

Biden eyes freedom by Fourth of July

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — One year after the nation was brought to a near-standstill by the coronavirus, President Joe Biden pledged in his first prime-time address to make all adults eligible for vaccines by May 1 and raised the possibility of beginning to “mark our independence from this virus” by the Fourth of July.

He offered Americans fresh hope and appealed anew for their help.

Speaking in the White House East Room Thursday night, Biden honored the “collective suffering” of Americans over the past year in his 24-minute address and then offered them a vision for a return to a modicum of normalcy this summer.

“We are bound together by the loss and the pain of the days that have gone by,” he said. “We are also bound together by the hope and the possibilities in the days in front of us.”

He predicted Americans could safely gather at least in small groups for July Fourth to “make this Independence Day truly special.”

But he also cautioned that this was a “goal” and attaining it depends on people’s cooperation in following public health guidelines and rolling up their sleeves to get vaccinated as soon as eligible. Only that, he said, can bring about an end to a pandemic that has

killed more than 530,000 Americans and disrupted the lives of countless more.

“While it was different for everyone, we all lost something,” Biden said of the sacrifices of the yearlong-and-counting pandemic.

The speech came just hours after Biden signed into law a \$1.9 trillion relief package that he said will help defeat the virus, nurse the economy back to health and deliver direct aid to Americans struggling to make ends meet.

Some cash distributions could begin arriving in the bank accounts of Americans this weekend.

“This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country,” Biden said as he signed the bill in the Oval Office.

Most noticeable to many Americans are provisions providing up to \$1,400 in direct payments and extending \$300 weekly emergency unemployment benefits into early September. Also 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, food programs and people’s utility bills.

In his Thursday night address, Biden said that as vaccine supplies continue to increase, he will direct states and territories to make

all adults eligible for vaccination by May 1. The U.S. is expecting to have enough doses for those 255 million adults by the end of that month, but Biden warned the process of actually administering those doses would take time, even as his administration looks to instill confidence in the safety of the vaccines to overcome hesitance.

“Let me be clear, that doesn’t mean everyone’s going to have that shot immediately, but it means you’ll be able to get in line beginning May 1,” he said.

Biden announced an expansion of other efforts to speed vaccinations, including deploying an additional 4,000 active-duty troops to support vaccination efforts and allowing more people — such as medical students, veterinarians and dentists — to deliver shots. He is also directing more doses toward some 950 community health centers and up to 20,000 retail pharmacies, to make it easier for people to get vaccinated closer to their homes.

Biden added that his administration is planning to launch a nationwide website to help people find doses, saying it would address frustrations so that there would be “no more searching day and night for an appointment.”

Navy submarine grappling with bedbug infestation

The Seattle Times

SEATTLE — Clothes got laundered, mattresses replaced and pesticides sprayed as the Navy waged war against a stubborn infestation of bedbugs that found their way onto a nuclear-powered submarine at its home port in the Bremerton area.

Navy entomologists now certify that “all feasible measures have been taken” to control the infestation and have recommended “repopulation of berthing,” according to a statement from Cmdr. Cindy Fields, a public affairs officer for the Naval Submarine Forces Pacific.

This campaign aboard the USS Connecticut has included laying down diatomaceous dust to draw insects out of hiding and into contact

with this “deadly” countermeasure, according to the statement.

But the Navy’s efforts have not quelled concerns from crew members, some of whom have been sleeping on cots in a pier-side shelter erected as temporary quarters to avoid getting bitten in the submarine “racks” where people sleep.

“They are really frustrated and feel like they have been let down by the Navy,” said Jeffery Rachall, who previously served aboard the submarine and — since leaving military service in 2018 — has remained in close contact with other crew. “They are complaining about a lack of sleep. They itch, and the bugs are crawling all over.”

Bedbugs are oval-shaped insects, about

one-quarter inch long when fully grown, that feed on blood from humans and some animals. They can be transported into hotels, homes and boats on people’s clothing, luggage or other personal belongings. They often take up residence in beds, where they may leave small spots that mark their presence. Though bites swell and become itchy, it may take two days or more for them to show up.

