

Survey finds trust in military declining

BY SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans who have trust and confidence in the U.S. military has declined by 14% in the last three years, according to a new survey released this week by the Ronald Reagan Institute.

Yet, the armed forces still top the list of the most respected institutions in the nation, the survey found.

People who said they have a “great deal of trust and confidence” in the military dropped from 70% in 2018 to 56% in 2021.

“While declining trust and confidence in the military is part of an overall downturn in attitudes among the American people, it’s particularly alarming as a leading indicator of a diminishing national spirit,” said Rachel Hoff, policy director at the Ronald Reagan In-

stitute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting Ronald Reagan’s legacy.

The institute started its “National Defense Survey” in 2018 to better understand how the public views defense, foreign policy and national security topics, according to the organization’s website. It’s designed to inform elected officials and policymakers.

The latest survey also found confidence in law enforcement similarly dropped from 50% in 2018 to 39% in 2021.

However, “the military remains the most trusted institution by a large margin,” the report’s authors wrote in a summary of the survey’s findings.

Ten percent of individuals surveyed had a “great deal” of confidence in Congress, 30% in the presidency, and 39% in law enforcement in 2021 — all far behind the level of faith

the public puts in the military.

The Pentagon’s press secretary on Wednesday shrugged off the survey results, but emphasized the department takes the issue seriously.

“Even though the numbers in this survey seem to show a drop in this particular survey, it’s clear that the American people still support and trust the men and women in the military,” Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby told reporters.

Seventy-four percent of those polled support increasing military spending, but funding for the military is a “top priority” for only 11%, trailing behind other issues such as health care and education, the poll found.

The survey also found 63% of people asked support maintaining military bases overseas, rather than reducing the U.S. military’s footprint over-

seas.

While Hoff pointed out findings do not explain what’s behind the diminishing trust, she offered “the politicization of the military, growing awareness surrounding the issue of sexual assault, or recent headlines about extremism in the ranks” as potential drivers.

The survey’s results come as the Pentagon is grappling with how to address a number of hot-button issues such as rooting out extremism in the ranks and preventing sexual assault and harassment.

Following the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, news reports have linked several active-duty service members and veterans to the riot.

An NPR analysis last month found about 14% of the people charged in connection with storming the Capitol have ties to the military.

Biden signs \$1.9T relief bill before speech to nation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Marking a year of loss and disruption, President Joe Biden on Thursday signed into law the \$1.9 trillion relief package that he said will help the U.S. defeat the coronavirus and nurse the economy back to health.

The signing came hours before Biden delivers his first prime-time address since taking office. He’s aiming to steer the nation toward a hungered-for sentiment — hope — as he marks one year since the onset of the pandemic that has killed more than 529,000 Americans.

Previewing his remarks, Biden said he would “talk about

what we’ve been through as a nation this past year, but more importantly, I’m going to talk about what comes next.”

On Wednesday, a Congress riven along party lines has approved the landmark \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, as Biden and Democrats claimed a major triumph on legislation marshaling the government’s spending might against twin pandemic and economic crises that have upended a nation.

The House gave final congressional approval to the sweeping package by a near party line 220-211 vote precisely seven weeks after Biden entered the White House and four

days after the Senate passed the bill. Republicans in both chambers opposed the legislation unanimously, characterizing it as bloated, crammed with liberal policies and heedless of signs the crises are easing.

A dominant feature of the bill is initiatives making it one of the biggest federal efforts in years to assist lower- and middle-income families. Included are expanded tax credits over the next year for children, child care and family leave — some of them credits that Democrats have signaled they’d like to make permanent — plus spending for renters, feeding programs and people’s utility bills.

Besides the direct payments and jobless-benefit extension, the measure has hundreds of billions for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, schools, state and local governments and ailing industries from airlines to concert halls. There is aid for farmers of color, pension systems and student borrowers, and subsidies for consumers buying health insurance and states expanding Medicaid coverage for lower earners.

The legislation would reduce the number of people living in poverty this year by around one-third, from 44 million down to 28 million, the liberal-leaning Urban Institute estimated

Navy sails Taiwan Strait; leaders talk China

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy sent its third warship in a little over a month through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, just a day after Indo-Pacific Command's leader warned legislators of China's intent on overtaking Taiwan.

The guided-missile destroyer USS John Finn steamed through the 110-mile-wide strait that separates China from Taiwan to "demonstrate the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Mark Langford said in a statement Thursday morning.

"The United States military will continue to fly, sail and op-

erate anywhere international law allows," he said, employing a phrase often used by Navy officials following such operations.

Beijing considers reunification with Taiwan a top priority and regularly protests Taiwan Strait transits, claiming foreign vessels must first ask permission before passing through.

