

## Biden open to war powers change

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Friday signaled support to replace decades-old authorizations for the use of military force in the Middle East, a little more than a week after he relied on the authorizations to carry out a retaliatory airstrike against Iranian-backed militia in eastern Syria.

The Biden administration announced its position after a bipartisan bill was introduced earlier this week that would repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the wars in Iraq that presidents from both parties have relied on for legal justification to carry out strikes in the region.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden was committed to working with Congress to “ensure that the authorizations for the use of military force currently on the books are replaced with a narrow and specific framework that will ensure we can protect Americans from terrorist threats while

ending the forever wars.”

Biden spurred bipartisan backlash last week after he ordered the strikes against facilities used by Kataeb Hezbollah. The strikes were in response to a rocket attack earlier in February targeting U.S. troops and civilian personnel in northern Iraq without first seeking congressional approval. The U.S. has blamed the militia for numerous attacks targeting U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq in the past.

Sen. Tim Kaine, a lead sponsor of the bill, said the reliance on the decades-old authorizations for use of military force “serve no operational purpose, keep us on permanent war footing, and undermine the sovereignty of Iraq.”

“Last week’s airstrikes in Syria show that the Executive Branch, regardless of party, will continue to stretch its war powers,” said Kaine, a Virginia Democrat.

Administration officials defended the airstrikes as legal and appropriate, saying they

took out facilities that housed valuable “capabilities” used by Iranian-backed militia groups to attack American and allied forces in Iraq.

But several leading members of Congress, including members in Biden’s own party, denounced the strikes — the first military action he has authorized. Kaine and others argued offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional absent extraordinary circumstances.

The White House signaled support to replace the authorizations even as it warned the U.S. may consider military action following a rocket attack earlier this week that hit an air base in western Iraq where American and coalition troops are housed. A U.S. contractor died after at least 10 rockets slammed into the base early Wednesday.

“If we assess further response is warranted, we will take action again in a manner and time of our choosing,” Psaki said.

## Most military families to be eligible for vaccine in April

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department rollout of its coronavirus vaccine effort will expand to most military families and service members starting in April, Army Lt. Gen. Ronald Place, the director of the Defense Health Agency, said Thursday.

The announcement was made during a virtual town hall hosted by Blue Star Families and the American Red Cross for military families about the coronavirus and the availability of vaccines. Military and civilian health care officials were invited to provide answers to questions on a range of issues including the safety of the vaccines.

About one-third of troops who have been offered the vaccine have declined to receive it, Robert Salesses, the Pentagon’s homeland defense chief, told lawmakers last month. Since the vaccine is only authorized on an emergency basis, the Pentagon cannot mandate that service members take it. The military services and the Pentagon

have been encouraging people to get vaccinated through social media and other messaging campaigns. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin even spoke about the importance of learning the facts about the safety of the vaccine in a video message that ran during the town hall.

“Speaking as a physician, the safety and effectiveness of the approved vaccines is exceptional. And every passing week, the evidence only grows stronger,” Place said regarding people’s hesitancy to be vaccinated.

The Defense Department is following a tiered approach to vaccinating service members, civilian workers, and families. Most locations are now in Phases 1B and 1C, which includes deploying service members, front-line workers such as commissary staff, and people who are 65 and older, Place said.

Vaccines are now available at 335 sites around the world, including in deployed locations and on ships, he said.

Phase 2 is for the remaining military community who were not identified in earlier phases. While a few locations have already moved to Phase 2, a “significant number” of Defense Department locations will move to Phase 2 in April, Place said.

All beneficiaries can access the vaccine for free from either the Defense Department or any vaccination site such as a pharmacy, he said.

Ahead of the military moving season that usually starts in spring, Place said families who are moving will not be prioritized because they will be able to access the vaccine no matter where they are moving to or from. When they are vaccinated will depend on which tier and phase that they fall under for receiving it.

Elementary school-aged children can start receiving the vaccine in the first quarter of 2022 once the data from safety studies is available, said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

# US strikes down rockets in attack on Iraqi base

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A U.S. defensive system protecting U.S. and coalition forces at an Iraqi air base that came under attack this week struck down three or four incoming rockets before they hit, a defense official told McClatchy on Thursday.

Al-Asad airbase in Iraq is a large training and logistics hub for U.S. and coalition forces. It was targeted by approximately 10 short-range rockets on Wednesday, resulting in the death of one U.S. contractor who had a heart attack while sheltering from the attack.

Al-Asad's Counter-Rocket, Artillery, Mortar (C-RAM) missile defensive system

“engaged” with the incoming rounds and early assessments indicate it hit three or four of the 122 mm rockets, the official said on condition of anonymity.

There were 10 known locations where the base was hit, the official said, and it was not clear if more than 10 rockets were fired, or if the rockets that were struck down by C-RAM were responsible for some of the ground damage.

The Defense Department has not said who is responsible for the attack, and Iraqi officials are still investigating it.

President Joe Biden on Wednesday pledged to identify who is responsible for the attacks and hold them responsible.

