

High court cuts college affirmative action

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Thursday struck down affirmative action in college admissions, forcing institutions of higher education to look for new ways to achieve diverse student bodies.

The court's conservative majority overturned admissions plans at Harvard and the University of North Carolina, the nation's oldest private and public colleges, respectively.

Chief Justice John Roberts said that for too long, universities have "concluded, wrongly, that the touchstone of an individual's identity is not challenges bested, skills built or lessons learned, but the color of their skin. Our constitutional history does not tolerate that choice."

Justice Clarence Thomas, the nation's second Black justice who had long called for an end to affirmative action, wrote separately that the decision "sees the universities' admissions policies for what they are: rudderless, race-based preferences designed to ensure a particular racial mix in their entering classes."

Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote in dissent that the decision "rolls back decades of

precedent and momentous progress."

Both Thomas and Sotomayor took the unusual step of reading a summary of their opinions aloud in the courtroom.

In a separate dissent, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson — the court's first Black female justice — called the decision "truly a tragedy for us all."

The vote was 6-3 in the North Carolina case and 6-2 in the Harvard case. Jackson sat out the Harvard case because she had been a member of an advisory governing board there.

The Supreme Court had twice upheld race-conscious college admissions programs in the past 20 years, including as recently as 2016.

But that was before the three appointees of former President Donald Trump joined the court. At arguments in late October, all six conservative justices expressed doubts about the practice, which had been upheld under Supreme Court decisions reaching back to 1978.

Lower courts had also upheld the programs at both UNC and Harvard, rejecting claims the schools discriminated against white and Asian American applicants.

The college admissions disputes are among several high-profile cases focused on race in America, and were weighed by the conservative-dominated, but most diverse court ever. Among the nine justices are four women, two Black people and a Latina.

The affirmative action cases were brought by conservative activist Edward Blum, who was also behind an earlier affirmative action challenge against the University of Texas as well as the case that led the court in 2013 to end use of a key provision of the landmark Voting Rights Act.

Blum formed Students for Fair Admissions, which filed the lawsuits against both schools in 2014.

The group argued that the Constitution forbids the use of race in college admissions and called for overturning earlier Supreme Court decisions that said otherwise.

Blum's group also contended that colleges and universities can use other, race-neutral ways to assemble a diverse student body, including by focusing on socioeconomic status and eliminating the preference for children of alumni and major donors.

Supreme Court OKs religious protection for workers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Thursday used the case of a Christian mailman who didn't want to work Sundays to solidify protections for workers who ask for religious accommodations.

In a unanimous decision, the justices made clear that workers who ask for accommodations, such as taking the Sabbath off, should get them unless their employers show doing so would result in "substantial increased costs" to the business.

The court made clear that businesses must cite more than minor costs — so-called "de minimis" costs — to reject re-

quests for religious accommodations at work. Unlike most cases before the court, both sides in the case had agreed businesses needed to show more.

The case before the court involved a mail carrier in rural Pennsylvania. The man was told that as part of his job, he'd need to start delivering Amazon packages on Sundays. He declined, saying his Sundays are for church and family. U.S. Postal Service officials initially tried to get substitutes for the man's shifts, but they couldn't always accommodate him. When he didn't show, that meant more work for others. Ul-

timately, the man quit and sued for religious discrimination.

As for the particular dispute in front of them, the justices sent the case back to a lower court for another look in light of their decision. The case involves Gerald Groff, a former employee of the U.S. Postal Service in Pennsylvania's Amish Country. For years, Groff was a fill-in mail carrier who worked on days when other mail carriers were off.

Whenever Groff was scheduled on a Sunday, another carrier had to work or his spot went unfilled. Officials said Groff's absences created a tense environment and contributed to mo-

rale problems. It also meant other carriers had to deliver more Sunday mail than they otherwise would.

Groff resigned in 2019 rather than wait to be fired. He sued the Postal service for failing to accommodate his religious practice. Lower courts ruled against him previously. As a result of the court's ruling, his case will get another look.

Groff said in a statement after the ruling that he was grateful the court heard his case. "I hope this decision allows others to be able to maintain their convictions without living in fear of losing their jobs because of what they believe," he said.

Belarus leader welcomes Wagner fighters

Associated Press

As life in Russia returned to normal after an armed rebellion by a mercenary group, tensions were rising in and around its neighbor Belarus, where the exiled leader of the force and some of its fighters were settling in.

Moving to Belarus was part of the deal the Kremlin struck with Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner private military company, to end last weekend's rebellion that rattled Russia's leadership.

Prigozhin and his fighters escaped prosecution and were offered refuge in Belarus by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who said his country could use their experience and expertise.

That doesn't sit well with the Belarusian opposition and guerrilla activists, who called Wagner fighters "a threat to the Belarusian people and (the country's) independence," and promised action.