It is unclear how the infestation started on the USS Connecticut, but it’s possible it was during a port stop, according to Rachall.

The USS Connecticut is a nuclear-powered, fast-attack submarine launched in 1997 that was transferred to a Washington home port in 2011. It can be used to conduct reconnaissance and protect Navy fleets.

Senators seek to expand military eligibility

BY SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee pressed for answers Thursday on how to address what he calls the most important issue surrounding military service: the small percentage of young people who qualify.

Congressional lawmakers had long studied how to expand military service eligibility for Americans who are between 17 and 24 years old, Sen. Jim Inhofe, of Oklahoma, said during a subcommittee hearing to discuss the findings of a congressionally mandated report about how to boost participation in military, national and public service.

Seventy-one percent of Americans be-

tween 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the military, as they fail to meet requirements in areas such as physical and mental health, grooming standards, criminal records and education. Recruiters and experts have argued the lack of eligible candidates could pose a threat to personnel readiness because the military relies on a constant stream of new recruits each year.

Each year, about 32 million citizens fall in that age range of 17-24 — the prime recruiting target for the military. However, those who are interested in serving and who meet the academic, physical, medical, behavioral and legal standards drops to a pool of 450,000 candidates.

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, which sets annual policy and spending priorities for the Pentagon, di-

rected a National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service to produce a report that identifies ways to improve military recruiting and attract young people to national and public service.

The commission spent the next two years holding listening sessions with various representatives to discuss the issue and develop best practices.

The report's most controversial recommendation was women between the ages of 18 and 25 should be eligible for a future draft in the event of a perpetual war.

Throughout the hearing, the commission's members detailed new ways to attract young people to serve in the armed forces, such as more incentives, particularly in education, better marketing tactics and increased career flexibility.

6th juror picked for Chauvin trial; murder charged added

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS—A man who said he has a “very negative” impression of Derek Chauvin nevertheless became the sixth juror selected for the former Minneapolis police officer's trial in George Floyd's death.

The man, who told attorneys he could set that aside and consider the evidence in the case, was the only juror chosen Thursday in a day most notable for the judge restoring a third-degree murder charge against Chauvin.

After continuing jury selection, which was expected to resume Friday for a fourth day, the panel seated so far will include five men and one woman. Three of those seated are white, one is multiracial, one is Hispanic and one is Black, according to Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill.

Cahill's restoration of the third-degree murder charge came at the start of Thursday's proceedings, a day after Chauvin failed to get appellate courts to block the charge, handing jurors

one more option for a conviction if they choose. Cahill had earlier rejected it as not warranted by the circumstances of Floyd's death, but an appellate court ruling in an unrelated case established new grounds.

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.

The sole juror picked Thursday described himself as an outgoing, family-oriented soccer fan for whom the prospect of the trial is “kind of exciting.” Asked whether he could set his opinions aside and stick to the evidence presented in court, he replied: “I'm willing to see all the evidence and everything, hear witnesses.”

Several other candidates were dismissed, including a woman who said she “can't unsee the video” of Chauvin pinning Floyd, and a man who said he has doubts about Black Lives Matter and the way the group pursues its goals.

Portland mayor seeks \$2M to stem gun violence

*Associated Press
Report for America*

PORTLAND, Ore. — The mayor of Portland, Ore., announced Thursday he would seek \$2 million in one-time funding for police, other agencies and outreach programs to try to stem rampant gun violence in the city.

The move by Mayor Ted Wheeler represents an about-face after city leaders in June voted to cut nearly \$16 million from the police budget, reductions that included the elimination of a gun violence reduction unit. The cuts came amid racial justice protests following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Oregon's largest city has seen a spike in violence. So far this year, there have been 20 homicides, most the result of shootings. During the same period of 2020 — the deadliest year in the city in more than a quarter century — there was one.