# Miller becomes longest-serving commander of Afghanistan War

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

KABUL, Afghanistan — Gen. Austin “Scott” Miller on Friday marked 915 days as head of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan, making him the longest-serving commander of America’s longest war.

“The world recognizes we cannot fail,” Miller said when he was sworn in as the 17<sup>th</sup> commander overseeing the U.S. and NATO mission on Sept. 2, 2018, taking over from Gen. John Nicholson, who was at the helm for 914 days.

Since then, Miller, who turns 60 in May, played a key role in a historic deal with the Taliban and has overseen a U.S. drawdown amid rising violence among Afghans.

But under the Army general’s command, transparency about the U.S.’s actions in the war has shrunk while territory under Taliban control has grown to reach the highest level since the U.S.’s arrival in 2001.

The former leader of Joint Special Operations Command has mostly remained out of the public eye during his time in Afghanistan. But within weeks of assuming command, he made headlines when he escaped an attack in Kandahar that killed provincial

police chief Gen. Abdul Raziq and wounded several others, including Army Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Smiley. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

One of Miller’s tasks during his tenure has been to maintain the Afghan government’s trust in the United States. That was shaken early when the Trump administration excluded Kabul from talks with the Taliban, which began in late 2018 — around the same time then-President Donald Trump announced plans to slash the number of U.S. troops fighting overseas, including in Afghanistan.

Miller brought a no-nonsense military attitude to the table when he attended the talks with the Taliban in Qatar and showed himself to be “a skilled negotiator,” a U.S. administration official who was at the talks said.

Afghan forces respect him because of the bonds he’s built during multiple deployments, First Deputy Defense Minister Shah Mahmood Miakhel said.

But Miller’s legacy in Afghanistan depends on what happens in the coming months and how, or if, the U.S. withdraws while he’s in command.

# China boosting defense spending by 6.8% in 2021

Associated Press

BEIJING — China is increasing its defense spending by 6.8% in 2021 as it works to maintain a robust upgrading of the armed forces despite high government debt and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

A national budget report issued Friday said China would spend \$210 billion on defense in the coming year.

That’s up from \$180 billion last year representing a 6.6% boost, the lowest percentage increase in at least two decades.

The military budget has dipped during periods of slower economic growth, but has also been dropping steadily from the double-digit percentage increases over years as the increasingly powerful military matures and rapid expansion of what is already the world’s second largest defense budget is no longer required.

The lavish spending increases of years past have given China the second-largest defense budget in the world behind the U.S. With 3 million troops, the world’s largest standing military has been steadily adding aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines and stealth fighters to its arsenal.

The government says most of the spending increases go toward improving pay and other conditions for troops while observers say the budget omits much of China’s spending on weaponry, most of it developed domestically. China’s military is largely designed to maintain its threat to use force to bring Taiwan under its control, although it has also grown more assertive in the South China Sea, the Western Pacific, Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

The U.S., whose defense spending is estimated to run to about \$934 billion between Oct. 1, 2020, and Sept. 30, 2021, has complained of a lack of transparency in China’s defense programs, fueling speculation that Beijing aims to supplant America as the primary military power in East Asia.

The People’s Liberation Army exercises a strong political role as the military branch of the ruling Communist Party. President and party leader Xi Jinping heads the government and party commissions that oversee the armed forces.

# Dems compromise on aid for jobless

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Democrats agreed Friday to pare back emergency jobless benefits but extend them for an extra month, bidding to solidify support as the Senate approached a voting marathon on a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill.

The deal came as the chamber worked toward approving a final version of the massive package, probably over the weekend, of President Joe Biden's top legislative priority. That would give the House time to approve the legislation and whisk it to Biden for his signature.

First, the Senate was preparing to vote on a mountain of amendments, mostly by GOP opponents. Virtually all are destined to fail but are designed to force Democrats to take politically awkward votes.

Among them, though, was a Democratic plan that was expected to pass that would trim the House bill's \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefits.

Under the compromise, those payments — payable on top of regular state benefits — would be reduced to \$300, but run an extra month through September. Taxes also would be reduced on unemployment benefits. A Senate Democratic aide provided details of the deal on condition of anonymity.

Biden and Senate leaders had agreed Wednesday to retain the House bill's higher \$400 version. The reduction to \$300 seemed to reflect a need to secure support for the overall bill, particularly from moderate Democrats.

Republicans are attacking the bill as a liberal spend-fest that ignores that growing num-

bers of vaccinations and signs of a stirring economy suggest that the twin crises are easing.

"Our country is already set for a roaring recovery," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., in part citing an unexpectedly strong report on job creation. "Democrats inherited a tide that was already turning."

Democrats reject that, citing the 10 million jobs the economy has lost during the pandemic and numerous people still struggling to buy food and pay rent.

"If you just look at a big number you say, 'Oh, everything's getting a little better,'" said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "It's not for the lower half of America. It's not."

## Lawmakers request briefings on Guard need

BY SARAH CAMMARATA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Some lawmakers on Thursday called for congressional briefings on possible threats to the Capitol following reports that police have requested an extension of the National Guard deployment in Washington.