Guided-missile destroyers USS John S. McCain and USS Curtis Wilbur steamed through the strait without asking permission on Feb. 4 and Feb. 25, respectively.

After the Feb. 4 transit, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin called U.S. strait transits "provocations" that threaten China's "national

sovereignty and territorial integrity," according to a translated transcript.

The transit Wednesday came a day after the head of Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Philip Davidson, told the Senate Armed Services Committee he believed China could overtake Taiwan and force reunification "in the next six years."

"I worry that [China is] accelerating their ambitions to supplant the United States and our leadership role in the rules-based international order," Davidson said Tuesday. "They've long said that they want to do that by 2050. I'm worried about them moving that target closer."

He further suggested the U.S.

review its policy regarding relations with Taiwan. For four decades, the U.S. has considered Taiwan's status unsettled but acknowledges that China asserts sovereignty over Taiwan with the "One China" policy.

"I would submit that we've got more than 40 years of the strategic ambiguity has helped keep Taiwan in its current status," he said. "But you know, these things should be reconsidered routinely. I'd look forward to the conversation."

In a press conference Thursday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin "believes it's in no one's interest" for conflict to occur over Taiwan.

Austin heads to Indo-Pacific region for 1st overseas trip as defense secretary

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin begins his first overseas trip Saturday with visits to key allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, with meetings planned with counterparts in Japan, South Korea and India, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

The choice of Asia for Austin's inaugural trip underscores the growing importance of the region in both the Pentagon's strategic planning and America's economic interdependence with the Pacific.

"I'll meet with my counterparts and other officials to discuss the importance of our alliances and partnerships, and together we'll reinforce the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region," Austin said in a tweet Wednesday.

He has been in the job since Jan. 22.

The Pentagon's national defense strategy has, in recent years, pivoted away from emphasizing counterinsurgency and the Middle East toward greater focus on so-called "great power" competition with China and Russia.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee this week, Adm. Philip Davidson, head of Indo-Pacific Command, said the United States needs to invest more in troops,

missile detection and weapons in the region in response to China's growing military capabilities.

"I see [China] developing systems, capabilities and a posture that would indicate that they're interested in aggression," he said.

Austin will first stop in Hawaii, which is headquarters for Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, Marine Forces Pacific, Pacific Air Forces, U.S. Army Pacific and Special Operations Command Pacific.

He will meet with troops and senior commanders while there, the Pentagon said.

He will then fly to Japan to join Secretary of State Antony Blinken for the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee, informally called 2+2. That is being hosted by Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi and Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi, the Pentagon said.

Both U.S. Cabinet members then travel to South Korea to attend a meeting hosted by South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Minister of Defense Suh Wook.

Austin will then head to India to meet with Rajnath Singh, the minister of defense, and other senior national security leaders. They will discuss ways to further advance cooperation made possible in 2016 when the U.S. designated India as a Major Defense Partner.

Marines' sunset tweet from above Okinawa draws fire

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing removed a tweet Monday of an Okinawa sunset photographed from a helicopter in flight after it provoked a sizeable negative response.

The sunset wasn't the problem, according to local media reports, but the view included the barrel of a .50-caliber machine gun and the caption: "Oki views! A view down the barrel with HMH-465 'Warhorse' on a recent flight in Okinawa!!" The caption included the hashtags #FightNow and #FreeAndOpenIndoPacific.

"The weapon in the lower left of the photo that is pointing away from any populated area below, was locked in the up position for travel and no Marine was manning it when the photo was taken," wing spokesman Maj. Ken Kunze said in an email Thursday to Stars and Stripes.

Nonetheless, The Okinawa Times, for one, reported the tweet as insensitive for depicting weaponry being flown over Okinawa cities.

US jobless claims fall; pace of layoffs eases

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell last week to 712,000, the lowest total since early November, evidence that fewer employers are cutting jobs amid a decline in confirmed coronavirus cases and signs of an improving economy.

The Labor Department said Thursday that applications for unemployment aid dropped by 42,000 from 754,000 the week before. Though the job market has been slowly strengthening, many businesses remain under pressure, and 9.6 million jobs remain lost to the pandemic that flattened the economy 12 months

ago.

In February, U.S. employers added a robust 379,000 jobs, the most since October, reflecting an economy in which consumers are spending more and states and cities are easing business restrictions. Thursday's figure, though the lowest weekly figure in four months, showed that weekly applications for jobless benefits still remain high by historical standards: Before the viral outbreak, they had never topped 700,000, even during the Great Recession.

All told, 4.1 million Americans are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits. Counting supplemental federal unem-

ployment programs that were established to soften the economic damage from the virus, an estimated 20.1 million people are collecting some form of jobless aid.