"We're categorically against stationing Russian mercenaries in Belarus and are preparing a 'warm' welcome to Wagnerites

in Belarus," said Aliaksandr Azarau, leader of the BYPOL guerrilla group of former military members, speaking in a telephone interview with The Associated Press from outside the country.

Neighboring Baltic countries also expressed concerns about how this would affect regional security. In a joint statement Wednesday, parliament speakers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania urged the European Union to label Wagner a terrorist organization.

"The emergence of the Wagner mercenary group in Belarus could make the security situation on the eastern borders of NATO and the EU even more precarious," the statement read.

Lukashenko said those Wagner fighters who don't want to come under the command of the Russian Defense Ministry — one of the options offered to them by Russian President Vladimir Putin — can stay in Belarus "for some time" at their own expense.

He said he had offered them "an abandoned military unit" to set up camp, and

promised to "help with whatever we can."

"We're looking at it pragmatically — if their commanders come to us and help us, (we get their) experience," Lukashenko said.

He didn't specify the facility's location, but Azarau said construction of a site for Wagner mercenaries was underway in Osipovichi, a city 142 miles north of the border with Ukraine, with Belarusian soldiers involved.

Residents of the city of 30,000 told AP they were rattled by the developments.

"There's military equipment in the streets and Belarusian servicemen — all residents are discussing the arrival of Wagnerites and, frankly speaking, we're panicking and are not happy about being neighbors with them," Inga, a 43-year-old doctor in Osipovichi, said by phone.

"I have teenage daughters. ... How will we live next to thugs, pardoned murderers and rapists?" said the woman, who spoke on condition of that she not be fully identified out of safety concerns.

Russian general possibly detained after mutiny

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Gen. Sergei Surovkin, the deputy commander of the Russian group of forces fighting in Ukraine, is believed to have been detained days after mercenaries staged a revolt inside Russia, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Thursday, citing U.S. and Ukrainian intelligence assessments.

The people spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to

discuss the matter publicly.

It's not clear whether Surovkin faces any charges or where he is being held, reflecting the opaque world of the Kremlin's politics and uncertainty after the revolt.

But his reported detention comes days after Wagner Group mercenaries took over the military headquarters in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don and were heading toward Moscow in what appears to have been an aborted insurrection.

Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin has spoken positively of Surovkin while criticizing the country's military brass and suggested that he should be appointed the General Staff chief to replace Gen. Valery Gerasimov. The New York Times this week reported that U.S. officials believe Surovkin had advance knowledge of Prigozhin's plan to stage the revolt.

The White House and the Kremlin declined to comment.

EU leaders to assess Putin's position at summit talks

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took center stage at Thursday's European Union summit, underscoring the importance the 27 EU leaders attach to protecting their eastern flank from Russian aggression and beefing

up Ukraine's defense capabilities.

Zelenskyy was set to address the gathering by video link and Stoltenberg attended an early lunch at the spring summit for leaders. But the biggest seat at the table was reserved for something that's not officially on the agenda: the fallout from

the stunning weekend mutiny in Russia and the impact it has on the rule of President Vladimir Putin.

"The mutiny we saw at the weekend demonstrates that there are cracks and divisions within the Russian system. At the same time, it is important to underline that these are inter-

nal Russian matters," said Stoltenberg on arrival at the summit.

EU leaders agreed. "This showed deep cracks in Putin's system. This mutiny of last weekend will also have after-shocks that we will see," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Report: Threat from Somalia cutback inflated

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The push to get U.S. troops back on the ground in Somalia in 2022 was based in part on an inflated threat assessment from U.S. Africa Command about the terrorist danger to the homeland, according to a new report that calls for an updated strategy in the country.

International Crisis Group, an independent multinational think tank, details the behind-the-scenes debate that led the White House to reverse former President Donald Trump's decision to yank all 700 U.S. troops out of the east African country during the last days of his administration.

The report, released last week

by the peace-focused group, calls for more emphasis on nonmilitary means to try to end a long-running conflict that has involved U.S. military airstrikes and troop deployments geared toward building up Somalia's fledgling armed forces.

Retired Gen. Stephen Townsend, who led U.S. Africa Command at the time of the debate about troop deployments in Somalia, painted a dire picture of the security situation that resulted from Trump's withdrawal order.

He argued publicly and privately that the al-Shabab group had grown stronger since the AFRICOM mission was relegated to rotating forces in and out of

the country, a situation he characterized as "commuting to work."

"In East Africa, al-Qaida's al-Shabab remains the greatest threat to U.S. persons and interests in the region as well as the homeland, while undermining peace, security and political progress in Somalia," Townsend told the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2022.