"Before any extension for National Guard presence is finalized, lawmakers should be briefed on the latest intelligence threat assessments to determine the necessity of keeping our service members away from their families and full-time jobs," Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla., a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said in a prepared statement. He said the Guard is need-

ed for other missions such as coronavirus vaccine distribution and natural disaster deployments.

Waltz's comments followed a report by The Associated Press that the Capitol Police have requested a 60-day extension of the Guard deployment that is scheduled to end March 12. The report came as the Capitol was on high alert after Capitol Police said Wednesday that it "obtained intelligence that shows a possible plot to breach the Capitol by an identified militia group on Thursday."

Yet some lawmakers slammed the possibility of keeping troops deployed in Washington.

Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Com-

mittee, told Capitol Hill pool reporters that the request is "outrageous."

"That's not their function, that's not their mission," he said of the Guard troops. "They cannot do it. All of our employed people, all of the thousands of employers who would be forced to do something that they financially couldn't do. It's destroying careers of people. That's not what they're supposed to be."

A defense official on Thursday acknowledged the Pentagon received the request from the police force, but said it was a "draft" and the details of the proposal have not been finalized.

A spokesperson for the Capitol Police did not immediately return a request Thursday seeking comment.

## Dallas cop charged; hitman says he arranged killings

*Associated Press*

DALLAS — A Dallas police officer was arrested Thursday on two counts of capital murder, more than a year and a half after a man told investigators that he kidnapped and killed two people at the officer's instruction in 2017, authorities said.

Bryan Riser, a 13-year veteran of the force, was arrested Thursday morning and taken to the Dallas County jail for processing, according to a statement from the police department.

Riser was arrested in the unconnected killings of Liza Saenz, 31, and Albert Douglas, 61, after a man came forward in August 2019 and

told police he had kidnapped and killed them at Riser's direction, police Chief Eddie Garcia said during a news conference. He said investigators don't know the motives for the killings, but that they were not related to Riser's police work.

Garcia did not explain why Riser was arrested nearly 20 months after the witness came forward, and police declined to answer subsequent questions about the timing. Riser joined the department in 2008, and Garcia acknowledged that he had been patrolling Dallas while under investigation for the killings.

The chief stressed that his homicide divi-

sion and the FBI were still investigating and said the department was reviewing Riser's arrests.

Saenz's body was pulled from the Trinity River in southwest Dallas on March 10, 2017, with several bullet wounds, the chief said. Douglas was reported missing that year and his body hasn't been found.

Riser has been put on administrative leave pending the outcome of an internal affairs investigation. Garcia said "we're going to expedite our process" toward his firing.

"We will not allow anyone to tarnish this badge," the chief said.

# Reports: NY officials changed nursing home death count

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Top aides to Gov. Andrew Cuomo altered a state Health Department report to obscure the true number of people killed by COVID-19 in the state's nursing homes, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times reported late Thursday.

The aides, including the secretary to the governor, Melissa DeRosa, pushed state health officials to edit the July report so only residents who died inside long-term care facilities, and not those who became ill there and later died at a hospital, were counted, the newspapers reported, citing documents and people with knowledge of the administration's internal discussions.

The report was designed and released to rebut criticism of Cuomo over a March 25 directive that barred nursing homes from rejecting recovering coronavirus patients being discharged from hospitals. Some nursing homes complained at the time that the policy could help spread the virus.

The report concluded the policy played no role in spreading infection.

The state's analysis was based partly on what officials acknowledged at the time was an imprecise statistic. The report said 6,432 people had died in the state's nursing homes.

State officials acknowledged that the true number of deaths was higher because of the exclusion of patients who died in hospitals, but they declined at the time to give any estimate of that larger number of deaths, saying the numbers still needed to be verified.

The Times and Journal reported that, in fact, the original drafts of the report had included that number, then more than 9,200 deaths, until Cuomo's aides said it should be taken out.

State officials insisted Thursday that the edits were made because of concerns about accuracy, not to protect Cuomo's reputation.

"While early versions of the report included out of facility

deaths, the COVID task force was not satisfied that the data had been verified against hospital data and so the final report used only data for in facility deaths, which was disclosed in the report," said Department of Health spokesperson Gary Holmes.

## California

SACRAMENTO — California will begin sending 40% of all vaccine doses to the most vulnerable neighborhoods in the state to try to inoculate people most at risk from the coronavirus and get the state's economy open more quickly, Gov. Gavin Newsom said Thursday in the latest shake-up to the state's rules.

The doses will be spread among 400 ZIP codes where there are about 8 million people eligible for shots, said Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state's health and human services secretary. Many of the neighborhoods are in Los Angeles County and the central valley, which have had among the highest rates of infection.

The areas are considered most vulnerable based on metrics such as household income, education level and access to health care. Newsom said that not only is this the right thing to do, it's critical to opening up more of the state's economy.

## Alabama

MONTGOMERY — Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey has faced political pressure and angry constituents over her state's mask order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the 76-year-old governor of the deeply red state has resisted calls to drop the requirement as Republican governors across the South either shunned mask mandates altogether or lifted them in late winter.