The continuing job cuts reflect the extent to which the pandemic disrupted normal economic activity and kept consumers hunkered down at home rather than out traveling, shopping, dining and attending entertainment venues. Cities and states restricted the hours and capacity of restaurants, bars and other businesses. Even where restrictions didn't exist, many Americans for months chose to stay home to avoid the risk of infection.

Now, though, as vaccinations are increasingly administered around the country, business limitations are gradually eased and consumers grow more comfortable engaging face to face with others, optimism about the economy is rising. Last month, consumers bounced back from months of retrenchment to step up their spending by 2.4% — the sharpest increase in seven months and a sign that the economy may be poised to sustain a recovery.

In the meantime, the number of confirmed new COVID-19 cases has dropped to an average of around 50,000 a day from nearly 250,000 in early January.

US general downplays N. Korea missile display

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The top U.S. general on the Korean Peninsula has poured cold water on the North's claim of possessing the "world's most powerful weapon."

Pyeongyang showed off its new submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missile during a parade in January.

However, U.S. Forces Korea commander Army Gen. Robert Abrams, in written testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday, said North Korea's claims aren't evidence of a viable nuclear weapon.

"Projecting a capability in a parade, while an effective communication strategy, does not necessarily equal the ability to deliver it," he said. "In fact, there has been no reporting to indicate that North Korea has exhibited a platform capable of delivering the weapons we were shown."

There remains a "significant gap" between asserting North Korea possesses the "most powerful weapon" and certifying

they possess not only the actual weapons but also a platform capable of successfully delivering it, Abrams said.

However, he added: This "new, possibly larger" intercontinental ballistic missile that can be launched by submarine may be an "intermediate step" toward obtaining solid-propellant ICBMs.

North Korea test-fired its new missile in October 2019. However, it has yet to launch it from a real submarine, Kim Hyunwook, an American studies professor at Korea National Diplomatic Academy in Seoul, said in an email Thursday.

"So, [North Korea's] real capability of launching a SLBM is not ready yet," he said.

The North also lacks the technology to build a nuclear-powered submarine, Kim added.

Pyeongyang tested a nuclear weapon and an ICBM in 2017 but hasn't repeated the experiments in recent years as leader Kim Jong Un and former President Donald Trump held summit meetings and U.S. forces scaled back training on the peninsula.

Top Army leader rebukes Fox host's talk on women

By KARIN ZEITVOGEL
Stars and Stripes

Women in the military deliver more than babies, senior military leaders said after Fox News host Tucker Carlson said on his show that pregnant women "are going to fight our wars" and make a mockery of the U.S. military.

"Women lead our most lethal units with character. They will dominate ANY future battlefield we're called to fight on," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston said on Twitter on Thursday, adding that Carlson's comments hours earlier were divisive and "don't reflect Army values."

Carlson said in a roughly 30-second clip on his show Wednesday, "So we've got new hairstyles, maternity flight suits. Pregnant women are going to fight our wars."

"It's a mockery of the U.S. military," he added, going on to compare America's armed forces to China's, which he said were "becoming more masculine" as they assembled the world's largest navy.

Carlson showed a photo during his broadcast of an Air Force officer wearing an artificial pregnancy bump while modeling a mater-

nity flight suit still in development. The Air Force has changed some of its rules to allow pregnant service members to fly nonfighter aircraft through their second trimester without a waiver.

The changes were initiated during the Trump administration.

Gen. Paul E. Funk II, commander of the Army Training and Doctrine Command, praised the "thousands of women (who) serve honorably every day around the globe." U.S. female service members are "beacons of freedom" who prove Carlson wrong, he said on Twitter.

Female service members were also quick to respond to Carlson, posting pictures of themselves during deployments.

"Is this what mockery looks like?" asked the host of the Parenting in Uniform podcast in a tweet above a picture of her manning a .50-caliber machine gun on a Humvee.

The picture was taken during her first deployment in Afghanistan in 2005, when she was a platoon leader with the 846th Engineer Battalion, she told Stars and Stripes. She deployed three more times during nearly 18 years of service.

Report: Cuomo groped female aide at home

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — An aide to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo says he groped her in the governor's residence, a newspaper reported Wednesday, in the most serious allegation made yet by a series of women against the embattled Democrat.

The Times Union of Albany reported that the woman, who it did not name, was alone with Cuomo late last year when he closed the door, reached under her shirt and fondled her. The newspaper's reporting is based on an unidentified source with direct knowledge of the woman's accusation. The governor had summoned her to the Executive Mansion in Albany, saying he needed help with his cellphone, the newspaper reported.

"I have never done anything like this," Cuomo said through a spokesperson Wednesday evening.

"The details of this report are gut-wrenching," Cuomo said, adding that he would not speak to the specifics of this or any other allegation, given an ongoing investigation overseen by the state attorney general.

Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan said in a statement Wednesday night that no criminal complaint had been filed by the alleged victim to the Albany Police Department.

