

## Study: Bomb blasts linked to Alzheimer's

By J.P. LAWRENCE

*Stars and Stripes*

Troops exposed to shockwaves from bomb blasts may be at higher risk for developing Alzheimer's disease and other neurological issues, even if they haven't suffered a traumatic brain injury, recent Army-funded research suggests.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke found that even small explosions — ones unlikely to cause concussions or injuries — change the molecular structure of the brain, a study published last week in the journal *Brain Pathology* found.

"This finding may explain those many blast-exposed individuals returning from war zones with no detectable brain injury, but who still suffer from persistent neurological symptoms, including depression, headaches, irritability and memory problems," Ben Bahr, professor of molecular biology and biochemistry at UNC Pembroke, said in an Army statement.

Explosions from roadside bombs, rockets and mortar rounds have affected many deployed troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the past 20 years. Traumatic brain

injuries and concussions from these blasts often lead to problems with sleep and memory, and sometimes to depression that leads to suicide.

Long-term issues can arise from blasts that troops might not recognize as harmful at the time, Bahr said.

"Our interest was focused on the effects of low-level blast waves that soldiers can experience during training and in war zones ... where nearby explosions can cause blast waves that can knock soldiers to their knees but they are able to get back up with no obvious injury to the body or brain," Bahr said in an email.

To test the impact of explosions on troops, researchers used slices of rat brains, specifically from the hippocampus, which plays an important role in learning and memory.

They placed the brain tissue into a makeshift skull: an aquarium filled with warm water. Seven inches away from the aquarium was a 1.7-gram explosive charge, capable of a "seemingly innocuous level of blast wave intensity," Bahr said.

The explosion produced a blast wave that pulsed through the air, the tank and then

through the water before reaching the brain tissue.

The blast damaged the hippocampus and diminished electrical activity between neurons, said Frederick Gregory, program manager for the Army Research Office, which funded the research.

"You start seeing the development of proteins associated with Alzheimer's plaque, as well as a loss in proteins you need to maintain your synaptic connections to your neurons," Gregory said in a phone call. These effects could be seen after only one blast, with further explosions showing cumulative damage, he said.

The research also involved the Development Command Army Research Laboratory and the National Institutes of Health.

Researchers said they plan to look at the effects of blasts on other parts of the brain.

"Early detection of this measurable deterioration could improve diagnoses and treatment of recurring neuropsychiatric impediments, and reduce the risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's disease later in life," Bahr said in the Army statement.

## States ease virus restrictions despite warnings

*Associated Press*

MISSION, Kan. — With the U.S. vaccination drive picking up speed and a third formula on the way, states eager to reopen for business are easing coronavirus restrictions despite warnings from health experts that the outbreak is far from over and that moving too quickly could prolong the misery.

Massachusetts on Monday made it much easier to grab dinner and a show. In Missouri, where individual communities get to make the rules, the two biggest metropolitan areas — St. Louis and Kansas City — are relaxing some measures. Iowa's governor recently lifted mask requirements and limits on the number of people allowed in bars and restaurants, while the town of Lawrence, home to the University of Kansas, now lets establishments stay open until midnight.

The push to reopen comes as COVID-19

vaccine shipments to the states are ramping up. Nearly 20% of the nation's adults — or over 50 million people — have received at least one dose of vaccine, and 10% have been fully inoculated 2 ½ months into the campaign to snuff out the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Johnson & Johnson shipped out nearly 4 million doses of its newly authorized, one-shot COVID-19 vaccine Sunday night. The company will deliver about 16 million more doses by the end of March and a total of 100 million by the end of June.

That adds to the supply being distributed by Pfizer and Moderna and should help the nation amass enough doses by midsummer to vaccinate all adults. The White House is encouraging Americans to take the first dose available to them, regardless of manufacturer.

In New York City, where limited indoor

dining has resumed, officials said the J&J vaccine will help the city to inoculate millions more people by summer, including through door-to-door vaccinations of homebound seniors.

But the efforts come with strong warnings from health officials against reopening too quickly, as worrisome coronavirus variants spread.

On Monday, the head of the CDC, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, urgently warned state officials and ordinary Americans not to let down their guard, saying she is "really worried about reports that more states are rolling back the exact public health measures that we have recommended."

"I remain deeply concerned about a potential shift in the trajectory of the pandemic," she said. "We stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground that we have gained."

# Minimum wage hike unlikely in relief bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats' hopes of including a minimum wage increase in their \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill seemed all but dead as the Senate prepared to debate its own version of the House-passed aid package.

Four days after the chamber's parliamentarian said Senate rules forbid inclusion of a straight-out minimum wage increase in the relief measure, Democrats on Monday seemed to have exhausted their most realistic options for quickly salvaging the pay hike. In one decision, they abandoned a potential amendment threatening tax increases on big companies that don't boost workers' pay to certain levels.

"At this moment, we may not have a path, but I hope we can find one" for pushing the federal pay floor to \$15 an hour, said No. 2 Senate Democratic leader Richard Durbin

of Illinois.