"Maybe they don't have access to the same information I have. We want to be abundantly clear and abundantly safe before we drop the mask mandate," Ivey said when asked about fellow Republicans — including the Alabama Senate and the lieutenant governor — who urged her to end the order.

Ivey issued Alabama's mask

order in July and announced on Thursday that she would extend it five more weeks until April 9.

## Oregon

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said Thursday that starting next week counties that have moved out of the COVID-19 extreme risk level will not be moved back into it without giving them two weeks to improve their case numbers.

The temporary freeze also will allow businesses to avoid abrupt closures and major changes in how they do business. If case numbers don't improve in those two weeks, however, the county will move backward.

"Recognizing the challenges businesses encounter when facing a switch back and forth between Extreme Risk and other risk levels, this two-week extension will alleviate some of these challenges and give counties a bit more time to bring case rates down," she said in an emailed statement. "As always, businesses and community members should continue to make smart choices and follow statewide and county-specific health and safety guidance."

## Ohio

COLUMBUS — Gov. Mike DeWine on Thursday set a specific target of reduced coronavirus cases as the benchmark for ending public health orders in Ohio, including mask wearing.

Those orders will be lifted once the state hits the mark of 50 coronavirus cases per 100,000 people for two weeks, DeWine said. He called the goal "very doable," noting that that figure has already dropped from 731 cases on Dec. 3 to 445 cases on Feb. 3, and to 179 cases on Thursday.

But meeting that goal requires continued mask wearing for now and for as many people to receive the coronavirus vaccine as possible, DeWine said. The state now has supplies of vaccines from Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson.

## Florida

MIAMI — Florida Gov. Ron

DeSantis and state health officials came under deeper scrutiny amid revelations that seniors in a wealthy enclave in Key Largo received hundreds of life-saving vaccinations as early as mid-January, giving ammunition to critics who say the Republican governor is favoring wealthy constituents over ordinary Floridians.

The revelations were the latest example of wealthy Floridians getting earlier access to coronavirus vaccines, even as the state has lagged in efforts to get poorer residents vaccinated.

DeSantis pushed back Thursday, saying a local hospital — not the state — was behind the vaccinations of more than 1,200 residents of the exclusive Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, and that the state "wasn't involved in it in any shape or form."

Despite the governor's denials of quid pro quos, the charges of favoritism were amplified by money pouring into the governor's campaign coffers from wealthy benefactors with ties to communities awarded vaccination sites — like the one in Key Largo. One resident of Ocean Reef, Republican former Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner, last week gave the Florida governor's campaign committee \$250,000.

## Connecticut

HARTFORD — Connecticut will be relaxing many coronavirus-related restrictions in two weeks on businesses, theaters, churches and travel but will be keeping the statewide mask mandate, Gov. Ned Lamont said Thursday while citing declining infections and hospitalization and increasing vaccinations.

An array of changes will take effect March 19, such as making the state's restrictions for incoming travelers — including a 10-day quarantine — an advisory rather than mandatory.

Also, capacity limits will be eliminated on restaurants, libraries, museums, aquariums, gyms, retail stores, hair salons and churches. Restaurants will still have to close their dining rooms at 11 p.m. and seat no more than eight people per table.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Kangaroo captured after slipping its keepers

**AL** WINFIELD — A young kangaroo who slipped away from his keepers as he was being hauled to a new home has been captured.

The Winfield Police Department, in a post Wednesday on its Facebook page, said Jack, the 3 ½ year old kangaroo escaped Monday. He was seen in cell-phone video heartily hopping down a country road in Winfield, al.com reported.

“For those interested in Jack the Kangaroo, he has been caught and is doing well,” Winfield Police’s social media post said.

The animal was being taken from south Mississippi to its new home in Tennessee, said Braxton Basinger of B & H Livestock.

Basinger stopped at his home in Winfield and planned to keep the kangaroo there until he made the final delivery Thursday. The kangaroo escaped when a worker let go of it while taking it out of the trailer, he said.

### Bill would designate gun stores as essential firms

**AZ** PHOENIX — The Arizona Senate has voted to designate gun stores as essential businesses allowed to remain open during an emergency.

Republicans sent the measure to the House in a 16-14 party-line vote on Wednesday.

Republican Sen. Wendy Rogers says the right to keep and bear arms must be protected, especially during emergencies.

Democratic Sen. Martin Quezada says the Legislature has much bigger priorities during

the pandemic, such as ensuring people get access to unemployment insurance and don’t lose their homes.

### City believed to be first to ban new gas stations

**CA** PETALUMA — A Northern California city has become what’s believed to be the first in the country to ban all new gas stations in an effort to curb carbon emissions.

The Petaluma City Council voted unanimously to prohibit the creation, expansion, reconstruction and relocation of gas stations, encouraging owners to transition to stations that serve electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles, the San Francisco Chronicle reported.

The city of 58,000 people 40 miles north of San Francisco hopes to become carbon neutral by 2030.