The three-term governor faces harassment allegations from several other women and increasingly urgent calls for his resignation or impeachment from at least some fellow Democrats. Cuomo has repeatedly said he won't resign.

"He's openly said he will not resign. And with further mounting allegations that are deeply credible, we are in a position now where I think we should impeach," said Assembly member Jessica González-Rojas, a

Democrat who had previously pushed for his resignation.

The woman whose account was reported by the Times Union said Cuomo had touched her and made flirtatious comments on multiple occasions. According to the newspaper, her allegations came to light as Cuomo staffers watched the governor's March 3 news conference, his first after a new round of sexual harassment claims made in late February.

In it, he denied ever touching a woman inappropriately. The aide subsequently became emotional, and told a female supervisor who approached her about her encounters with the governor. At least one supervisor reported the allegation to an attorney in the governor's office Monday, the newspaper reported.

Judge OK's 3rd-degree murder charge in Floyd death

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A judge on Thursday granted prosecutors' request to add a third-degree murder charge against the former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death.

Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill reinstated the charge after the former officer, Derek Chauvin, failed to get appellate courts to block it. Cahill had earlier rejected the charge as not warranted by the circumstances of Floyd's death, but an appellate court ruling in an unrelated case established new grounds for it.

Chauvin already faced second-degree murder and manslaughter charges. Legal experts say the additional charge helps prosecutors by giving jurors one more option to convict Chauvin of murder.

The dispute over the third-degree mur-

der charge revolved around the conviction of another former Minneapolis police officer in the unrelated killing of an Australian woman. The appeals court recently affirmed Mohamed Noor's third-degree murder conviction in the 2017 shooting death of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, and the state used that affirmation to argue that it established new justification for the charge in Chauvin's case.

Cahill agreed that the precedent has now been established.

"I feel bound by that and I feel it would be an abuse of discretion not to grant the motion," he said.

Floyd was declared dead on May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against the Black man's neck for about nine minutes. Floyd's death sparked sometimes violent protests in Minneapolis and beyond,

leading to a nationwide reckoning on race.

The ruling came ahead of resumption of jury selection Thursday. Five jurors had been seated after just two days of screening by attorneys and the judge, who has set aside at least three weeks to fill the panel.

Attorneys have given considerable attention to the jury pool's attitudes toward police in the first two days of questioning, trying to determine whether they're more inclined to believe testimony from law enforcement over evidence from other witnesses to the fatal confrontation.

A questionnaire explores potential jurors' familiarity with the case and their own contacts with police. Their written answers have not been made public, and the jurors' identities are being kept secret. Their racial backgrounds often aren't disclosed in open court.

Miss. governor to put limits on transgender athletes

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Mississippi Republican Gov. Tate Reeves signed a bill Thursday to ban transgender athletes from competing on girls or women's sports teams.

Mississippi is the first state this year to enact such a ban, after a federal court blocked an Idaho law last year. The bill is set to become law July 1, although a legal challenge is possible.

More than 20 states are proposing restrictions on athletics or gender-confirming health care for transgender minors this year. Conservative lawmakers are responding to an executive order by Democratic President Joe Biden that bans discrimination based on gender identity in school sports and elsewhere.

Biden signed it Jan. 20, the day he took office.

Reeves has three daughters who play sports and he said March 4 on Twitter that Mississippi's bill would "protect young girls from being forced to compete with biological males for athletic opportunities."

"It's crazy we have to address it, but the Biden E.O. forced the issue," Reeves tweeted that day. "Adults? That's on them. But the push for kids to adopt transgenderism is just wrong."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Remains of Cold War-era Russian sub catch fire

RI PROVIDENCE — The remains of a Cold War-era Russian submarine once seen in a movie starring Harrison Ford caught fire in Providence on Tuesday morning as workers were using a blowtorch to cut it up for scrap, fire officials said.

The fire at a waterfront scrap yard sent a plume of black smoke over the city at about 9:30 a.m. but was quickly extinguished. No one was hurt.

The hull is sheathed in a 3- to 4-inch layer of rubber and that's what caught fire as workers cut into it with a torch, Providence Deputy Assistant Fire Chief Steve Capracotta said.

After the Cold War, the submarine known as Juliett 484 was sold and used as a restaurant and vodka bar in Helsinki, Finland, and as a set for the 2002 Ford movie "K-19: The Widowmaker."

2 students charged with stealing from university

TN MURFREESBORO — Two students have been charged with stealing \$114,000 from Middle Tennessee State University, authorities said.

The students were indicted Tuesday by a Rutherford County grand jury, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation said in a statement.

The charges stem from an investigation by the bureau and the Tennessee Comptroller of the school's Somali Student Association and Muslim Student Association. Investigators found evidence that two leaders of the student groups fraudulently obtained more than \$114,000 in student activity fees over a three-year period, the bureau said.