A group of community mem-

bers and leaders sent a letter to the City Council on Thursday with a list of actions they believe will slow gun violence, including expanding the ranks of street-level outreach workers, increasing gun crime investigations and re-establishing a uniformed patrol team to engage in violence prevention and response.

“We believe very strongly that it is important to intercede at this point, and appeal to the city to work with us and and to hear us, as it relates to the need for the tide to be stemmed with the number of shootings on the street,” said J.W. Matt Hennessee, chair of Inter-Faith Peace & Action Collaborative.

As of March 8, there have been 278 shootings in the Portland region, 58 people have been injured from shootings, and there have been 17 gun-related homicides, according to the mayor's office. At the current pace, shootings and homicides are on track to surpass last year's totals.

Calls for Cuomo resignation growing

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's grip on power appeared increasingly threatened Thursday as a majority of state legislators called for his resignation, Democrats launched an impeachment investigation and police in the state capital said they stood ready to investigate a groping allegation.

The firestorm around the Democrat grew a day after the Times Union of Albany reported that an unidentified aide had claimed Cuomo reached under her shirt and fondled her at his official residence late last year.

The woman hasn't filed a criminal complaint, but a lawyer for the governor said Thursday that the state had reported the allegation to the Albany Police Department after the woman involved declined to do so herself.

"In this case the person is represented by counsel and when counsel confirmed the client did not want to make a report, the state notified the police department and gave them the attorney's information," said Beth Gar-

vey, the governor's acting counsel.

An Albany Police Department spokesperson, Steve Smith, didn't immediately return a message from The Associated Press, but told The New York Times police had reached out to a representative for the woman.

The possible involvement of police comes as more lawmakers called on Cuomo to resign over alleged misconduct with women and allegations that his administration concealed how many nursing home residents died of COVID-19.

At least 121 members of the state Assembly and Senate have said publicly they believe Cuomo should quit office now, according to a tally by The Associated Press. The count includes 65 Democrats and 56 Republicans.

The top Democrat in the state Assembly, Speaker Carl Heastie, on Thursday backed a plan for its judiciary committee to launch an impeachment investigation.

The committee can interview witnesses and subpoena documents and its inquiry could be wide-ranging: from alleged sexual

misconduct to COVID-19 outbreaks at nursing homes.

It won't interfere with a separate inquiry of sexual harassment allegations being conducted by state Attorney General Letitia James, according to Heastie and James.

"The legislature needs to determine for itself what the facts are," a member of the committee, Assemblyman Tom Abinanti, said. "For the people who want immediate impeachment, I think we say please be patient. The process is slow. This could be the next step."

Cuomo has repeatedly said he won't resign and urged the public to await the outcome of the attorney general's investigation.

Asked for comment Thursday, Cuomo's office referred reporters to previous statements in which the governor denied inappropriately touching anyone, but apologized for some comments he made to female staffers. He's said he was trying to engage in playful banter and didn't intend to make people uncomfortable.

Dr. Seuss sales soar amid controversy

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Oh, the books that sold last week by Dr. Seuss.

More than 1.2 million copies of stories by the late children's author sold in the first week of March — more than quadruple from the week before — following the news that his estate was pulling six books because of racial and ethnic stereotyping. For days virtually every book in the top 20 on Amazon's bestseller list was by Dr. Seuss.

According to NPD BookScan, which

tracks around 85% of retail sales, the top sellers weren't even the books being withdrawn. "The Cat in the Hat" sold more than 100,000 copies, compared to just 17,000 in the previous week. "Green Eggs and Ham" topped 90,000 copies, and "One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish" sold around 88,000.

The six books going out of print are "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street," "If I Ran the Zoo," "McElligot's Pool," "On Beyond Zebra!," "Scrambled Eggs Super!"

and "The Cat's Quizzer."

Dr. Seuss was born on March 2, 1904, and sales traditionally go up during his birthday week. But this year they likely received an extra shot because of those most opposed to the estate's decision. Conservatives soon responded with allegations of "cancel culture," as Fox News provided extensive coverage and such prominent Republicans as House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy released videos of themselves reading from Seuss books.