He went on to say that "if left unchecked, al-Shabab will soon expand beyond Somalia's borders and become an even greater threat to regional stability and American interests."

The Crisis Group report, which involved interviews with current and past U.S. government offi-

cials, added that the plan to get troops back on the ground went mostly unchallenged.

"Despite the sense among some U.S. officials that Townsend may have been inflating the threat, especially to the U.S. homeland, his position faced little if any dissent at the Defense Department," the report said. "Not even political appointees who otherwise supported scaling back the war on terror vigorously challenged his proposal."

The result was a return to the military status quo in Somalia, where there are now several hundred troops supporting the country's decadeslong struggle against Islamic militants.

Pentagon mulling nuclear microreactors for Guam

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. government is considering nuclear microreactors to power its Pacific-island fortress on Guam.

Legislation being considered by the Senate and due to be passed by year's end directs a briefing on military nuclear microreactors, according to an executive summary of the National Defense Authorization Act, greenlit June 22 by the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The executive summary doesn't specify who would be briefed, but directs it to focus on "the potential for using modular microreactors to supplement power generation in Guam."

The island citadel is home to a burgeoning garrison of military personnel from every service branch.

Andersen Air Force Base has long been a linchpin of U.S. air power in the Indo-Pacific while Guam's harbor hosts attack submarines and port calls by aircraft carrier strike groups. Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz, which opened in January but is still un-

der construction, will accommodate thousands of Marines relocating from Okinawa.

Meanwhile, the Army, which operates a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, system on Guam, will expand its footprint under plans for 360-degree air and missile defense to combat potential Chinese or North Korean strikes.

The defense funding bill requires a report on the capacity of infrastructure, resources and personnel available on Guam to meet U.S. Indo-Pacific Command strategic objectives.

Guam's delegate to Congress, James Moylan, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, is unaware of discussions about potential nuclear power on Guam, according to his statement in The Guam Daily Post on Tuesday.

"This is the first we are reading of any discussions associated with nuclear reactors to supplement power on Guam," he wrote. "Since this was discovered in the Senate's version of the NDAA, no discussions or inquiries were made with our office."

Ex-president: US deal makes Philippines target for China

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said the Chinese ambassador to Manila told him the country would be a target if America launched attacks on China from bases in the islands.

In comments reported Wednesday by the Manila Bulletin, Duterte said Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian issued the warning to him during a recent meeting.

"I reminded [Huang] again that the Philippines does not have a quarrel with China," Duterte said, according to the Bulletin, "but his answer to me was, 'If you provide places where there can be an aggressive action to China, the Philippines would always be a target.'"

Duterte's time in office was marked by warm words for Beijing and criticism of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement that gives U.S. forces the right to operate from bases in the islands.

The relationship between the allies has improved following the election of President Ferdi-

nand Marcos Jr. last year. In February, officials added four new sites to five locations named in the original base-sharing pact.

Duterte has claimed, however, that there are 17 sites in the agreement, according to the Bulletin.

"In the interest of the public's right to know, there should be an open discussion," he said. "Americans should come clean and give us a truthful narration or narrative or an explanation and identify the places where they have installed bases here in the Philippines."

The result of a U.S. attack on China would be retaliation with nuclear weapons against the Philippines, Duterte said, according to the Bulletin.

"[Americans] who are farther away have 'anti-missile' missiles," he said. "You can shoot them down before they can enter your airspace. The problem is, here in the Philippines, what are the stakes for us? Nothing. It would not only be destructive. I believe that the Philippines would be a graveyard if war comes."

Human remains likely found in sub debris

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Human remains have likely been recovered from the wreckage of the submersible that imploded during an underwater voyage to view the Titanic, the U.S. Coast Guard said Wednesday.

The news came hours after the announcement that debris from the Titan, collected from the seafloor more than 12,000 feet below the surface of the North Atlantic, had arrived in St. John's, Newfoundland. Twisted chunks of the submersible were unloaded at a Canadian Coast Guard pier.

Recovering and scrutinizing the wreckage is a key part of the investigation into why the Titan imploded last week, killing all five people on board. The multiday search and eventual recovery of debris from the 22-foot vessel captured the world's attention.

"There is still a substantial amount of work to be done to understand the factors

that led to the catastrophic loss of the Titan and help ensure a similar tragedy does not occur again," Coast Guard Chief Capt. Jason Neubauer said in a statement released late Wednesday afternoon.

The "presumed human remains" will be brought to the United States, where medical professionals will conduct a formal analysis, Neubauer said. He added that the Coast Guard has convened an investigation of the implosion at the highest level. The Marine Board of Investigation will analyze and test evidence, including pieces of debris, at a port in the U.S. The board will share the evidence at a future public hearing whose date has not been determined, the Coast Guard said.

Neubauer said the evidence will provide "critical insights" into the cause of the implosion.