Mohamed Gure and Mohamed Osman, who are both 22, were charged with theft, forgery, and criminal simulation, officials said.

Man armed with knife holds baby amid standoff

WI FOND DU LAC — A long standoff with a driver who held a baby while armed with a butcher knife ended without injury in Dodge County.

A deputy tried stopping the driver for speeding in Fond du Lac County about 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, according to sheriff's officials. The male suspect failed to stop and deputies began a pursuit that continued into Fond du Lac and then proceeded south on rural highways.

The driver attempted to strike a sheriff's squad car before a deputy used a pursuit intervention technique to force the vehicle into a ditch, authorities said.

According to officials, the driver then armed himself with a large butcher knife and he and a female passenger remained in the vehicle. A short time later, a baby was removed from a rear car seat and the man held the child in front of him while still armed with the knife.

Sheriff's negotiators continued to talk to the man for several hours and about 10:15 p.m. he agreed to get out of the vehicle and was arrested.

Pastor on leave after 'trophy wife' sermon

MO MALDEN — A southeastern Missouri preacher went on leave from his church and is seeking professional counseling after giving a sermon that chastised married women who "let themselves go" and held up former

first lady Melania Trump as the pinnacle of feminine beauty.

A video widely circulated on social media shows Pastor Stewart-Allen Clark's sermon before the 1st General Baptist Church in Malden. The sermon was roundly panned as sexist and counter to Christian teachings.

In the video, Clark berated wives who gained weight after marriage and admonished that they should look good for their husbands, adding, "it's important that he thinks you're hot!"

"I'm not saying every woman can be the epic — the epic — trophy wife of all time like Melania Trump," Clark said, as a photo of the former first lady appeared behind him on a screen. "Most women can't be trophy wives, but you know ... maybe you're a participation trophy."

The church's website said Clark began his leave on March 2 and is seeking professional counseling.

Ex-director of veterans cemetery arrested

MS NEWTON — The former director of the Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery was arrested and accused of embezzling money from the office, authorities said.

Henry Gruno was arrested Monday by the Office of the State Auditor and presented with a \$29,818 demand letter, news outlets reported. The amount includes interest and investigative expenses.

The auditor's office said Gruno embezzled about \$14,000 in public money from Mississippi Veterans Affairs between January 2016 and January 2019.

State Auditor Shad White said Gruno was accused of using a credit card and a fuel card to embezzle the funds. Gruno used the

credit card to buy items such as barbecue supplies, toys and luggage, White said.

Man charged with selling fake autographed gear

AL BIRMINGHAM — A Maryland man has been charged with selling fake autographed memorabilia and defrauding Alabama TV stations out of thousands in advertising costs for fraudulent websites, according to federal court records.

Douglas Edward Duren agreed this month to plead guilty to wire fraud and aggravated identity theft, according to federal prosecutors in Alabama. Authorities alleged he sold items with forged signatures, including sports collectibles and movie posters, over a nine-year period on three fake websites.

Duren was also accused of impersonating advertising agency employees, promising to pay several television stations in Birmingham and Madison County up to \$75,000 to advertise the websites, AL.com reported.

Skater gets timely rescue after falling through ice

NH SOMERSWORTH — A man who fell through the ice while skating on a river said firefighters arrived to save him just in time.

William Rogers was skating on the Salmon Falls River on Sunday. WMUR-TV reported he was alone and unable to get himself out, but he used his Apple watch to call 911.

"First thing I did was try to walrus up on the ice knowing that I needed to get out of the water as quickly as possible and the ice just kept breaking underneath me," Rogers said.

Somersworth firefighters rescued him.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

Virus was shock to sports' system

Associated Press

It's the predictable rhythm of sports that draws us in.

Not so much the results of the games themselves as the steady cadence of the seasons — the cutting down of nets and hoisting of trophies, the pregame hype and postgame deconstructions, the trade talk and injury crises that envelop each passing year with the regularity of an atomic clock.

So, when two NBA basketball teams were hastily sent back to their locker rooms, not to return, after pregame introductions on March 11, 2020, and, then, a day later, when two college basketball teams walked off the floor at halftime and also didn't come back — “Game Ppd, pandemic” — it was a shock to the system.

It was one thing for the still-nascent collection of COVID-19 numbers, the interviews with lawmakers and the warnings from Dr. Anthony Fauci to overtake CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. Quite another for all those updates to find their way onto ESPN.

It was a sign that the steadily streaming loop of games we play, and watch — games that have been played amid crisis, in the aftermath of catastrophe and that even resumed less than a week after the 9/11 terrorist attacks — could no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in memory, sports were as much at the mercy of an uncontrolled, unpredictable and ever-changing health crisis as any other segment of life.