Senate Democrats hope to unveil their version of the broad relief package and begin debate as early as Wednesday. Congressional leaders want to send President Joe Biden the legislation combating the pandemic and bolstering the economy by March 14, the date emergency jobless benefits that lawmakers approved in December expire.

The overall relief bill is Biden's biggest early legislative priority. It looms as an initial test of his ability to unite Democrats in the Senate — where the party has no votes to spare — and risks lasting damage to his influence should he fail. Republicans are strongly against the legislation and could well oppose it unanimously, as House GOP lawmakers did when that chamber approved the bill early Saturday.

The measure would provide \$1,400 payments to individuals plus hundreds of bil-

lions of dollars for schools and colleges, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, mass transit systems, renters and small businesses. It also has money for child care, tax breaks for families with children and assistance for states willing to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income residents.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said he wanted Democrats to ignore the parliamentarian's ruling blocking the minimum wage increase. He also wants them to vote to eliminate filibusters — procedural delays that would take an unachievable 60 votes for Democrats to prevail.

Neither idea seemed to have the support among Democrats or the White House needed to succeed. But Sanders, the Senate's lead sponsor of the hike to \$15, said he'd force a vote on an amendment restoring the minimum wage increase anyway.

## Beijing kicks off monthlong drills in South China Sea

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

*Stars and Stripes*

Beijing on Monday kicked off a military exercise in the South China Sea scheduled to last until March 31, according to a report by the South China Morning Post the same day.

The military drills will occur within a 5-kilometer radius of a point west of the Leizhou Peninsula, the state-run Global Times reported Sunday. Beijing will prohibit other vessels from coming into that area this month, according to a Friday notice on the Chinese Maritime Safety Administration's website.

The region is a flashpoint between the United States and China, as Beijing claims nearly all of it as its territorial waters despite a U.N. ruling to the contrary. The U.S. regularly challenges those claims by conducting patrols, military exercises and freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea, to which China routinely objects.

The Chinese Ministry of National Defense did not go into detail about the monthlong exercise, but in a statement Monday said China would "not lose an inch of land left to us by our ancestors."

Beijing bases its South China Sea claims on its own 1947 map that includes a nine-

dash line that encompasses those waters. A U.N. tribunal, however, rejected China's claim in 2016 following a challenge from the Philippines.

The monthlong exercise comes as the U.S. has stepped up its military operations in the contentious waters and two French warships are en route from Toulon to patrol the region, according to the French navy.

In the past month alone, the U.S. has held a dual-carrier exercise with the USS Nimitz and USS Theodore Roosevelt and two freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea, along with two transits of the Taiwan Strait.

## Marine who died surfing was promoted in December

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Marine who went missing while surfing over the weekend, and was later pronounced dead at an Okinawa hospital, was remembered Tuesday as a beloved member of Combat Logistics Battalion 31 whose spirit "represented the best the Marine Corps has to offer."

Cpl. Rene PonceAvalos, a 22-year-old en-

gineer equipment operator from Beaverton, Ore., went missing Sunday afternoon while surfing near Okinawa's Ikei Island, according to a statement Monday from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit.

PonceAvalos was found unresponsive two hours later and rushed to the hospital.

No cause of death has been released. The Marine Corps is investigating the incident, according to a statement Tuesday.

"On behalf of Combat Logistics Battalion

31, we extend our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Corporal Rene PonceAvalos," the battalion's commander, Lt. Col. Stanley Calixte, said in the statement.

PonceAvalos joined the Marines in 2019 and rose quickly through the ranks "with the respect and admiration of peers and superiors alike," Calixte said. PonceAvalos was meritoriously promoted to corporal on Dec. 2.

# Critics: Cuomo ignored power imbalance

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — When she first arrived in Albany to work as a legislative aide in 2013, New York Assembly Member Yuh-Line Niou had lawmakers grab her buttocks, suggest she and her boss were “a hot duo” who should have sex and peer into her office to check her out for a “hot or not” list.

Niou, then a chief of staff in her late 20s, never reported it. She feared it would unfairly drag down her boss. But the experiences stayed with her.

She bristled Monday at the response from Gov. Andrew Cuomo to allegations he sexually harassed two young women in state government, remarks some on social media called a “faux-pology” that blames victims for misinterpreting his “good-natured” jokes.

“When is it a joke to say ‘Do you have sex with older men?’” said Niou, now 38, who became a lawmaker herself in 2017, and now

represents lower Manhattan. “I felt like it was very much gas-lighting instead of an apology, and I think a lot of women read it that way.”

One former administration employee, Lindsey Boylan, said Cuomo kissed her on the lips, commented on her appearance and summoned her to an unnecessary private meeting in his office after a holiday party.

Another former employee, Charlotte Bennett, 25, said Cuomo questioned her about her sex life, talked about being lonely and asked if she would be open to a sexual relationship with an older man.

And late Monday, a third woman, Anna Ruch, said in a New York Times story that Cuomo touched her back and face without consent and asked to kiss her in the middle of a 2019 wedding reception, moments after they met.

Bennett criticized Cuomo’s statement in one of her own Mon-

day, saying the 63-year-old governor has “refused to acknowledge or take responsibility for his predatory behavior.”

