tuesday, he hopped off his chair and said with the slightest smile, "See you at Travelers."

That would be the Travelers Championship next week, a PGA Tour event that excludes him as a LIV member.

A few minutes later, after a brief television interview, Koepka was headed toward the

clubhouse at Los Angeles Country Club when someone referenced his cheeky remark by saying, "Really, Brooks?"

Another smile, and he moved his hand in a circular motion to indicate stirring the pot.

Rarely has such big news had so few answers, and Koepka was among those who wasn't sure where this business agreement among the PGA Tour, European tour and Public Investment Fund was headed, particularly as it relates to the future of LIV.

Nor does he particularly care.

Koepka cares about the majors, and no one is playing them better at the moment.

He had the 54-hole lead at the Masters until Jon Rahm tracked him down, and Koepka won his fifth major, the PGA Championship, at Oak Hill. That was his favorite, mainly because of injuries to his knee that made him wonder if his best golf already was behind him.

Koepka has said if healthy, that might have made his decision to defect to LIV Golf last

year more difficult.

He's happy with where he is, no matter the format or how often he plays. Everything is geared around the majors.

The record is astounding. Along with his five majors, he has four runner-up finishes. Dating to 2015, when Koepka first became eligible for all of them, he has finished in the top 10 in 18 of his last 30 majors.

He has spent one round over two days on the North course at LACC, the front nine on Monday and the back on Tuesday, and then there were nine holes on the final day of practice.

In the midst of these preparations is chatter about where the PGA Tour and LIV Golf is headed under the agreement. Some believe it's a distraction, others figure it all went away once numbers started to fill scorecards on Thursday.

Koepka doesn't mind either way.

"The more chaotic things get, the easier it gets for me," he said. "Everything starts to slow down and I am able to focus on

whatever I need to focus on while everybody else is dealing with distractions, worried about other things."

He believes that's one reason he thrives in the biggest events.

"I enjoy the chaos," he said.

His definition of chaos is not just what happens off the course. Koepka thinks back to Shinnecock Hills for the 2018 U.S. Open, when the course got away from the USGA (again) and no one from the final 22 groups broke par in the third round. That's the year Phil Mickelson swatted a moving ball on the 13th green out of frustration.

Koepka wound up winning, making him the first back-to-back U.S. Open champion since Curtis Strange in 1989.

"Everybody was ... complaining," he said. "They were all so focused on the golf course they kind of forgot about what was going on, that they were there to play a major championship. OK, the greens are pretty fast. But if you leave yourself with an uphill putt, it's not too bad."

No. 1 Scheffler hoping to solve putting problems

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Scottie Scheffler took one long, smooth stroke, then looked down the line and watched the ball roll toward the hole on the practice green.

He was using his wedge.

That was a drill. The state of his game on the greens — more of an emergency.

The player listed No. 1 in the latest world golf ranking is sitting at No. 148 in the PGA Tour in putting this year. With the U.S. Open this week, Scheffler finds himself experimenting with different putters and also trying to give himself a little more credit for putts he hits well that just don't go in.

There have been a lot of them lately.

"If I hit a really good 6-iron, sometimes it's going to go to 2 feet and sometimes it's going to go to 15 feet, and it's like, 'well, ... it doesn't make a huge difference,'" said Scheffler, who is trying to become the only No. 1 to win the U.S. Open other than Tiger Woods, who last accomplished that in 2008. "But if I have a 6-footer and I hit a really good putt and one time it goes in and one time it doesn't, everyone is like 'Oh, why did he miss that putt?'"

But missing those putts comes at a price. Analytics, to say nothing of leaderboards, spell it out.

Scheffler leads the PGA Tour in scoring average and strokes gained on approach shots. Numbers from one analytics

guru showed that through May, he was the only player to gain 15 or more strokes from tee to green this year; he's done it four times.

He leads the tour in hitting greens in regulation, a stat that, by itself, can hamper putting statistics because players normally get closer when they're scrambling and chipping from mere feet away than flying wedges in from 100 yards.