A year after the worldwide coronavirus pandemic stopped all the games in their tracks, the aftershocks are still being felt across every sector.

It's true in the pros and colleges, where

leagues and conferences found themselves scrambling to figure out how to resume in bubbles, pods and cohorts. Once jam-packed, stadiums are now being used as mass vaccination venues or, in cases where they've reopened their gates to significant numbers of fans, scapegoated as potential superspreader sites. The goal of it all is a return to something resembling “normal,” to get back to providing the masses with the programming they sorely missed while still accounting for the high risk the players take for the sake of our round-the-clock entertainment (and, yes, their millions in salaries and profit).

It's also true at the grassroots, where little leagues, swim teams, gymnastics camps and running clubs all went dark, leaving the very existence of their businesses, to say nothing of the sports they fortify from the ground all the way to the elite levels, up in the air.

And at the outdoor playgrounds and courts and courses, which were shuttered, roped off and padlocked for weeks, sometimes months, before slowly gaining cachet as a new, somewhat safer haven for millions of restless citizens shut in by government mandate, or fear, or concern, or some combination of the three.

Some of what was lost, or stopped, has come back over the ensuing 12 months, with the rapid development of a vaccine and a sometimes-begrudging acceptance of mask-wearing and social distancing becoming norms that are now being relaxed in certain parts of the U.S. In many cases, lessons learned in sports have been applied to society in general, and helped make things better. The NFL, for instance, offered a veritable manual for bringing

large groups back into the workplace — if you have the resources.

But life at all these levels does not look the same, and some of it might never look “normal” again.

“Urinals, water fountains and hot dog stands where someone hands you food directly; buying game programs and taking ticket stubs home; athletes signing autographs and passing a pen back to you,” said sports marketing guru Joe Favorito, spelling out just a short list on how the fan experience has changed for good.

Said media expert Dennis Deninger: “We will never return to the old model of sending commentators, analysts and producers to every game that is going to be broadcast.” It will save money but come at a cost, he said: “The broadcast product cannot help but be diminished if those who we as fans count on to be our eyes and ears at an event are not there.”

Indeed, we as sports journalists have become comfortable forgoing the locker rooms for interviews via Zoom. The whole concept of “access” will generate debate for what's left of the media when the world regains its health and discovers its new normal.

One takeaway that is as relevant today as it was a year ago came from the esteemed media commentator Bob Thompson of Syracuse: A big part of the show is the fans — the crying flute players, the painted chests, the cheerleaders. Without all that, he said, sports wouldn't feel quite the same, the TV program wouldn't be as fun, maybe the popcorn wouldn't taste as good, even if the games did go on as planned.

How right he was.

Rangers first in line for return to capacity crowds

Associated Press

The Texas Rangers are on track to become the first team in Major League Baseball or any major U.S.-based sports league to have a full-capacity crowd since the coronavirus pandemic started altering the sports landscape a year ago.

On the same day Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's order took effect allowing businesses in the state to operate at 100% capacity, Rangers CEO Neil Leibman

said Wednesday that the team hopes to be at that for the April 5 opener against the Toronto Blue Jays.

“We're very confident we won't be a super-spreader event,” said Leibman, who is also the team's president of business operations. “With all the protocols that we're following, we'll be extremely responsible and provide a very comfortable environment for somebody to enjoy the game without worry-

ing we're going to be a spreader event.”

The pandemic could still alter the team's intent to host a capacity crowd at the 40,518-seat Globe Life Field, which the Rangers opened last year without fans in the stands.

Local officials are still able to impose “mitigation strategies,” such as reduced capacity, if virus hospitalizations exceed 15% of all hospital capacity in their region over certain periods.

Even with his order, Abbott has encouraged the public to continue practicing social distancing measures and wearing masks, though they are no longer mandated.

The Rangers will require fans to wear masks for games, unless they are actively eating and drinking at their seats, as was the case for the postseason major league games played at their \$1.2 billion stadium in Arlington, Texas, in October.

Mavericks rally late to defeat Spurs

Associated Press

DALLAS — Luka Dončić had 22 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists in his 33rd triple-double, Kristaps Porziņģis had 28 points and 14 rebounds and the Dallas Mavericks used a late run to pull away and beat the San Antonio Spurs 115-104 on Wednesday night.

Dallas finished with a 17-4 run against a San Antonio team that will no longer have seven-time All-Star LaMarcus Aldridge in the lineup.

Before the game, coach Gregg Popovich announced that Aldridge, 35, in his sixth season in San Antonio, would no longer be with the team by mutual agreement.

“He’s been a great teammate,” said Pop-

ovich, who added that Aldridge is healthy. “We just think this is a win-win for both LaMarcus and for the club.”

Spurs veteran guard Patty Mills also played with Aldridge in Portland.