Cuomo’s office did not respond to a request for comment Monday. He denied Boylan’s allegations in his statement and said that in Bennett’s case, he had intended to act like a mentor.

“I have teased people about their personal lives, their relationships, about getting married or not getting married. I mean no offense and only attempt to add some levity and banter to what is a very serious business,” the three-term governor said in the statement issued Sunday.

“I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended. I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation,” he continued. “To the extent anyone felt

that way, I am truly sorry.”

Northwestern University law professor Deborah Tuerkheimer, who teaches law and gender issues, said Cuomo in his statement ignored the crucial power imbalance at play.

“The notion that his behavior was simply unwanted ‘flirtation’ that may have caused ‘offense’ entirely ignores a workplace hierarchy in which he — the governor of the state — was positioned at the very top,” Tuerkheimer said.

“It’s about the environment. The allegations described an environment that made both of these women feel degraded ... as objects, rather than the competent workers they were,” she said.

Bennett complained to her bosses and to Cuomo’s legal counsel last spring about what she deemed the governor’s sexual advances and was transferred to a new position before leaving public employment in November.

## Dr. Seuss Enterprises cuts 6 books for racist images

Associated Press

BOSTON — Six Dr. Seuss books — including “And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street” and “If I Ran the Zoo” — will stop being published because of racist and insensitive imagery, the business that preserves and protects the author’s legacy said Tuesday.

“These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong,” Dr. Seuss Enterprises told The Associated Press in a statement that coincided with the late author and illustrator’s birthday.

“Ceasing sales of these books is only part of our commitment and our broader plan to ensure Dr. Seuss Enterprises’ catalog represents and supports all communities and families,” it said.

The other books affected are “McElligot’s Pool”, “On Beyond Zebra!”, “Scrambled Eggs Super!” and “The Cat’s Quizzer.”

“Dr. Seuss Enterprises listened and took feedback from our audiences including teachers, academics and specialists in the field as part of our review process. We then worked with a panel of experts, including educators, to review our catalog of titles,” the company said.

As adored as Dr. Seuss is by millions around the world for the positive values in many of his works, there has been increasing criticism in recent years over the way Blacks, Asians and others are drawn in some of his most beloved children’s books.

## Rains in Appalachia lead to rescues, road closures

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Kentucky firefighter Eddie Stacy was turning his firetruck around in the dark while responding to storm damage when he noticed a tiny light coming from the flooded Red River.

It was a cellphone a woman was waving from a car inundated with water that was rising by the minute.

Stacy and other members of the Hazel Green Fire Department sprang into action Sunday night, pulling five people from the car where water was up to the dashboard. Among those rescued were a 17-month-old boy and a woman who appeared to be having a seizure, Stacy said in a telephone interview Monday.

“We don’t do too much training on this water rescue,” Stacy said. “Instinct, it just kicks in.”

Heavy thunderstorms pounded parts of Appalachia on Sunday and Monday, sending rivers out of their banks and leading to multiple water rescues, mudslides, road closures and power outages, officials said.

Stacy was part of a storm-response unit cutting down a tree that had fallen onto a road in Wolfe County about 75 miles southeast of Lexington. But a mudslide started and Stacy was forced to move his firetruck.

As he was turning around, Stacy noticed something in the floodwaters just down the road — a woman sitting on a stalled car’s door window, waving her cellphone flashlight and yelling for help.

# Vaccine inequity pits rural against urban US

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The U.S. vaccine campaign has heightened tensions between rural and urban America, where from Oregon to Tennessee to upstate New York, complaints are surfacing of a real — or perceived — inequity in vaccine allocation.

In some cases, recriminations over how scarce vaccines are distributed have taken on partisan tones, with rural Republican lawmakers in Democrat-led states complaining of “picking winners and losers,” and urbanites traveling hours to rural GOP-leaning communities to score COVID-19 shots when there are none in their city.

In Oregon, state GOP lawmakers walked out of a legislative session last week over the Democratic governor’s vaccine plans, citing rural vaccine distribution among their concerns. In upstate New York, public health officials in rural counties have complained of disparities in vaccine allocation, and in North Carolina, rural lawmakers say too many doses were going to mass vaccine centers in big cities.

In Tennessee, Missouri and Alabama, a dearth of shots in urban areas with the greatest number of health care workers has led seniors to snap up appointments hours from their homes.

## California

LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles County, which was among the hardest-hit by a deadly coronavirus surge, reported a record low number of new cases Monday as California’s overall figures continued to plummet.

The county of 10 million reported under 1,000 new daily cases — back to numbers not seen since before the fall and winter surge — and the daily rate of positive COVID-19 tests averaged about 3% over seven days compared to about 20% in early January.

While the number of new cases could be lower because of a

lag in weekend reporting, county Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said the county is moving in a positive direction overall. She said people appeared to have heeded social distancing and other safety measures designed to reduce COVID-19 transmission.

## Texas

AUSTIN — The first doses of the new Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine will arrive in Texas this week, state health officials said Monday.