Still, he is 90 notches worse on the putting list than he was last year, and Scheffler isn't hiding from reality. In an interview in late May, when he tied for third at the Charles Schwab Challenge, he said his struggles started at the Masters, where he was trying to defend his title but never got comfortable on

the greens. He finished 10th.

It kept on going like that, to the point where he said "I felt like I was putting toward a moving cup." At the Memorial earlier this month, he missed a playoff by a single shot despite gaining an unheard-of 20 shots against the field from tee to green. He lost 8.5 strokes putting.

"Obviously, had an off week there, or I probably would've won that one," he said in his pre-Open interview Tuesday.

Golf's equipment junkies have been watching his practice sessions intently. Scheffler has been testing a putter not that different from what he regularly uses. It's just wider and has some different weighting options.

Reds' De La Cruz soaring after big debut

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — There may have been 30 people inside Kauffman Stadium on Tuesday with a view of the field, including a couple of workers who were busy hosing off seats hours before the game, yet all would occasionally turn to see where the ball landed when they heard the crack of the bat.

Inside the cage, hat flipped backward a la Ken Griffey Jr. and with a left-handed swing nearly as sweet, was the hottest thing to hit baseball in quite some time. Elly De La Cruz pounded ropes into the stadium's massive alleys and soared shots that rattled around in the outfield seats or splashed into the stadium fountains.

An hour later, De La Cruz finally walked toward the visiting dugout with a few of his Cincinnati Reds teammates.

It was 2:58 p.m. First pitch was still more than four hours away.

Rarely do players widely considered baseball's top prospect exceed expectations from Day 1. But even rarer is a talent like De La Cruz, the 21-year-old switch-hitting infielder whose first

week in the majors was the stuff of legend.

In his first big league series, De La Cruz annihilated a 92 mph fastball from Noah Syndergaard, the ball landing some 458 feet away and one row from leaving Great American Ball Park entirely. In the same game against the Dodgers, the 6-foot-5 phenom went from home to third on a triple faster than anyone this season. He's even thrown a 96.6 mph laser to first base for an out.

De La Cruz is only the second player since at least 1900 to have a single, double, triple, homer and stolen base within their first three games, according to Elias Sports Bureau. The other was Bill Bruton of the Milwaukee Braves in 1953.

"Yeah, there's things that he's done on the field that are extremely impressive. There's no question about that," Reds manager David Bell acknowledged. "The fun part has been a lot of what he's been able to do so far had led to helping us be able to win."

That's something that hasn't happened around Cincinnati lately.

The Big Red Machine rusted away decades ago, and while there have been moments of unexpected joy — that 1990 World Series title bookended by losing seasons — heartbreak has been the norm. The Reds lost 100 games last season, their most since 1982, and have had losing records seven of the past eight full seasons; their only playoff trip during that span came during the COVID-19-shortened 2020 season, when they were swept in the wild-card round.

There have been talents over the years that have had Cincinnati buzzing, and Joey Votto and Johnny Cueto are among those that panned out. Just as many never lived up to the hype: Brandon Larson, Christopher Gruler and Ryan Wagner among them.

Perhaps that fine line between success and failure is why De La Cruz was back at the ballpark so early Tuesday.

He had gone 0-for-5 in a series opener against the Kansas City Royals, striking out twice and looking lost and confused, but he was already building his confidence back. With shades riding high on his ball cap, yet never

wiggling his head was so still, he continually pounded balls to all parts of the field as a handful of teammates watched.

"There's definitely adjustment. There's a transition," Bell said. "He wants to make sure he's doing the right thing around the clubhouse. This is all very new. Again, I keep going back to the ease of the transition. A lot of that has to do with how well he was prepared by people throughout our organization, and just in general, not being afraid to ask questions."

Unlike so many Reds prospects over the years, who had weighty expectations placed entirely on their shoulders, De La Cruz doesn't have to go it alone. Matt McLain is in the top five in All-Star voting, fellow infielder Spencer Steer gets regular playing time and another rookie, Andrew Abbott, has barged his way into the starting rotation.