Debris from the Titan, which is believed to have imploded on June 18 as it made its descent, was located about 12,500 feet un-

derwater and roughly 1,600 feet from the Titanic on the ocean floor. The Coast Guard is leading the investigation, in conjunction with several other government agencies in the U.S. and Canada.

Authorities have not disclosed details of the debris recovery, which could have followed several approaches, according to Carl Hartsfield, who directs a lab at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution that designs and operates autonomous underwater vehicles and has been serving as a consultant to the Coast Guard.

"If the pieces are small, you can collect them together and put them in a basket or some kind of collection device," Hartsfield said Monday. Bigger pieces could be retrieved with a remote-operated vehicle, or ROV, such as the one brought to the wreckage site by the Canadian ship Horizon Arctic to search the ocean floor. For extremely big pieces, a heavy lift could be used to pull them up with a tow line, he said.

Much of America can expect a hot, smoky summer

Associated Press

The only break much of America can hope for anytime soon from eye-watering dangerous smoke from fire-struck Canada is brief bouts of shirt-soaking sweltering heat and humidity from a southern heat wave that has already proven deadly, forecasters say.

And then the smoke will likely come back to the Midwest and East.

That's because neither the 235 out-of-control Canadian wildfires nor the stuck weather pattern that's responsible for this mess of meteorological maladies are showing signs of relenting for the next week or longer, according to meteorologists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Weather Prediction Center.

First, the stuck weather pattern made ab-

normally hot and dry conditions for Canada to burn at off-the-chart record levels. Then it created a setup where the only relief comes when low pressure systems roll through, which means areas on one side get smoky air from the north and the other gets sweltering air from the south.

Smoke or heat. "Pick your poison," said prediction center forecast operations chief Greg Carbin. "The conditions are not going to be very favorable."

"As long as those fires keep burning up there, that's going to be a problem for us," Carbin said. "As long as there's something to burn, there will be smoke we have to deal with."

Take St. Louis. The city had two days of unhealthy air Tuesday and Wednesday, but for

Thursday "they'll get an improvement of air quality with the very hot and humid heat," said weather prediction center meteorologist Bryan Jackson. The forecast is for temperatures that feel like 109 degrees — with 101 degree heat and stifling humidity.

On Wednesday, the low pressure system was parked over New England and because winds go counter-clockwise, areas to the west — such as Chicago and the Midwest — get smoky winds from the north, while areas east of the low pressure get southerly hot winds, Jackson said.

As that low pressure system moves on and another one travels over the central Great Plains and Lake Superior, the Midwest gets temporary relief, Jackson said. But when low pressure moves on, the smoke comes back.

Applications for jobless benefits in the US fall to 239K

Associated Press

Applications for unemployment benefits fell significantly last week after claims appeared to stabilize at modestly elevated levels in recent weeks.

U.S. applications for jobless claims fell by 26,000 to 239,000 for the week ending June 24, the Labor Department reported Thursday. Economists were expecting the elevat-

ed claims numbers to continue above 260,000, where they had settled the past three weeks.

"We have no specific explanation for this sudden dip, after three straight weeks in a narrow range from 262K to 265K, but observations for individual weeks always have to be viewed with skepticism, especially when they move against the established trend in

claims and other data," said analysts with Contingent Macro Research in a note to clients Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly fluctuations, rose by 1,500 to 257,500.

Jobless claims applications are seen as representative of the number of layoffs in a given week.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Governor bans support of 'conversion therapy'

AZ PHOENIX — Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs issued two pro-LGBTQ executive orders Tuesday, banning state support of so-called conversion therapy and allowing transgender state employees to receive gender-affirming health care under their insurance plan.

Under the executive actions, state agencies will be prohibited from using funds to promote or facilitate so-called conversion therapy, the scientifically discredited practice of using therapy to "convert" LGBTQ+ people to heterosexuality or traditional gender expectations.

Also, state employee health insurance plans can no longer list gender-affirming surgery as ineligible for coverage.

Anniversary turns tragic as pair fatally stabbed

MA NEWTON — Jill D'Amore helped make Our Lady Help of Christians Church beautiful, tending to flowers and decorating the parish season by season. Her mother, 97-year-old Lucia Arpino, never missed morning Mass until the coronavirus pandemic hit. And Jill's husband, Bruno, proudly flipped burgers at the parish picnic.

Their apparently random beating and stabbing deaths over the weekend — when the church had planned to celebrate the D'Amores' 50th wedding anniversary in a post-Communion blessing — have shaken the parish and the wider community of Newton, a city comprising a network of villages in

suburban Boston.

Christopher Ferguson, 41, pleaded not guilty to a murder charge in the death of Jill D'Amore, 73, along with two counts of assault and one count of burglary. Additional charges are expected in the deaths of Bruno D'Amore, 74, and Arpino, 97, after those autopsies are completed.