The first 24,000 doses of the single-dose vaccine against the illness caused by the coronavirus will go to federal vaccination sites in Dallas, Tarrant and Harris counties Tuesday, and the state expects that more than 200,000 doses will be allocated to Texas next week, the Texas Department of State Health Services said.

The new vaccine does not require the ultra-cold storage needed previously by the two-dose Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, officials said, making storage and distribution much easier. The vaccine is said to be well-suited for homebound seniors, the homeless and others who would have trouble showing up for an appointment for a second dose.

State health officials reported 1,981 new confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases Monday, bringing the total for the year-long pandemic to 2,647,845. Fifty-nine coronavirus fatalities reported brought the state’s pandemic death toll to 42,995.

## Maryland

BALTIMORE — A Baltimore strip club has filed a lawsuit against the mayor and city council, saying a ban enacted on adult entertainment during the COVID-19 pandemic infringes on the club’s right to free speech.

TC Entertainment, which operates the Penthouse Club, is seeking an injunction in federal court against the ban, enacted by Democratic Mayor Brandon

Scott as part of a wide-ranging list of closures during his first week in office in December, The Baltimore Sun reported Monday.

Stefanie Mavronis, a spokesperson for the mayor, says the city’s law department is reviewing the lawsuit.

Adult entertainment clubs closed Dec. 11 when the order signed by Scott called for the closure of “indoor recreational establishments,” including social and fraternal clubs, bowling alleys, skating rinks, hookah lounges and adult entertainment venues. It forced restaurants to bar indoor and outdoor dining and capped the number of visitors to retail and religious institutions, gyms, malls and museums at 25% of capacity.

## Florida

TALLAHASSEE — Coronavirus vaccine eligibility is expanding to older teachers and first responders and becoming more available for younger people considered vulnerable to COVID-19 under an executive order signed Monday by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Teachers, school employees, firefighters and law enforcement officers who are 50 and older will be able to get the shot starting on Wednesday, according to the order.

The order also allows for younger people deemed extremely vulnerable to the virus to get the shot at doctors’ offices or pharmacies. Previously, the group could only get vaccinated at hospitals.

Florida’s health data shows 1.7 million people have completed their two doses of the vaccines, and DeSantis said five counties have already inoculated more than two-thirds of their senior population.

## Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said fewer Kentuckians are going to hospitals with COVID-19, positivity

rates are dropping and the state just recorded a seventh straight week of declining cases.

Beshear presented a burst of positive news on the virus front during his daily briefing Monday, and said restaurants, bars and other businesses will be able to slightly increase capacity on Friday.

New daily case reports in Kentucky are down 72% in the last seven weeks, and on Monday, the state reported the lowest number of daily cases, 509, since late September, the governor said. The positivity rate, a seven-day average, was at 4.8%, according to state numbers.

More than 100,000 Kentuckians were vaccinated last week as vaccine centers received a surplus of doses after bad-weather delays. The state has given a first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine to nearly 700,000 Kentuckians, the governor said.

## Michigan

DETROIT — In-person educating in Detroit’s public schools is scheduled to restart March 8 for students and teachers who choose to return to classrooms.

The decision to reopen buildings was made in conjunction with the Detroit Federation of Teachers union and comes as COVID-19 infection rates in the city fall, the Detroit Public Schools Community District said Monday.

The district, however, will continue to provide an option for virtual learning and teaching.

“When pandemic infection rates in the city climbed beyond the 5% mark in November, we made the proactive decision to suspend in-person learning until rates declined in order to keep our students and employees as safe as possible,” Superintendent Nikolai Vitti said. “Now that the infection rate in the city has consistently been well below 5%, we are ready to welcome our students and teachers back who choose to resume in-person learning and teaching.”

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Man cited after using mannequin for carpool

**CA** LOS ANGELES — A California driver who said he had used a mannequin as his passenger for at least a year and a half in order to access carpool lanes has been cited and faces a fine of at least \$400.

The mannequin — adorned with gray hair, wrinkles, glasses, a Cleveland Indians baseball hat and a face mask — sat in the passenger seat of the driver's Toyota Tacoma when he was pulled over.

Officer S. Sullinger was patrolling the freeway in Glendora in search of carpool violators.

The officer noticed the front passenger in the Toyota was suspicious and that the vehicle had tinted windows on its front passenger side, which is illegal.

Sullinger realized the passenger was fake when the driver rolled down his window.

The driver was cited for the carpool infraction but the mannequin was not confiscated.

### FBI on the hunt for Piggy Bank Bandit

**AZ** PHOENIX — The FBI is looking for whoever is responsible for robbing multiple banks in metropolitan Phoenix.

The agency has referred to the suspect as the Piggy Bank Bandit because he or she left with rolls of coins from one of the robberies.

The first robbery happened at a U.S. Bank branch in Tempe. The FBI believes the same person robbed five other banks in Mesa, Gilbert and Phoenix.

Photos released by the FBI show a person wearing a face covering, black-rimmed glasses

and a beanie or hat. Officials said the person also appears to have a tattoo on the left side of the neck and sometimes carried a backpack.