Judge: CDC lacked authority to halt evictions

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — A federal judge in Ohio has ruled that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lacked the authority to issue a nationwide moratorium on rental evictions, the second such ruling issued by a federal judge in two weeks.

U.S. District Judge J. Philip Calabrese, sitting in Cleveland, ruled Wednesday that the CDC went beyond what the federal Public Health Service Act allows it to do in ordering a halt to evictions. However, he did not grant an injunction that would have stopped

the agency from enforcing the moratorium.

The ruling comes two weeks after U.S. District Judge J. Campbell Barker in the Eastern District of Texas determined that the moratorium was unconstitutional. The Justice Department is appealing that order.

The National Association of Homebuilders and a group of property owners from across northern Ohio had filed a federal lawsuit last October, claiming the CDC's order was overreaching and arbitrary.

The suit was one of several filed in federal courts across the country by property own-

ers who have struggled financially because of the coronavirus. Other courts around the country have upheld the eviction ban, said Diane Yentel, president of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition. She added that challenges to the moratorium made little sense when tens of billions of dollars in federal rental assistance are coming in the recently passed coronavirus relief bill.

The CDC eviction moratorium was signed in September by President Donald Trump and extended by President Joe Biden through March 31.

Revelers set to inundate wary Savannah

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — The South's largest St. Patrick's Day parade is canceled, as is the boozey riverside festival that accompanies it. Regardless, Savannah is preparing for its largest crowds since the yearlong pandemic began — an influx that officials worry could bring a surge in coronavirus infections.

The Irish holiday typically means Savannah's manicured squares and magnolia-shaded sidewalks are packed with thousands of gaudy green revelers on March 17. But with Georgia still reporting at least 1,000 new COVID-19 infections daily while ranking last in U.S. vaccinations, city officials pulled the plug on this year's parade — as they did a year ago when the pandemic was starting.

Likewise, Savannah City Hall withheld a permit for the sprawling St. Patrick's festival that's typically a magnet for beer-fueled revelry along the city's riverfront promenade of bars and souvenir shops.

But sidelining Savannah's largest gatherings hasn't stopped the party. The city's top tourism official says hotels in the downtown historic district could be 90% full this weekend — the busiest they've been in the past year.

"People know that Savannah is a St. Patrick's Day destination, they know the holiday is in the middle of the week and they're going to come the weekend before and after," said Joe Marinelli, president of Visit Savannah, the city's tourism bureau. He added that "COVID fatigue and pent up demand" for vacations are helping drive visitation.

Meanwhile, the owner of a new \$375 million hotel and nightlife development that covers a quarter-mile along the riverfront is promoting a festival beginning Friday with live music, a large fountain synchronized to Irish music and green lights illuminating the complex built from a shuttered power plant.

Savannah Mayor Van Johnson said the planned festivities at the Plant Riverside development are

"a slap in the face" to the city's efforts to curb coronavirus infections by forgoing events that draw big crowds.

Washington

SEATTLE — Washington state parks said Thursday that many group camps, day-use rental shelters, interpretive centers and historic facilities will start opening later this month.

With the state moving toward further reopening under Gov. Jay Inslee's coronavirus recovery plans, nearly 55 group camps in 52 state parks will open March 22, *The Seattle Times* reported. These normally open in March.

The remaining group camps will open when they normally open for the season. Additionally, 88 day-use shelters in 57 state parks will reopen March 22, or at the regular time they open for the season.

Occupancy at group camps and day-use shelters will be limited to a total of 15 people from two different

Connecticut

Gyms and fitness clubs across Connecticut that have been hit hard financially by the coronavirus pandemic are joining forces to persuade both federal and state elected leaders their industry still needs help.

Several of the state's larger health clubs and chains have so far joined the newly formed Connecticut Fitness Alliance. The coalition hopes to ultimately represent the interests of the more than 650 facilities located throughout the state, which employ a total of more than 50,000 people.