Woman loses bid to sue over abuser's sentence

LA NEW ORLEANS — A Louisiana woman who watched a man who coerced her into a sex act when she was 16 walk free in a plea deal has lost a legal battle to sue the prosecutor in the case.

Louisiana's Supreme Court had ruled earlier this year that the assistant district attorney in the case was immune from civil suits under state court doctrine for actions he took in the course of his job. The high court refused to reconsider the case Tuesday, ending the legal battle by victim Gabrielle Jameson, now 20, and her family.

Jameson was 16 in 2019 when she says she was coerced by her then-boss, Jeremy Schake, then 23. Schake eventually pleaded guilty to the crime of "carnal knowledge of a juvenile." He was given a 10-year suspended sentence and allowed to go free on probation.

Jameson has long insisted that she and her parents made clear to Assistant District Attorney Iain Dover that she wanted Schake to spend a full year in prison. Her attorney, Anthony Le Mon, has an email in which Dover indicated the judge knew of their wishes. But the judge in the case later said the victim's

wish was never communicated to him before he handed down the sentence.

New orca calf spotted in endangered pod

WA SEATTLE — A baby orca has apparently been born to an endangered killer whale population in the Pacific Northwest, scientists reported.

The Center for Whale Research announced the baby orca Friday on Facebook, saying the organization received photos showing what appears to be a new calf in L pod, part of the population known as the southern resident orcas, near Tofino, British Columbia.

The baby looks to be more than 3 weeks old and would be the first new calf in the pod since L125 was born in 2021.

Man who tried to have victim killed sentenced

NJ CAMDEN — A New Jersey man has been sentenced to more than six years in prison after exchanging sexually explicit videos and images with a 13-year-old New York girl and later paying \$20,000 in bitcoin to have her killed, eventually calling it off.

John Michael Musbach, 34, of Haddonfield, received his 78-month prison term Tuesday during a court hearing in Camden, according to federal prosecutors. He will also have to serve three years of supervised release after prison.

He began communicating online with the girl in 2015 and eventually began using those chats to request and receive sexually explicit videos and

photographs of the girl, and send her similar videos and images of himself. The girl's parents discovered the nature of the chats and notified law enforcement in New York state, where they lived.

In May 2016, Musbach started communicating with the administrator of a murder-for-hire site on the darknet, while his criminal case was pending, officials have said. After asking whether the girl was too young to target and being told the age wasn't a problem, prosecutors said, Musbach paid about \$20,000 in bitcoin for the hit.

Woman gets 2 years for trying to firebomb bank

CA LOS ANGELES — A woman who tried to firebomb a Southern California bank because she was furious at waiting in line was sentenced to two years in federal prison.

Teranee Millet, 35, of Gardena was sentenced after pleading guilty in March to unlawful possession of a firearm and destructive device, the U.S. attorney's office said in a statement.

Millet entered a Bank of America branch in the Los Angeles suburb of Torrance in September 2021. She spoke to the bank manager and demanded to be helped by another teller "because she believed she had been waiting in line for too long," the statement said.

Told no other tellers were available, Millet swore and threatened to blow up the bank, left, then returned a few minutes later with a Molotov cocktail that she hurled into the middle of the bank. A customer put out the fire.

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Yankees' Germán throws perfect game

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Since arriving in the big leagues six years ago, Domingo Germán has been anything but perfect.

Until now.

The New York Yankees right-hander pitched the 24th perfect game in major league history Wednesday night, retiring every Oakland batter in an 11-0 victory over the Athletics.

It was the first perfect game since Seattle Mariners ace Félix Hernández threw one against the Tampa Bay Rays on Aug. 15, 2012. There were three that season — but none since until Germán finished off the first no-hitter in the majors this year.

He joined Don Larsen (1956), David Wells (1998) and David Cone (1999) as Yankees to pitch perfect games. Larsen's gem came in Game 5 of the 1956 World Series against the Brooklyn Dodgers.

"So exciting," Germán said through a translator. "When you think about something very unique in baseball, not many people have an opportunity to pitch a perfect game. To accomplish something like this in my

career is something that I'm going to remember forever."

Coming off a pair of terrible starts, Germán (5-5) struck out nine of 27 hitters against the A's, who have the worst record in the majors at 21-61.

The 30-year-old pitcher served a 10-game suspension last month after getting ejected from a game in Toronto for using an illegal sticky substance on the mound. He was also banned 81 games by Major League Baseball earlier in his career over an alleged domestic violence incident.

His only previous complete game as a professional came with Double-A Trenton in April 2017.