“He might be the longest teammate that I’ve had,” Mills said. “He’s obviously well respected by this group particularly and every team that he’s played for. As a teammate, you just wish the best for him.”

DeMar DeRozan had 30 points, 11 assists and four steals for the Spurs.

Mills added 14 points and Rudy Gay had 13 for San Antonio, which was outrebounded 51-30 and outscored 21-2 on second-chance points.

“We lost the game on the boards,” Popovich said. “Porziņģis was great on the boards. I thought we did a good job on Dončić. Played hard, played well, but too many mental mistakes and a little bit uneven flow and uneven performance offensively.”

During the Mavericks’ late spurt, the Spurs missed 11 straight shots over a period of almost eight minutes.

Porziņģis, who had offseason knee surgery, has double-doubles in three straight games and seven of his last 12.

“I feel like I’m getting there,” Porziņģis said. “I still have to keep working on it. After surgery, the leg, it’s not feeling the same.”

Sooners hold on for big win over Iowa St.

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Even when Oklahoma built a 19-point second-half lead on slumping Iowa State, the Sooners probably should have known the Cyclones would at least make the game interesting in the closing minutes Wednesday night.

This is the Big 12 Tournament, after all.

So with their first-round game slipping away, the No. 25 Sooners turned to Austin Reaves for an answer. Their standout guard responded by scoring 11 of his 21 points in the closing minutes, allowing Oklahoma to hold on for a nervy 79-73 win that sent coach Lon Kruger’s team into a quarterfinal matchup with No. 11 Kansas.

“When you drop a few in a row that go down to the wire,” Kruger said afterward, “you have to get that feeling of winning again. I’m proud of the guys to get that one in the win column.”

De’Vion Harmon added 18 points and Elijah Harkless had 12 for the No. 7 seeded Sooners (15-9), who had lost four straight and were on a shaky NCAA Tournament bubble heading into the weekend. But with a win over Iowa State, they are likely a lock for the field of 68 — and certainly would be with a win over the Jayhawks on Thursday night.

Duke drops out of ACC tourney for positive test

Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Duke has pulled out of the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament and ended its season after a positive coronavirus test and the resulting quarantining and contact tracing.

The ACC announced that the Blue Devils’ quarterfinal game with Florida State scheduled for Thursday night has been canceled. Duke had won its first two tournament games, but finished just 13-11 overall and 9-9 in ACC games.

Athletic director Kevin White said that Duke’s season is over, ending the Blue Devils’ streak of 24 consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances.

The team entered the week knowing that it likely needed to win the ACC Tournament to extend an NCAA tournament streak dating back to 1996.

Duke failed to live up to its always lofty expectations, but coach Mike Krzyzewski said he loved this young team and was honored to coach it.

“We have not asked more of any team in our history, and they deserve enormous credit for handling everything like the outstanding young men they are,” Krzyzewski said. “I feel deeply for our players, who have done a terrific job all season in taking care of each other and the team.”

“I am extremely proud of their collective attitudes and effort, which could not have been stronger.”

Orange make case to be off of the bubble

Associated Press

Jim Boheim figures his Syracuse team has done enough to earn a bid to the NCAA Tournament.

The Orange beat North Carolina State on Wednesday in the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament, a matchup of the league’s two teams facing bubble uncertainty. That certainly helped Syracuse (16-8) as it hovers around the cut line in many projections.

Buddy Boheim scored 27 points with a season-high six of Syracuse’s 14 three-pointers.

“I think when you look at the profile overall, I think we’ve got a lot of good wins against good teams,” Boheim said, adding: “I think we did what we needed to do this year, but we’ll see what happens.”

The Orange entered Wednesday at No. 49 in NET and viewed just outside the 68-team field.

Syracuse lacks a headline win and is 1-6 record in Quadrant 1 games — the top category based on an opponent’s NET ranking — though Boheim noted all seven games were played on the road.

He also pointed to the team’s 4-1 record against Quadrant 2 teams, with the win against the Wolfpack — coming off five straight wins — likely joining that category.

Grosenick steps in to backstop Kings

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Adrian Kempe scored two goals and Troy Grosenick made 33 saves in his first NHL appearance in nearly 6½ years, leading the Los Angeles Kings to a 5-1 defeat of the Anaheim Ducks on Wednesday.

Captain Anze Kopitar, Andreas Athanasiou and Alex Iafallo also scored for the Kings, who beat the Ducks for the first time in three tries this season and split two Freeway Faceoff meetings over the past three days with their Southern California rivals.

The 31-year-old Grosenick's entire previous NHL experience consisted of two games for the San Jose Sharks in November 2014. When Kings goalie Cal Petersen went into the COVID-19 protocol about three hours before this game, Grosenick came through with a strong performance on short notice.

Sam Steel scored and John Gibson stopped 32 shots for

Anaheim.