### Police: Dispute over light led to dorm slashing

**CT** HAMDEN — A Quinnipiac University student slashed his roommate's neck after they argued about a dorm room light, police in Connecticut said. The victim survived the attack.

Officers responded to the Hamden college on a report of a possible fight between two roommates.

Police found a 20-year-old student with a large laceration to his neck. He told police his roommate jumped on top of him while he was sleeping, punched him in the face and cut his throat with a knife. Officers said they negotiated with the attacker and were able to get possession of the knife.

### Wetland bird added to endangered species list

**FL** FORT MYERS — The state of Florida has added one of the most elusive wetland birds to its endangered and threatened species.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners met online, adopting the eastern black rail bird to the list, in order to be consistent with federal protections. It is the size of a sparrow, found in marshy areas, and is described by Audubon as "extremely secretive."

Rarely seen or heard, the black rail's habitat is disappearing rapidly as climate change and development continue to destroy wetlands. Some of the birds' preferred habitat has been converted to homes and golf course

communities.

### Ex-postal carriers among 11 charged in card theft

**IL** CHICAGO — Three former postal carriers from Chicago are among 11 people indicted following an investigation into the theft of credit cards from the mail.

Federal prosecutors said they were charged with conspiring to steal mail and committing unauthorized access device fraud, the Chicago Sun-Times reported.

Another former mail carrier from Broadview, Ill., and one from College Park, Ga., also were charged, as were six other Chicago-area residents.

The 18-month conspiracy involved the theft of credit cards and other financial instruments in order to sell them for cash or other items, according to prosecutors.

### Hotel fined for cheating people during wildfire

**OR** ROSEBURG — A hotel in Roseburg, Ore., has been fined \$31,000 for overcharging dozens of area residents who sought rooms after fleeing a large wildfire in September.

The News-Review reported SUBH Investment LLC, which does business as Days Inn by Wyndham in Roseburg, entered into an agreement with the Oregon Department of Justice.

At the time of the Archie Creek Fire, the Days Inn rented or offered to rent at least 31 rooms at a price that was at least 15% higher than the normal room price, the agreement said.

The single highest rate Days Inn charged in October was \$150 a night, yet during the fire the hotel rented 12 different rooms for over \$200 a night, including six

rooms for over \$300 a night, the Department of Justice said.

### Historic general store destroyed by fire

**NC** TODD — A century-old general store in the northwest North Carolina mountains known as a gathering place for local commerce and memories was destroyed by fire, authorities said.

The Todd General Store, established in 1914 and identified in the National Register of Historic Places, burned to the ground, Ashe County officials said. No one was injured.

The fire's cause hasn't been determined, Ashe County Fire Marshal Jonathan Stansberry told the Watauga Democrat. He said the fire pattern suggests it may have started in the kitchen.

### 5 charged in illegal gun sales scheme

**RI** PROVIDENCE — Five Rhode Island men have been indicted on charges connected to their alleged roles in an illegal gun sales scheme that distributed almost 90 weapons, the state attorney general's office said.

Rashaan Mangum, 29, is alleged to have bought 89 handguns from dealers throughout Rhode Island using false information and then selling them to people not allowed to have guns and without proper paperwork, according to a statement from Attorney General Peter Neronha's office.

Four others are alleged to have conspired or solicited Mangum to purchase the handguns.

The five suspects face a total of 38 charges. Four are in custody and one is being sought.

— From wire reports

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# 'Super seniors' benefit college football

Associated Press

Bret Bielema saw a unique opportunity to accelerate a turnaround at Illinois when he returned to college football as head coach of the Illini in December.

The NCAA's decision to grant every fall sport athlete who played through the pandemic an extra season of eligibility meant Illinois could bring back a large group of experienced players to be the foundation of Bielema's first team in Champaign.

Schools are not obligated to bring back those players and give them scholarships, but Bielema said he made it clear at his first team meeting that all were welcome.

"And I wasn't going to do it based on watching a bunch of film and deciding who I thought could or couldn't play or who should or shouldn't have an opportunity," Bielema said. "If you're in that room you're part of the Illini family and we're in this together."

As major college football re-

turns to normal in 2021, one of the lingering effects of the pandemic season will be the return of hundreds of extra, older players who choose to stick around for another year. With spring practice approaching, more than 1,000 scholarship players are expected to take advantage of the NCAA's eligibility mulligan, according to an Associated Press review of rosters provided by 129 schools.

The number of these super seniors on each team is subject to change and likely to go down as players continue to assess the value of an playing extra year of college football, but their presence is likely to have a major impact on the 2021 season.

ESPN's SP+ power rankings use returning production (everything from yards and points scored to tackles and interceptions) to project how teams will do in the coming season. Bill Connelly, who created SP+, said there will be more returning production across college football in 2021 than in any year since he started tracking it in

2014.

Connelly said on The AP Top 25 College Football Podcast the typical national average for returning production among FBS teams is about 62% per team. As rosters continue to come together, with transfers still finding homes for next season, the national average for returning production has already topped 70% per team.