Winless in six previous outings against Oakland, Germán threw 72 of 99 pitches for strikes. He mixed 51 curveballs and 30 fastballs that averaged 92.5 mph with 17 changeups and one sinker.

He went to three balls on a batter just twice, falling behind Ryan Noda 3-1 in the fourth and Jonah Bride by the same count in the eighth. Noda struck out on consecutive curveballs, and

Germán followed with three straight curves to Bride: one for a called strike, the next resulting in a foul ball and the third in a groundout.

"It was just so fun to watch him do that and go to work. We've seen him flirt with outings like that over time," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said, thinking to when Boston's Alex Verdugo broke up Germán's no-hit bid in the eighth in July 2021.

"When he gets rolling like that he's just so fun to watch at his craft because he's so good at commanding all of his pitches. His curveball was great tonight, but because his changeup and his fastball were good, too, it made that curveball even more special."

Seth Brown came the closest to reaching base for the A's, hitting a sharp grounder in the fifth inning to first baseman Anthony Rizzo, who made a diving stop and tossed to Germán for the out.

With the crowd of 12,479 on its feet for the ninth, Germán quickly finished what he started. He got Aledmys Díaz to ground out before Shea Langeliers flied

out to short center field. When Esteury Ruiz grounded out to third baseman Josh Donaldson to end it, New York's dugout and bullpen emptied as Germán's teammates raced to the mound to celebrate.

"That last inning was very different — very different. I felt an amount of pressure that I've never felt before," Germán said. "I'm trying to visualize what I want to execute there. At the same time, I don't want to miss. So much pressure, but yet so rewarding."

"The key there was not to overthrow," he added.

A's leadoff hitter Tony Kemp said Germán's curveball set up everything else.

"He threw that curveball in any count that he wanted to," Kemp said. "It was spinning differently and moving differently. He put his fastball where he wanted to. Changeup as well. He just kind of mixed them. Got a couple of good swings off him, but no results."

It was the 13th no-hitter in Yankees history, including Larsen's perfect game in the World Series.

Mets owner considering selloff at trade deadline

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mets owner Steven Cohen threatened his underperforming team with the prospect of a trade deadline selloff unless New York gets back into contention for a playoff berth, while promising job security through the season's end to manager Buck Showalter and general manager Billy Eppler.

"All is not lost yet, but it's getting late," Cohen said during a news conference Wednesday with the Mets in fourth place in the NL East. "I'm preparing my management team for all possibilities. If we don't get better, we have decisions to make at the trade deadline, and that's not my preferred end result but I'm preparing all contingencies."

"And we'll see where it goes. It's on the players, right?" Cohen continued. "They're

veterans. They've been there before. These are players who have done it, and we'll see if they can get their act together and string together some wins. I can't pitch and I can't hit. That's the way it goes."

New York currently projects to a \$360 million payroll and is on track for a record luxury tax of about \$99 million. The Mets are shattering the previous payroll high for \$291 million set by the 2015 Los Angeles Dodgers, who set a tax record that year at \$43.6 million.

And yet, the Mets began Wednesday 36-43 after losing seven of their previous 10 games and 16 of 22. They were 16½ games back of first-place Atlanta and 8½ games out of the last NL wild-card berth. Their 4.58 ERA is 25th among the 30 teams.

In stark contrast to Yankees owner George Steinbrenner's behavior in the

1970s and 1980s, Cohen promised stable management.

"I'm a patient guy, OK?" the 67-year-old hedge fund billionaire said. "Now, everybody wants a headline. Everybody says: Fire this person, fire that person. But I don't see that as a way to operate."

"If you want to attract good people to this organization, the worst thing you can do is be impulsive, OK, and win the headline for the day. ... You're not attracting the best talent. You're not going to want to work for somebody who has a short fuse. Listen, I know fans, they want something to happen. I get it. But sometimes, you can't do it because you have long-term objectives."

This year's trade deadline is Aug. 1 and an unsuccessful season could increase interest in a youth movement for a team that had the oldest average age on opening day.

Bedard drafted No. 1 by Blackhawks

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Connor Bedard can finally appreciate looking forward to playing for the Chicago Blackhawks after spending the past few months avoiding the subject.

And the Blackhawks — and their fans who began chanting “Let’s go, Hawks!” in Music City after Bedard was selected with the first pick in the NHL Draft on Wednesday night — can begin looking forward to a new era with a highly skilled offensive forward who’s drawn comparisons to Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby.

Bedard became the second No. 1 pick in Blackhawks history, joining Patrick Kane, who went first overall in 2007 and helped form the core of a team that won three Stanley Cups from 2010 to 2015. Kane’s tenure in Chicago ended in February when he was traded to the New York Rangers.

“I can’t put into words growing up and obviously, that’s when they were going on their runs winning Cups,” said Bedard, who turns 18 on July 17.