They form a young core that is fun to watch. It's versatile, dynamic and portends big things for the future.

Kind of like De La Cruz, who is at the center of it all.

For top Cup teams, schedule break is mixed blessing

Associated Press

SONOMA, Calif. — The relentless grind of the NASCAR Cup Series pauses this week, and just about everybody involved with the cars is looking to take advantage.

Martin Truex Jr. plans to go fishing after claiming his second victory of the season on Sunday at Sonoma Raceway. Aric Almirola's wife and children were in wine country to watch his surprising Xfinity Series victory at Sonoma on Saturday because they're all spending the next 10 days in California, surfing and hiking and going to a Dodgers game on Father's Day.

NASCAR's schedule in its top flight is famously busy: This is

the teams' sole weekend without a race between the Daytona 500 on Feb. 19 and the Cup Series championship at Phoenix on Nov. 5.

But for the teams and drivers doing their best work now, it's natural to wonder whether the break could slow their momentum right before the start of the 10-race sprint to the 10-race Cup playoffs.

Kyle Busch is the hottest driver on the grid, with four straight top-10 finishes, culminating in a victory outside St. Louis and a second-place finish behind Truex in Sonoma.

"I mean, I don't know if I want an off week," Busch said Sunday, wearing the closest facial

expression he ever makes to a smile. "Let's go, right? We're rolling right now."

"It'll be a good break for everybody to regroup and refocus and set in," Busch added. "If we can keep doing those things, we'll be a force."

In truth, Busch and his Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet team are already a force.

After a few early season bumps, he has surged up to sixth in the driver standings with a playoff spot secure through his three victories.

Truex and his team also are on a roll, with two victories and four top-five finishes in the last six races. His only finish outside the top 10 in this stretch was last

month at Darlington, where he won the pole and had a dominant car before collisions knocked him out of the race.

"I don't know that it really matters," Truex said of the one-week break. "We've got a great team. We know what we are capable of now. We have a lot of confidence back that we lacked last year in our decision-making, whether it was strategy or whatever. It seems like things are clicking right now. I don't know that an off week will change anything. We could probably use a few more off weeks before the playoffs, if I'm being honest with you, but we don't get those, so I'm ready whenever."

Florida heads to CWS with deep pitching staff

Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Florida coach Kevin O'Sullivan sifted through his desk this week in search of decade-old notebooks from previous trips to the College World Series.

The pages contain countless reminders about how to handle days, maybe even weeks, in Omaha, Neb. Build in downtime. Make sure everyone has fun. Gather the team together at the end of each night.

Solid tips, for sure. But the most important pointer didn't need to be jotted down anywhere: bring pitching, lots of pitching. It shouldn't be an issue for Sully and the Gators this time around.

Second-seeded Florida (50-15) has its most talented collection of arms since winning the program's lone national title in 2017, a staff so deep that O'Sullivan could face daunting decisions about when to use standout soph-

omore Jac Caglianone and highly touted freshman Cade Fisher.

"There's no perfect or complete team. Everybody's got strengths, everybody's got weaknesses," O'Sullivan said. "We had to work awfully hard to figure out our bullpen and get our starting pitching going."

"Certainly, we're pitching at a high level at the right time."

It's been nearly flawless the last two weeks, raising outside expectations and making the Gators one of the favorites to reach the best-of-three championship series. Florida opens bracket play against No. 7 seed Virginia (50-13) on Friday night.

Fourth-year junior and ace Brandon Sproat (8-3, 4.69 ERA) will get the ball to start against the Cavaliers. He's pitched at least six innings in four of his last five starts, giving the Gators a chance almost every time out.

No. 2 starter Hurston Waldrep (9-3, 4.15 ERA) might be even

better. Florida has won Waldrep's last five starts, including consecutive gems against Connecticut and South Carolina in NCAA play. The Southern Miss transfer, a junior expected to be a first-round pick in next month's MLB draft, struck out 12 in seven innings against the Huskies and fanned a career-high 13 in eight innings against the Gamecocks.