"Everybody's like eight to 10 (percentage points) higher because they're returning more seniors, because all the seniors got a chance at an extra year of eligibility," Connelly said.

Normally, the top teams in returning production will be around 87%, Connelly said. Currently, three teams are expected to have more than 90% of their production from 2020 back in 2021.

Leading the way was Louisiana-Lafayette at 96%. UCLA and Miami were both at 91%. Lafayette (Levi Lewis) and Miami (D'Eriq King) each has a quarterback who will be a super senior.

As of this past weekend, Illinois expects to have 17 scholarship super seniors, the most of any Power Five school.

"What I wouldn't give to be able to play another season in Memorial Stadium, packed to the brim with 60,000 Fighting Illini. That's all I want right now," said tackle Alex Palczewski, one of three returning starters along the offensive line for the Illini who will be super seniors.

For a program that hasn't had a winning record since 2011 and has reached the postseason just twice in that time, the hope is that Palczewski, fellow linemen Doug Kramer and Vederian Lowe and the super senior class will power a long awaited breakthrough in Champaign.

The NCAA ruled super seniors will not count next season toward the Bowl Subdivision cap of 85 scholarship players per team. As of now, athletes using their COVID-19 year of eligibility after 2021-22 will count toward scholarship and roster limits in all NCAA sports.

## In-game video returns to baseball for 2021 season

Associated Press

For Chris Owings' first seven years in the majors, he could pop into the video room to take a look at his at-bats during a game.

Then last season, the utility infielder for the Colorado Rockies had to make due with a printout.

"You'd come back in the dugout and you'd say, 'Hey where was that pitch at?'" Owings said Monday. "It would be like it is on the MLB app where it just shows where the pitch crossed the plate. You go from seeing every pitch where it crossed, where your swing was, to just being able to see where the pitch was on a piece of paper."

It was a jarring change for some hitters during a down year for offense during the pandemic-shortened season. But Major

League Baseball has cleared the way for the return of in-game video on dugout iPads beginning on opening day, with catcher signals clipped when they are displayed on a computer.

Washington Nationals first baseman Ryan Zimmerman, who opted out of last season because of COVID-19 concerns, called video "a huge part of the game."

"A lot's been said about video rooms and how some people incorrectly used them. But I think we've kind of handled that situation," he said. "Having the delays with the live feeds and things like that allow you to basically squash all of that stuff. 'Hitters and pitchers, honestly, use video during the game, and it gives us the best chance to be

successful and it gives us the best chance to, basically, put the best product on the field. Things like that, that help us perform better, should be able to be used."

For decades, baseball players retreated to a clubhouse video room to check out their at-bats or take a closer look at a reliever entering a game. Then Houston was penalized in January 2020 for an electronic sign-stealing scheme during the Astros' run to the 2017 World Series title and again in the 2018 season. The coronavirus pandemic also led baseball to limit clubhouse access.

The prohibition of in-game video access coincided with a .245 MLB batting average during the shortest regular season

since 1878, the lowest since .237 in 1968 and down from .252 in 2019. The average number of home runs per game declined from the record set in 2019, and the difference between strikeouts and hits increased despite the short season.

"It definitely made it a little more difficult for hitters," Texas Rangers outfielder David Dahl said.

Chicago White Sox manager Tony La Russa, hired in October, likes how players will be in the dugout with the iPads rather than going back to the video room.

"If you're always going in the clubhouse to watch your at-bat and then you come out after three outs, you lose a sense of the game," said La Russa.

# Williamson, Pelicans hold off Jazz

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Zion Williamson had 26 points, 10 rebounds and five assists, and the New Orleans Pelicans held off a late Utah charge to beat the NBA-leading Jazz 129-124 on Monday night.

Brandon Ingram scored 26 points, Lonzo Ball added 23 and JJ Redick had 17, highlighted by a pair of four-point plays on three-pointers as he was fouled.

Bojan Bogdanovic hit seven threes and finished with a game-high 31 points for Utah (27-8), which lost for just the eighth time this season, but the second time in three games.

New Orleans led by 14 with 3:54 left, but had to survive the Jazz cutting their deficit to a point in the final minute.

**Nets 124, Spurs 113 (OT):** James Harden had 30 points, 15 assists and 14 rebounds and Brooklyn overcame a collapse in the final seconds of regulation to snap a 17-game losing streak in San Antonio.

Kyrie Irving added 27 points and Bruce Brown had 23 for the Nets.

The Spurs closed the fourth quarter on a 10-0 run to force overtime.

DeMar DeRozan had 22 points and 11 assists, while Dejounte Murray and Lonnie Walker each had 19 points. All five starters scored in double figures for San Antonio.

**Trail Blazers 123, Hornets 111:** Carmelo Anthony scored 29 points, Damian Lillard

had 23 points and 10 assists and Portland snapped a four-game losing streak with a victory over visiting Charlotte.

Robert Covington had a season-high 21 points and 10 rebounds for the Blazers, who got off to a sluggish start but led by as many as 19 points in the final quarter.

Portland finished with a franchise-record 24 three-pointers, led by Lillard and Anthony with six apiece.