### Driver swerves to miss falling couch, gets ticket

**FL** FORT LAUDERDALE — A couple driving home from Florida flipped and wrecked their car while swerving to avoid a couch that fell off a truck. And though both escaped serious injury, there was no avoiding a \$166 traffic ticket dropped off at the hospital where they were treated.

Jake Singer told the South Florida SunSentinel that his girlfriend was driving Feb. 20 on Interstate 95 as they returned to Washington, D.C., after a month-long visit with family in Boca Raton.

Singer said his girlfriend swerved to avoid the couch and that their 2006 Toyota Corolla struck the median and flipped over — and the truck kept going.

The car was totaled and both were taken to the hospital in ambulances, he said, lucky to have survived. But then a Florida Highway Patrol trooper showed up at the hospital to deliver the traffic ticket for “failing to drive in a single lane,” according to the agency’s crash report.

“He gave us a ticket for basically swerving lanes while trying to avoid a couch that was flying at us on the highway,” Singer told the newspaper.

### Man delivering new bus suffers injury in rollover

**ND** CHURCHS FERRY — Authorities said a man who was delivering a new bus to a school in Canada suffered a minor injury Wednesday morning after the bus rolled over several times on a highway in northeastern North Dakota.

The North Dakota Highway Patrol says Toronado Watson, 50, of Winston-Salem, N.C., fell asleep shortly after 9 a.m. while driving a 2022 Thomas school bus west on U.S. Highway 2 near Churchs Ferry.

The patrol says Watson tried to gain control of the bus after running off the road but overcorrected and wound up rolling it in the north ditch. Watson, who was the sole occupant of the bus, was wearing his seatbelt. He was transported to a Devils Lake hospital for treatment.

### Man catches 9 ½ foot bluefin tuna off coast

**NC** NAGS HEAD — A Virginia man has reeled in a 9 ½ foot bluefin tuna off the coast of North Carolina.

The Virginian-Pilot reported Tuesday that Josiah VanFleet of Toano had caught the fish about

45 miles off the coast of Nags Head on Feb. 24.

VanFleet, who has a bathroom and kitchen remodeling business, said it’s the biggest fish he ever caught.

He told the newspaper that the U.S. Coast Guard helped measure the fish and put it at an estimated 1,000 pounds. North Carolina’s current record is 877 pounds. But an estimated weight is not enough for the record books.

VanFleet caught the fish using a 22-foot Grady-White boat. He said it took seven adults and a second boat to complete the job.

### Sonoran desert tortoises are up for adoption

**AZ** PHOENIX — Wanted: Forever homes for more than 100 Sonoran desert tortoises that can grow to 14 inches and live as long as 100 years.

Due primarily to illegal breeding, Arizona Game and Fish Department officials said they have several tortoises of various ages and sizes available for adoption.

Tegan Wolf, desert tortoise adoption program coordinator for the department, said only one tortoise can be adopted per person and per household.

But an additional tortoise of the same sex can be adopted if it’s placed in a completely separate enclosure as the reptiles can be territorial.

Adopters must have a securely enclosed yard and construct a burrow to protect the tortoise from potential hazards such as a fire pit, unfenced pool or dogs.

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# Hornets owner thrilled with play of Ball

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Rookie LaMelo Ball has seized the attention of the NBA this season with his highlight reel passes and a surprising ability to score, including Charlotte Hornets owner Michael Jordan.

The six-time NBA champion said when the Hornets selected Ball with the No. 3 overall pick they hoped the crafty 6-foot-6 point guard would eventually rise to the level of becoming an All-Star.

Jordan likes the way Ball is trending.

"I think Melo has adjusted to the NBA game better than any of us ever thought this early in his career," The 2009 Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame inductee told The Associated Press in an email. "He has exceeded our expectations so far this season."

Ball leads all rookies in most statistical categories, including points (15.8), assists (6.3), rebounds (6) and steals (1.6) per game.

More importantly, Ball's game — which includes an array of slick, needle-threading passes — has brought some needed pizzazz and star potential to a franchise mired in obscurity for years. The Hornets are 17-18 entering the All-Star break, just a game behind the fourth-place Boston Celtics in the ultra-tight Eastern Conference.

"He's the real deal," Jazz guard Donovan Mitchell said.

Warriors forward Draymond Green recently tweeted "La-Melo is a problem!"

"Right now, with the way things look, he looks like NBA rookie of the year to me," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said. "He's getting it done statistically, their team is winning. He's got energy, he's got a vibe, he's got swagger. If you like watching players that play with flair, he's right up there."

Ball, who grew up watching Penny Hardaway and Jamal Crawford highlights, sees things on the court most players don't.

He regularly delivers on-time behind-the-back passes leading to transition layups, kick-outs for open three-pointers and alley-oop lobbs for dunks off the pick-and-roll, many of those going to high-flying Miles Bridges, earning the duo the nickname "AirBnB."

Ball's impact with the Hornets was almost immediate, becoming the youngest player in NBA history to record a triple-double in just his 10th NBA game. Still, it took 20 games before Hornets coach James Borrego inserted him into the starting lineup following an injury to Devonte Graham.

It's unlikely Ball is giving up the position anytime soon.