Avalanche 2, Coyotes 1: Gabriel Landeskog scored 4:22 into overtime and Philipp Grubauer made 13 saves, sending host Colorado past Arizona.

Landeskog circled through the Coyotes end and sent a wrist shot over Antti Raanta for his seventh of the season.

The Avalanche settled for a split during the two-game series in Denver even though they outshot Arizona by an 81-28 margin.

Colorado limited the Coyotes to 14 shots on Wednesday. It's the 14th straight game the Avalanche have allowed less than 30 shots, which tied a franchise record.

Brandon Saad scored 1:23 into the game, but Raanta settled in and was difficult to solve. He made 44 saves.

Nick Schmaltz scored for Arizona.

Oilers 7, Senators 1: Leon Draisaitl had three goals and two assists, leading host Edmonton to the victory.

Connor McDavid added a

goal and two assists for the Oilers, who earned their third straight win. Darnell Nurse had a goal and an assist, and Juhar Khaira and James Neal also scored. Tyson Barrie had three assists.

Draisaitl's third career hat trick helped Edmonton improve to 6-0-0 against Ottawa this season. The teams finish their three-game series on Friday night.

Matt Murray stopped 29 shots for the Senators, and Evgenii Dadonov spoiled Mike Smith's shutout bid midway through the third period. It was Dadonov's 100th career goal.

Canadiens 5, Canucks 1: Jesper Kotkaniemi had a goal and an assist, and Corey Perry, Shea Weber, Jeff Petry and Phillip Danault also scored for the Montreal in a win at Vancouver. Tyler Toffoli added two assists.

Brock Boeser had the lone goal for the Canucks with a rocket during a second-period power play.

Carey Price had 23 saves for

the Canadiens and Thatcher Demko stopped 40 of 45 shots for Vancouver.

Wild 4, Golden Knights 3: Joel Eriksson Ek had two goals and Kirill Kaprizov scored for his team's league-worst power play, leading host Minnesota past West Division-leading Vegas.

Kaapo Kahkonen stopped 24 shots to win his eighth consecutive start for Minnesota, extending his franchise rookie record despite surrendering a hat trick to Dylan Coghlan for the first three goals of his career. Coghlan scored with 6 minutes left and then with the extra attacker with 2:10 remaining.

Carson Soucy scored Minnesota's third goal of the third period during a rare stumble by Vegas goalie Marc-Andre Fleury, who stopped 25 shots before being pulled for Logan Thompson's NHL debut about halfway through the final frame. Fleury entered the night ranked third in the league in both goals-against average and save percentage.

Harvick isn't concerned about 11-race winless streak

The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer

Lest you forget Kevin Harvick's dominance in 2020, the NASCAR driver sat poised on Zoom on Tuesday between two of the nine trophies he won last year, a reminder that one bad finish at Las Vegas this week can't take away his 58 career Cup wins.

Harvick spoke with reporters ahead of Sunday's Cup race at Phoenix, where he's led nearly 15% of the series laps he's run at the one-mile dogleg oval — his highest percentage of Cup laps led at a single track. Despite the 20th-place finish after starting on the pole last weekend, the driver is ready to move on to better performances.

"Most of my races are over by

Monday whether we've won or lost," Harvick said, adding that "angry takes too much time."

The No. 4 Ford team was the highest finisher of the four-car Stewart-Haas organization Sunday, and Harvick acknowledged that they "just missed it on all levels." But he didn't seem fazed by his team's recent finish due to the particular challenges of Las Vegas and that it's still early in the season. NASCAR has run four races so far on three different styles of tracks.

"Vegas is a tough racetrack just because of the fact that it falls into a lot of different categories as far as ride quality, aerodynamic balance," Harvick said. "Do you want to work on the front of the car or the

back of the car? Do you go to the wind tunnel and use up some of your wind tunnel time and how do you put that into your simulation?"

Harvick noted that this weekend's Phoenix track is drastically different than last weekend's 1.5-mile speedway in Las Vegas. The racing will probably look different, too, with different aero and engine packages being used between the two speedways.

After a No. 4 winless streak that's carried through 11 races starting at the end of last season (Harvick's most recent winless streak that lasted longer was the beginning of 2019), Sunday's finish and Stewart-Haas teammates all finishing out of the top

10 in the first four races this year, it's fair to wonder whether there's concern among the team over an emerging pattern. Harvick, however, seemed unconcerned.

He said his advice to his younger teammates, Chase Briscoe and Cole Custer, about overcoming their early struggles this year would be to maintain the perspective of, "It's a one-week-at-a-time grind." Harvick also brushed off skepticism that he'd still dominate at Phoenix this weekend given his latest finish at the track (seventh) at last year's season finale, calling it a "silly question" when asked about whether his team is still an automatic threat there.