"That was the best stuff he's had all year," catcher BT Riopelle said. "He put his complete arsenal on display from pitch one. That kid is going to make a lot of money, but hopefully he can make himself some more money in Omaha."

Sproat and Waldrep give Florida as good a 1-2 tandem as anyone remaining in NCAA play. But what makes this team better than most during O'Sullivan's 16 seasons in Gainesville is its depth on the mound.

Caglianone (7-3), one of the best two-way players in the

country, threw six shutout innings in regional play. Brandon Neely, a weekend starter last season who reluctantly agreed to take on the closer role this year, was a first-team All-Southeastern Conference selection thanks to 13 saves and 64 strikeouts in 46⅓ innings.

"When I first approached him about closing, he really wanted no part of it," O'Sullivan said. "But I promised him one thing. I said, 'You came in as a starter and you're going to leave this program as a starter.' So I'm going to move him back to the starting rotation next year."

Left-hander Philip Abner (3-0) and righty Ryan Slater (10-1) have become dependable relievers, and Fisher (6-0) has been as good as anyone down the stretch. He's allowed one earned run since the end of April, and O'Sullivan is confident he can seamlessly slide into the rotation if Caglianone is needed in relief.

TCU in 6th College World Series after winning 11 straight

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — As freshman Karson Bowen bounced toward home plate and then into the TCU dugout after his go-ahead grand slam, head coach Kirk Saarloos saw something the Horned Frogs really needed at that time.

"Relief is the thing I saw," Saarloos said.

Only a couple of days after being swept in a three-game series at West Virginia in late April to extend their season-long losing streak to five games — "Definitely a pretty low point," record-setting slugger Brayden Taylor said — the Frogs trailed in the eighth inning at home against Dallas Baptist before Bowen's big blast.

"He came running off the field with a huge smile on his face, and the excitement of the dugout, it was kind of like almost relief and kind of just the joy," Saarloos said. "I think, honestly, that's kind of where it flipped, a grand slam on a Tuesday night in the eighth inning against DBU."

The Frogs (42-22) are now going to the College World Series for the sixth time, their first since four consecutive trips to Omaha from 2014-17. They have won 19 of

21 games since the start of May, with an 11-game winning streak that includes sweeping through the Big 12 Tournament, the Fayetteville Regional and an unexpected home super regional against Indiana State.

"We needed all the pieces to connect. And once they did, we knew we would start rolling like we are," junior center fielder Elijah Nunez said. "We never lost confidence. We knew what team we were. ... And now we're here."

TCU plays the opening game in this year's CWS on Friday against Oral Roberts (51-12), which has won 23 of its last 24 games.

"All the credit goes to our players, because they got into a position of 'Man, it's not fun losing.' They kind of looked at one another and held each other accountable, but stayed together," Saarloos said. "It's very easy to fracture and go different ways when things aren't going great."

Saarloos, a former MLB pitcher, went to the College World Series twice while playing at Cal State Fullerton (1999 and 2001). He was part of the Frogs' four consecutive trips after becoming their pitching coach in 2013, and now goes in only his second sea-

son as head coach since succeeding Jim Schlossnagle, who left for Texas A&M.

Nunez and third baseman Taylor, who has 23 homers this season and is TCU's career leader with 48, are third-year starters in an everyday lineup bolstered by freshmen like catcher Bowen (team-best .355 batting average, six homers, 46 RBIs) and shortstop Anthony Silva (.340-7-47), and key transfers first baseman Cole Fontenelle (.347-13-52), second baseman Tre Richardson (.315-6-59) and right fielder Austin Davis (.280-9-55).

Freshman right-hander Kole Klecker (10-4, 3.84 ERA) leads the Big 12 in wins, and freshman lefty Ben Abeldt (3-3, 3.72 ERA) has a team-high 29 appearances.

Right after beating Dallas Baptist, the Frogs lost the first two games in a home series against Texas to fall to 23-20. But they have been on a roll since a 15-7 win in the finale against the Longhorns on May 1.

"I think that we were just sick and tired of playing the way that we were," Taylor said. "We just decided to go out there, start having more fun, start playing baseball the way we know how."