The 19-year-old has only elevated his game in 15 starts, averaging 20.6 points, 6.6 assists and 6.2 rebounds and has already won NBA rookie of the month twice.

"Me being me, I'm never going to say putting me on the bench was something smart or good to do," Ball said. "It al-

ways feels like when I'm on the court I'm helping. ... But I think one of the reasons is because we didn't have no summer league, so he probably wanted to ease me into it."

Before the NBA draft three where were concerns about Ball's unorthodox shooting form with a lower release point than most. He's proven doubters wrong by finding ways to create his own shot while making 37.8% from beyond the arc.

"Man, he's good," Mitchell said. "I'm not going to lie, I'm very impressed with his play-making ability, his competitiveness, but his joy. ... He's very talented; he can do many different things."

Ball said he wants to add some muscle to his frame and Jordan added "we believe that he will continue to work and get better as a player."

Ball's long-term NBA goal is simple, if not lofty: he wants to be a Hall of Famer like Jordan.

Nothing would please Jordan more.

## Randle, Knicks top Pistons, head into break above .500

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Julius Randle capped his All-Star first half with 27 points, 16 rebounds and seven assists, sending the New York Knicks into the break with a winning record after a 114-104 victory over the Detroit Pistons on Thursday night.

RJ Barrett added 21 points to help the Knicks improve to 19-18 in their first season under Tom Thibodeau. They have missed the playoffs for seven straight years but finished the first half in fifth place in the Eastern Conference.

Wayne Ellington scored 17 points for the Pistons.

**Trail Blazers 123, Kings 119:** Damian Lillard had 44 points, including 10 straight at a key moment down the stretch, to help

Portland beat visiting Sacramento.

Lillard made eight three-pointers. The Trail Blazers have won three straight heading into the All-Star break.

De'Aaron Fox had 32 points, 12 assists and eight rebounds for Sacramento.

**Suns 120, Warriors 98:** Cameron Payne scored 17 points, Devin Booker added 16 and host Phoenix easily handled short-handed Golden State.

The Suns enter the All-Star break second in the NBA at 24-11, winning 16 of 19 dating to Jan. 28.

**Wizards 119, Clippers 117:** Bradley Beal scored 33 points and Washington won while Los Angeles All-Star Paul George was a late scratch on the road.

Russell Westbrook had 27 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds for the Wizards. They have won eight of 11 heading into the All-Star break.

**Celtics 132, Raptors 125:** Jayson Tatum had 27 points and 12 rebounds and host Boston won its fourth straight game, outlasting short-handed Toronto.

Jaylen Brown added 21 points and seven rebounds, and Kemba Walker finished with 15 points.

**Bucks 112, Grizzlies 111:** Jrue Holiday hit a baseline jumper with two seconds remaining and visiting Milwaukee escaped with the victory over Memphis.

Rookie Desmond Bane had a final chance for the Grizzlies, but his three-pointer hit the

front of the rim, giving the Bucks their sixth victory in seven games.

**Heat 103, Pelicans 93:** Jimmy Butler had 29 points and nine assists and Miami took advantage of Zion Williamson's absence to beat host New Orleans.

Brandon Ingram scored 17 points for New Orleans. Williamson was scratched because of a toe injury.

**Nuggets 113, Pacers 103:** Nikola Jokic had 20 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists, Michael Porter Jr. also scored 24 points and visiting Denver beat Indiana.

**Thunder 107, Spurs 102:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 33 points and Oklahoma City rallied in the second half to beat host San Antonio.

# James, Durant choose All-Star teams

Associated Press

LeBron James has faced Giannis Antetokounmpo as an opponent in the last three All-Star Games.

The Los Angeles Lakers' star got him as a teammate this year.

James used the No. 1 overall pick on Antetokounmpo — the NBA's two-time reigning MVP from Milwaukee — in the draft for Sunday's All-Star Game in Atlanta. Kevin Durant, who will not play in the All-Star Game because of injury but still is the captain for Team Durant, took Brooklyn teammate Kyrie Irving with his first pick.

The other starters for Team LeBron will be Stephen Curry of Golden State, Luka Doncic of Dallas and Nikola Jokic of Denver. The other starters for Team Durant will be Joel Embiid of Philadelphia, 2020 All-Star MVP Kawhi Leonard of the Clippers, Bradley Beal of Washington and Jayson Tatum of Boston.

This is the fourth year of the NBA's playing captain format for the All-Star Game. James is

3-0, beating teams captained by Curry in 2018 and Antetokounmpo in the last two seasons.

"I just try to pick players that can complement one another," James said during the draft that was taped Wednesday and aired Thursday night on TNT. "When we're on the floor, we'll try to play the game the right way. It's the All-Star Game, so there's going to be some shenanigans out there. But for the majority of the game, we're going to try to play the right way and come out with a win."

Durant had the first pick of the reserve round and took another Brooklyn teammate, James Harden with the opening selection there. James' first pick among the reserves was Damian Lillard of Portland, Durant followed by taking Devin Booker of Phoenix, and James countered by selecting Ben Simmons of Philadelphia.