LaMelo Ball had 30 points for the Hornets, who have not won in Portland since March 2008. The Blazers are 25-6 against Charlotte in Portland.

**Nuggets 118, Bulls 112:** Nikola Jokic dominated with 39 points and 14 rebounds, and Denver won at Chicago.

Jokic scored 17 in the fourth quarter to help the Nuggets come away with the win after blowing a 15-point lead. He finished with nine assists, just missing his 50th career triple-double.

Jamal Murray scored 24. Michael Porter Jr. added 17 points and 15 rebounds, and Denver won for the third time in four games.

All-Star Zach LaVine led Chicago with 23 points and grabbed nine rebounds. Coby White added 20 points and 10 rebounds, but the Bulls lost their second straight after winning three in a row.

**Mavericks 130, Magic 124:** Luka Doncic had 33 points, 10 rebounds and nine as-

sists, Kristaps Porzingis played a nearly flawless second half and Dallas won at Orlando.

Jalen Brunson scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half as the Mavericks broke open a close game. Dallas has won four of its past five and nine of 12.

Nikola Vucevic had 29 points, 15 rebounds and eight assists for the Magic, who dropped their fourth straight.

**76ers 130, Pacers 114:** Shake Milton scored 26 points, Furkan Korkmaz had 19 and the reserves sparked Philadelphia to a home win over Indiana.

Joel Embiid had 24 points and 13 rebounds, and Ben Simmons had 18 points and six rebounds.

Malcolm Brogdon led the Pacers with 20 points in his return from a one-game absence due to a sore right knee.

**Cavaliers 101, Rockets 90:** Collin Sexton scored 39 points and visiting Cleveland handed hapless Houston its 12th straight loss.

The Cavaliers have won four straight after losing their previous 10 games.

It's the Rockets' longest losing streak since dropping 15 in a row in 2001, and the first time they have lost five straight at home since March 2006. John Wall's performance was the only thing that kept Houston in this one. He had 23 points by halftime and finished with a season-high 32.

## Hawks fire Pierce after high hopes, sluggish start

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Atlanta Hawks coach Lloyd Pierce was fired less than halfway into a season that began with heightened expectations but was beset by injuries.

Hawks president Travis Schlenk announced the move on Monday.

The Hawks are 14-20 and 11th in the Eastern Conference, following a 109-99 loss at Miami on Sunday night. It was the Hawks' 11th loss after holding a fourth-quarter lead. The teams play again in Miami on Tuesday.

Pierce, 44, gave no indication that he thought he was in trouble after Sunday's loss. He ran the Hawks' practice on Monday

morning in Miami.

Schlenk said he and his staff made the decision to fire Pierce on Monday morning and decided against waiting until the All-Star break to announce the move.

"I just felt like we needed a new voice to take the next step," Schlenk said Monday night in a Zoom call with reporters.

The Hawks named Nate McMillan interim coach. McMillan, the former Indiana Pacers coach, was added to Pierce's staff in the offseason. McMillan has a 661-588 record with Seattle, Portland and Indiana.

McMillan filled in for Pierce when Pierce was recently away

from the team while his wife was giving birth. The Hawks were 2-1 with McMillan during Pierce's absence.

Atlanta was Pierce's first job as a head coach. He was previously an assistant with Philadelphia, Memphis, Golden State and Cleveland.

Schlenk said he timed the move to help the team have a second-half resurgence.

"As we said at the beginning of the season, our goal was to have progress this year to move forward," Schlenk said. "We just felt that wasn't happening as quickly as we wanted."

The Hawks last appeared in the playoffs in 2017. The team has rebuilt around point guard

Trae Young and forward John Collins and invested heavily in veterans in the offseason.

Key additions include Bogdan Bogdanovic, Danilo Gallinari, Rajon Rondo and Kris Dunn. The Hawks' talent also received a major upgrade with the addition of center Clint Capela.

The Hawks had free-agent money to spend, and Schlenk wasted no time in adding Gallinari (three years, \$61.5 million), Rondo (two years, \$15 million) and Dunn (two years, \$10 million). Dunn has yet to play, due to his ongoing recovery from ankle surgery. Bogdanovic has missed 25 games. Gallinari has missed nine games.

# Necas lifts Hurricanes over Panthers

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Martin Necas scored 1:59 into overtime and the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Florida Panthers 3-2 on Monday night.

Brett Pesce and Vincent Trocheck also scored for the Hurricanes, who won at Florida for the second time in three days. Alex Nedeljkovic had a career-high 44 saves.

Frank Vatrano and Eetu Loustarinen scored in the third period to give the Panthers the lead, and Chris Driedger finished with 24 saves. Florida has lost three of four.

**Senators 5, Flames 1:** Drake Batherson scored twice in Ottawa's victory over visiting Calgary, giving him six straight games with a goal.

Artem Anisimov and Evgenii Dadanov also scored for the Senators, and Colin White had an empty-net goal. Tim Stutzle contributed two assists to help Ottawa (8-15-1) win for the fourth time in five games.

The 22-year-old Batherson has seven goals in his last six games. He matched Jason Spezza for the longest goal

streak in franchise history.