“You watched a lot of them and you see the United Center going crazy and all of Chicago getting behind them and you know (the) Original Six and so much history here.”

As for why he spent the past two months deflecting questions about the Blackhawks? Bedard smiled and said: “I didn’t want to jinx myself.”

At just under 5-foot-10 and 185 pounds, Bedard is regarded as a generational prospect, much like McDavid, who was selected first in 2015 and this week was named the league’s MVP for the third time.

While Bedard’s selection by Chicago was a near certainty, the first round of the draft featured several twists — but no trades.

Sweden’s Leo Carlsson went second overall, chosen by the Anaheim Ducks over Michigan freshman Adam Fantilli. Ducks general manager Pat Verbeek had declined to speak to reporters in the weeks leading up to the draft but believes the sturdy, 6-foot-3 forward can become a dominant two-way

player.

“There was a lot of really healthy debate on which player to take,” Verbeek said.

Carlsson got an inkling of the Ducks’ interest after a follow-up meeting with team officials on Tuesday. That was a day after he and his family had to rent a van to drive from Newark, N.J., to Music City because their flight was canceled.

Fantilli, the third freshman to win college hockey’s top award, the Hobey Baker Trophy, went third to Columbus.

The first American player off the board went fourth when the San Jose Sharks selected USA Hockey Development Program forward Will Smith, who is from Boston and has committed to playing at Boston College next season.

David Reinbacher was the first defenseman off the board, selected fifth by Montreal. But the player from Austria had to wait a few extra seconds to hear his name called.

Announcing the pick, Canadiens goalie Carey Price stopped after saying “David,”

apparently forgetting the player’s last name. General manager Kent Hughes came to the rescue and said: “We planned it that way. It’s David Reinbacher.”

The Arizona Coyotes went with what was considered an off-the-board pick by selecting Russian defenseman Dmitry Simashev a year after drafting five defensemen. They passed over forward Matvei Michkov, who has captivated draft watchers because the offensively skilled player is under contract to play in his native Russia through the 2025-26 season.

The Philadelphia Flyers ended Michkov’s wait with the seventh pick. Danny Briere, the Flyers’ first-time general manager, is overseeing a major overhaul, putting him in position to be patient while the 18-year-old Michkov finishes out his contract in Russia.

A translator spoke to The Associated Press about Michkov and said the player is highly motivated to show he should have been picked higher.

Gold medal gymnast Biles returning to competition

Associated Press

Simone Biles is back.

The gymnastics superstar plans to return to competition at the U.S. Classic outside Chicago in early August, her first event since the pandemic-delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

USA Gymnastics announced Wednesday that Biles, a seven-time Olympic medalist and the 2016 Olympic champion, is part of the women’s field for the single-day event set for Aug. 5.

Biles has taken most of the last two years off following her eventful stay in Japan in the summer of 2021, where her decision to remove herself from multiple events to focus on her mental health shifted the focus from

the games themselves to the overall wellness of the athletes.

She served as a cheerleader as her American teammates won the team silver then sat out the all-around, vault and floor exercise finals she had qualified for while dealing with what is known as “the twisties” — a gymnastics term for when an athlete loses their spatial awareness when airborne.

Biles returned for the balance beam final, where she won a bronze medal that tied Shannon Miller’s record for most Olympic medals by an American female gymnast. She hinted at the Paris 2024 Olympics but only after taking a lengthy break.

The last two years have been a

whirlwind of sorts. She headlined her post-Olympic tour in the fall of 2021 and married NFL player Jonathan Owens — now a defensive back for the Green Bay Packers — this spring.

The 26-year-old Biles has also become one of the most vocal advocates for athletes finding space to protect their mental health after her stand in Japan put the issue front and center. While the conversation around the subject is constantly evolving, Biles’ return to the sport she dominated for nearly a decade suggests an athlete who wants to go out on her own terms.

The U.S. Classic is one of the marquee events on USA Gymnastics’ annual calendar and

typically serves as a warm-up of sorts for the national championships, this year scheduled for late August in San Jose.

Biles used the Classic as her comeback meet in 2018 following a two-year hiatus after her record medals haul in Rio de Janeiro. It took her all of two hours to show she remained the gold standard in her sport, setting the stage for another spectacular run that included two more world all-around championships in 2018 and 2019 and three more national titles.

Biles appears to be plotting a more subdued path as she tries to make a third Olympic team, a rarity for an American female gymnast.

NASCAR to hold 1st Cup Series street race

Associated Press

CHICAGO — During the run-up to NASCAR's first street race in downtown Chicago, Julie Giese walked through the site twice a day.

While making sure everything was on schedule, she also tried to carry along the moment.