"I wanted Ben Simmons. I wanted Ben," Durant said.

The remaining Team Durant subs: Zion Williamson of New

Orleans, Zach LaVine of Chicago, Julius Randle of New York, Nikola Vucevic of Orlando and Donovan Mitchell of Utah. James' final selections were Chris Paul of Phoenix, Jaylen Brown of Boston, Paul George of the Los Angeles Clippers, Domantas Sabonis of Indiana and Rudy Gobert of Utah.

Mitchell and Gobert, respectively, were the last two players taken despite being the only All-Stars from the Jazz — who hit the break an NBA-best 27-9.

"This is slander, America," TNT analyst Charles Barkley said during the taping.

Durant took Mitchell, which left Gobert to James as the final selection. And James did his best to diffuse what he knows will inevitably be a topic of conversation — how the Jazz got snubbed during the draft.

"Listen, I just want to say something," James said. "There's no slander. There's no slander to the Utah Jazz. But you guys got to understand, just like in video games growing up, we

never played with Utah. Even as great as Karl Malone and John Stockton was, we never picked those guys in video games. Never."

The NBA and the National Basketball Players Association have committed more than \$3 million to aid historically Black institutions as part of All-Star Sunday, with at least \$1.75 million coming from the game itself.

Team LeBron will play on behalf of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. Team Durant will play for the United Negro College Fund. Both organizations will receive \$500,000 to start, and the winners of the first, second and third quarters will collect another \$150,000. The team that reaches the target score first and wins the game will get \$300,000 more.

"It's an honor that we get to represent so many people and use this platform to help advance education, our youth, just the world in general," Durant said.

## Michigan finally wraps up Big Ten championship

Associated Press

Franz Wagner scored 19 points, Hunter Dickinson added 14 and No. 2 Michigan wrapped up the Big Ten title with a 69-50 victory over rival Michigan State on Thursday night.

The Wolverines (19-2, 14-2) had a chance to clinch the championship based on winning percentage with a victory in any of their final three games. They were blown out by No. 4 Illinois — the team chasing them — on Tuesday night, but they rebounded with a gritty effort two nights later.

Michigan went on a 9-2 run to take a 39-28 lead into halftime. The Wolverines later went on a 25-4 tear that spanned much of the second half.

Aaron Henry scored 14

points for Michigan State (14-11, 8-11), which will finish with a losing conference record for the first time since 1993. It had never happened before under coach Tom Izzo, and the Spartans are struggling to extend Izzo's streak of 22 straight NCAA Tournament appearances.

**No. 3 Baylor 81, No. 17 Oklahoma State 70:** Jared Butler scored 22 points and the host Bears, fresh off clinching their first Big 12 title on the road two days earlier, ended the Cowboys' five-game winning streak.

Baylor (20-1, 12-1 Big 12) seems to have its legs back under it after a three-week stretch without any games because of COVID-19 issues in the program.

**No. 5 Iowa 102, Nebraska 64:** Jordan Bohannon tied a career high with eight three-pointers and scored 26 points, and the host Hawkeyes beat the Cornhuskers.

Freshman Patrick McCaffery had a career-high 19 points for Iowa (19-7, 13-6 Big Ten). Luka Garza had 14 points for the Hawkeyes, who topped 100 points for the fourth time this season.

**No. 6 West Virginia 76, TCU 67:** Redshirt freshman Jalen Bridges set seasons highs with 22 points and 12 rebounds to lead the host Mountaineers past the Horned Frogs.

**No. 13 Kansas 67, UTEP 62:** Marcus Garrett scored on a driving layup with 22.4 seconds to go and Dajuan Harris added

a pair of clinching free throws as the host Jayhawks overcame a 15-point second-half deficit and beat the Miners.

**No. 15 Texas 69, No. 16 Oklahoma 65:** Jericho Sims matched season highs with 16 points and 12 rebounds to help the visiting Longhorns beat the Sooners.

**No. 18 Texas Tech 81, Iowa State 54:** Mac McClung scored 20 points and the host Red Raiders beat the Cyclones for their third consecutive victory following a three-game losing streak.

**No. 24 Colorado 75, Arizona State 61:** McKinley Wright IV scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half and the host Buffaloes shook off a sluggish start to beat the Sun Devils.

# Kreider's hat trick powers Rangers

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Chris Kreider had his second hat trick in five games and the Rangers beat the slumping New Jersey Devils 6-1 on Thursday night in a game marred by a late injury to New York goalie Igor Shesterkin.

Kreider, who scored three times in a loss to Philadelphia on Feb. 24, has nine goals in his last six games, and 13 overall. He completed his natural hat trick 23 seconds into the final period after scoring twice in the second. His fourth career hat trick came on five shots.

Shesterkin seemed to hurt his right leg with just under six minutes to play when he stretched to stop a 2-on-1 break and shot by Damon Severson. He went down without contact and had to help off the ice, dragging the leg.

Shesterkin kept the Rangers in the game in the first period by stopping 13 of 14 shots. He finished with 32 saves in helping the Rangers win their second straight and their fifth in seven. Pavel Buchnevich, Brendan

Smith and Alexis Lafreniere also scored for New York.