Matt Murray, pulled from Saturday's 6-3 loss to the Flames, stopped 27 shots for the win.

Milan Lucic scored for Calgary (10-11-2) in the finale of a six-game, 10-day road trip. David Rittich made 31 saves in his fifth consecutive start.

**Canucks 4, Jets 0:** Thatcher Demko stopped 27 shots for his first career shutout and Vancouver scored three times in the first period in a win at Winnipeg.

Nate Schmidt, J.T. Miller and Nils Hoglander had early goals to help the Canucks end a four-game losing streak (0-3-1). Elias Pettersson added an empty-netter.

Connor Hellebuyck made 15 saves for the Jets, who had won four straight.

**Blues 5, Ducks 4:** Dakota Joshua scored in his NHL debut and Zach Sanford got two goals to lead St. Louis to a win at Anaheim.

Jordan Kyrou and David Perron also scored for the Blues, who won for the second time in five games. Ville Husso made

29 saves in the same arena where he earned his first NHL victory on Jan. 31.

Isac Lundeström scored three goals for the Ducks, whose winless skid stretched to a season-worst seven games.

**Golden Knights 5, Wild 4 (OT):** Max Pacioretty scored twice, including the winner in overtime, to lift host Vegas over Minnesota.

The Golden Knights erased a two-goal deficit in the third period and won a matchup between the West Division's top two teams.

After Alex Tuch scored the tying goal with 42 seconds left in regulation, it was Pacioretty punching home the winner after captain Mark Stone fed him with his fifth primary assist of the game.

Cody Glass and Nic Hague also scored for Vegas. Marc-Andre Fleury, making his ninth straight start, had 26 saves and improved to 10-3-0.

Marcus Foligno scored twice, and Jordan Greenway and Nick Bonino also had goals for the Wild.

**Sharks 6, Avalanche 2:** Erik

Karlsson scored for the first time this season during a four-goal third period that helped host San Jose roll past Colorado.

Rudolfs Balcers broke a tie early in the third, John Leonard scored on a breakaway and Evander Kane added an empty-netter as the Sharks pulled away to beat the Avalanche for the first time in three tries this season. Timo Meier assisted on the first three goals in the third.

Radim Simek and Kevin Labanc also scored for San Jose, and Martin Jones made 33 saves.

**Maple Leafs 3, Oilers 0:** Michael Hutchinson stopped 31 shots for his sixth career shutout as Toronto won at Edmonton.

Morgan Rielly and William Nylander each had a goal and an assist, and Zach Hyman also scored. The Maple Leafs blanked the Oilers for the second straight game, following a 4-0 win Saturday.

Mikko Koskinen allowed three goals on 10 shots before being replaced by Mike Smith to start the second period.

# Cunningham caps Cowboys' sweep of Sooners

Associated Press

STILLWATER, Okla. — As freshman star Cade Cunningham soaked in the cheers following Oklahoma State's win over Oklahoma on Monday night, the home fans at Gallagher-Iba Arena chanted, "One more year!"

He's not coming back — he was introduced with the seniors and is projected by many to be the top pick in this year's NBA Draft. And when the game was on the line, it was easy to see why he's on his way out. Cunningham scored 13 of his 15 points in the final 10 minutes to help the 17th-ranked Cowboys defeat No. 16 Oklahoma 79-75.

Cunningham had 40 points in Saturday's 94-90 overtime win at Oklahoma. This time, the 6-foot-8 point guard was a decoy much of the night but finished strong.

"Cade just takes the pressure off the rest of us," Oklahoma State guard Bryce Williams said. "He's got so much pressure on him, but it's not really pressure to him. He can handle the situation. But he's got a team behind him that can back him up every day."

Kalib Boone had 17 points and nine rebounds, and Williams scored 14 for the Cowboys (17-6, 10-6 Big 12), who won their fifth straight game overall and

earned their third consecutive win over a ranked opponent.

Brady Manek had 20 points and Austin Reaves added 19 for Oklahoma (14-8, 9-7), which lost its third straight after climbing to No. 7 in the AP Top 25.

**No. 21 Virginia 62, Miami 51:** Sam Hauser scored 18 points and the host Cavaliers ended a three-game skid by handing the Hurricanes their sixth loss in a row.

Trey Murphy III added 12 points for Virginia (16-6, 12-4 Atlantic Coast Conference), which took command with a 14-2 run to end the first half.

Kameron McGusty scored 14 points and Elijah Olaniyi had 12

for Miami (7-16, 3-15).

**Syracuse 72, North Carolina 70:** Buddy Boeheim scored 26 to become a 1,000-point career scorer and the host Orange breathed some life into their NCAA Tournament hopes by holding on to beat the Tar Heels.

Syracuse was up 14 with 5:18 to play, 10 with less than two minutes to go and eight going into the final minute before it turned into a nail biter.

**Colorado State 74, Air Force 44:** David Roddy had 22 points and 12 rebounds as the host Rams easily beat the Falcons.

Isaiah Stevens had 15 points for Colorado State (16-4, 13-3 Mountain West Conference).