"There's a lot of moving parts and pieces and it's easy to get lost and caught up in all of that," said Giese, a longtime racing fan who was appointed track president for NASCAR's daring Chicago venture last August. "But what we need to remember is ultimately we're putting on something that is the first time that this sport has ever done. And that's incredibly special."

That history arrives this weekend, when NASCAR holds a Cup Series street race for the first time as part of its 75th season. The Xfinity Series runs the The Loop 121 on Saturday, and the Cup Series takes over for the Grant Park 220 on Sunday.

It was quite an adventure to get to this point, especially when it comes to setting up for

the event in the heart of a busy city in a relatively short period of time — causing some headaches for commuters and tourists with road closures and parking restrictions in the area.

The start-finish line for the 12-turn, 2.2-mile course is near Buckingham Fountain, and drivers will race by several downtown landmarks while Lake Michigan and Grant Park provide a picturesque backdrop for spectators and TV viewers on NBC.

The races are the centerpiece of a NASCAR festival that also includes music and other entertainment options right in the middle of what series leaders believe is one of their most important markets.

"I think everyone understands the magnitude of this event from our industry perspective," Giese told the AP in a conference room at the race's office near the course.

NASCAR is hoping the high-profile event can accomplish what it was unable to create at Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet, a 45-mile drive from

downtown. It ran 19 Cup races at the track, including the opening race of the 2011 playoffs, but it was too far from Chicago to attract a new audience and NASCAR pulled out after the 2019 season.

Two of NASCAR's biggest sponsors, Xfinity and McDonald's, signed on as founding partners for the inaugural event downtown, along with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois. The unique location has presented some challenges.

"We're very used to a lot of transporters and haulers moving things around, and that becomes part of the setup," Giese said. "Obviously, that's not something we can do in and around the park. And so our partners, I think it's given them an opportunity to kind of think differently a little bit about their activations, maybe lean into their festival teams a little bit more and really just kind of think about how you activate this event."

The race weekend is part of a three-year deal with the city of Chicago — one that was fi-

nalized under previous Mayor Lori Lightfoot. But Giese said the city has been a great partner under Mayor Brandon Johnson's new administration.

When it comes to the traffic around the event, Giese said they will learn from this year.

"When you look at it from a planning perspective, where we started to where we are now, we trimmed a week off of that schedule from the initial plan because of that," she said. "I'm trying to be really mindful of where we're racing and the impacts that it has to the community around it."

The drivers are also going to have to learn a lot in a hurry. They will have precious little time on the course before each race, adding to the unpredictability with the weekend.

The simulators should get plenty of work before NASCAR arrives in Chicago.

"I've heard it's really bumpy," Kyle Larson said. "It looks narrow in one of the little overhead shots I think I saw. So, yeah, I don't really know. I don't really know anything about it until I get some laps."

Already hectic NBA offseason now poised for free agency

Associated Press

Chris Paul has already been traded twice this offseason, ending up in Golden State. Bradley Beal is now in Phoenix, John Collins was sent to Utah and Kristaps Porzingis is about to start anew in Boston in a deal that sent Marcus Smart to Memphis.

They have new places to call home. It's time to see if Kyrie Irving, Draymond Green, James Harden, Khris Middleton and dozens of other players will be on the move in the next few days as well.

As proven by the run of trades in recent weeks, NBA teams aren't waiting for free agency to make moves. But the real season of offseason player movement begins Friday at 6 p.m. Eastern, when teams are permitted to start talking to free agents — with the caveat that most deals cannot become official until July 6.

"Obviously, money's a thing. I mean,

that's just for anybody," said Miami guard Max Strus, a free agent now in line for a big payday, going from \$1.8 million this season to potentially \$12 million a year or more. "These are moments that you work for, and these are opportunities that could be life-changing — so you can't ever take that out of it. But I love playing basketball and that's always going to be the first thing for me."

Money and fit. That's what players like Strus will be seeking, and that's what teams will be weighing over the next few days — especially with a new Collective Bargaining Agreement, and new rules designed to at least slightly curb spending by the deeper-pocketed teams, set to go into effect on Saturday.

That's part of the reason why some trades have been made in recent days. The Warriors gave up Jordan Poole to get Paul

from Washington in part because Paul's contract expires in a year and Poole is on the books for four years (at more than \$30 million annually), and Atlanta sent Collins to Utah for similar reasons.

"I think a lot can be made of all the challenges that are coming our way, whether it be aging roster, the new CBA with some of the limitations there, anything else you can bring up," Warriors general manager Mike Dunleavy Jr. said. "We're aware of all those things."

There could be more trades coming as well, with all eyes on Portland and whether Damian Lillard will eventually ask to be dealt elsewhere — Miami or Brooklyn, specifically — or remain with the Trail Blazers.

In the interim, there will be some massive deals struck — some possibly reaching \$200 million.