Jack Hughes scored for the Devils.

**Lightning 3, Blackhawks 2 (OT):** Alex Killorn scored 4:59 into overtime, with the puck barely over the line at the horn, and visiting Tampa Bay beat Chicago for its sixth straight victory.

Steven Stamkos and Anthony Cirelli also scored for Tampa Bay, and Andrei Vasilevskiy made 35 saves in another stellar performance.

**Islanders 5, Sabres 2:** Matt Martin scored twice and host New York beat Buffalo in the opener of a three-game series.

Noah Dobson, Anthony Beauvillier and Jordan Eberle also scored for New York, and rookie Ilya Sorokin stopped 16 shots. The Islanders improved to 5-0-1 in their last six overall and 8-0-2 at the Nassau Coliseum to remain the only team without a regulation loss at home.

**Flyers 4, Penguins 3:** Claude Giroux scored his second goal of the night on a tap-in with 2:08 remaining and visiting Phila-

delphia overcame an early Pittsburgh deluge.

Scott Laughton and Sean Couturier also scored for the Flyers. They trailed by three following a 71-second first-period onslaught by Pittsburgh.

**Canucks 3, Maple Leafs 1:** Jake Virtanen scored twice, leading host Vancouver past NHL-leading Toronto in the opener of a two-game set.

Bo Horvat also scored for Vancouver, and Thatcher Demko stopped 32 shots.

**Jets 4, Canadiens 3 (OT):** Pierre-Luc Dubois scored at 4:29 of overtime to lift visiting Winnipeg past Montreal in the opener of a two-game series.

Dubois fired a rolling puck past goalie Jake Allen for his fifth of the season. Winnipeg improved to 5-0 in overtime this season, and Montreal fell to 0-4.

**Blue Jackets 3, Stars 2:** Boone Jenner had a goal and an assist, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Eric Robinson added third-period goals, and visiting Columbus beat struggling Dallas.

Korpisalo stopped 22 shots for the Blue Jackets. They have

won two straight after going 0-4-1.

**Panthers 5, Predators 4:** Aaron Ekblad had two goals and two assists to lead visiting Florida past Nashville.

Carter Verhaeghe, Mason Marchment and Jonathan Huberdeau also scored, Aleksander Barkov had three assists and Sergei Bobrovsky made 31 saves.

**Flames 7, Senators 3:** Dillon Dube had his first career hat trick to help host Calgary beat Ottawa.

Sean Monahan, Derek Ryan and Brett Ritchie each had a goal and an assist for Calgary. Josh Leivo also scored, and Matthew Tkachuk had three assists. David Rittich made 29 saves in his sixth straight start for the Flames.

**Hurricanes 5, Red Wings 2:** Jordan Staal and Jesper Fast scored early in the third period to help host Carolina beat Detroit.

Andrei Svechnikov, Svechnikov, Martin Necas and Nino Niederreiter also scored for the Hurricanes.

## Front Row's McDowell takes hot streak to Las Vegas

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Michael McDowell was rolling along at Homestead-Miami Speedway when he saw another driver signal for a car to pass.

When McDowell came upon the same driver, he wasn't given the same courtesy.

"I literally saw a driver wave another driver by, and then race me for the next seven laps like it was the last lap," McDowell recalled Tuesday.

He declined to identify the rival who refused to give McDowell an easy pass over the weekend, but it was an eye-opener for the Daytona 500 winner. A journeyman driver for small-budget teams, McDowell isn't usually

racing at the front of the pack or passing cars for top-10 finishes.

But since his Daytona 500 victory — his first win in 358 previous Cup Series starts — McDowell has found himself running with a different crowd. He has opened the season with three top-10 finishes through three races, just one shy of his total last year.

The strong start with Front Row Motorsports has put McDowell in uncharted territory. In the final laps Sunday at Homestead he found himself trying to pass Kevin Harvick for fifth, a previously unthinkable scenario.

It has all validated the effort McDowell put in over 14 years, but it hasn't translated into on-

track respect for the No. 34 Ford from his peers.

"There are top guys that don't want to be passed by the 34 and I get it, I understand that because they think that they're having a really bad day if the 34 is going around them," said McDowell, who also acknowledged putting up too strong of a fight when his car was a perpetual backmarker.

"On the flipside, I somewhat deserve it because I race the guts out of everybody and always have," he said. "Even when I was in bad cars I never made it easy on anybody, so I don't expect them to make it easy on me."

McDowell next goes to Las Vegas Motor Speedway on Sunday ranked a career-high fourth in

the Cup standings. His best finish in the final standings was 23rd last season, and when he opened this year, McDowell openly doubted his team could crack the top 16 required to qualify for the playoffs.

He still wasn't sure how Front Row stacked against the competition after winning the Daytona 500, which wasn't exactly a fluke because McDowell is a respected superspeedway racer. But he has yet to fall back into the field to where he's accustomed to racing.

"To make a big jump like we did, I wouldn't say that it's a complete, like, unbelievable shock, but it's pretty close to it," McDowell said.