Greta Wagner, the group's chair and the executive director of Chelsea Piers Connecticut in Stamford, said health clubs, gyms and yoga studios around the U.S. recently decided to form state alliances after making little headway in passing a proposed \$30 billion federal relief package for the industry, known as The GYMS Act.

The industry also was not included in the \$1.9 trillion relief package President Joe Biden

signed into law on Thursday.

Nevada

LAS VEGAS — Workers in the key Las Vegas restaurant, hospitality and casino sectors were told Thursday they can get a coronavirus vaccination.

State COVID-19 response officials issued an order adding "frontline commerce and service industries" in Clark County to the eligibility list that started in December with doctors and first responders and has added teachers, government and community support employees.

People 65 and older became eligible for vaccinations last month.

Thursday's order affecting restaurant, hospitality and casino employees is limited to Clark County.

Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz said Thursday he's planning significant rollbacks of COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings, following an update by state health officials showing that 70% of the state's seniors have now been vaccinated.

"They will be probably our biggest turn because we're at a point where we have not been since this thing started, and it will start to give guidance on larger gatherings starting as early as April," Walz said Thursday during a visit to a Twin Cities high school.

The next three or four weeks will "determine how this pandemic ends," said Walz.

Walz's announcement also came on a day when the Minnesota Department of Health confirmed the state's first known case of a coronavirus variant that was originally identified in South Africa.

New York

NEW YORK — Travelers to New York from other U.S. states will no longer be required to quarantine starting April 1, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Thursday.

Cuomo, who has been easing coronavirus restrictions amid calls for his resignation over sex-

ual harassment allegations, said the two-week quarantine for domestic travelers will be recommended but no longer mandated. International travelers will still be required to quarantine, he said.

The Democratic governor said in a statement that New York is "winning the footrace between the infection rate and the vaccination rate, allowing us to open new sectors of our economy and start our transition to a new normal in a post-pandemic world."

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said city officials were not consulted about the move to end the quarantine requirement, and he questioned its wisdom.

Dr. Jay Varma, senior health adviser to the mayor, said the city is still "at a very tenuous point" despite rising vaccination levels because highly transmissible variants of the coronavirus now account for more than half of new infections.

Idaho

BOISE — A rural Idaho high school isn't hosting a prom this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, so a group of parents planned to throw their own — promoting it with the tagline, "A Little Party Never Killed Nobody." But after getting calls from the school district and a local news organization, one organizer won't say if the event is still set for next month.

Chanall Astle, the parent of a Melba Junior-Senior High School student and one of the organizers, told the Idaho Statesman that the tagline was in reference to "The Great Gatsby," which is the theme of the event. (The line does not make an appearance in "The Great Gatsby" novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but it is the title of a song sung by Fergie and featured in the 2013 film adaptation of the movie).

Astle removed the prom flier from Facebook after she said she got a call from school district officials. She wouldn't say whether the event was still scheduled to take place.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man arrested for shooting at hallucinations

OR SALEM — The police bulletin, all in uppercase, carried this headline on Wednesday: MAN ARRESTED FOR SHOOTING AT HALLUCINATIONS.

Officers in Salem, Ore., on Tuesday afternoon responded to reports of a man shooting a gun in the backyard of a residence. The man then drove away. Officers located the vehicle and detained the man, Martin Abrego, 27, of Salem.

Police said they noticed the smell of natural gas, cordoned off the area and summoned the fire department. Gas to the home was turned off. It turned out that one of the bullets hit the home's natural gas meter. No one was hurt.

Detectives said Abrego was possibly under the influence of narcotics and was hallucinating. He believed he was being attacked and shot at the hallucinations, police said.

Flights halted at airport after drone sighted

NC GREENSBORO — A drone disrupted flights from a North Carolina airport, prompting an investigation from the Federal Aviation Administration and local law enforcement on where it came from and who owned it.

According to the FAA, the drone was seen flying over and around Piedmont Triad International Airport between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. on Tuesday, news sources reported. Air traffic controllers remained in constant communication with local officials as they searched for the drone operator, the FAA said.

Controllers switched runways and periodically suspended

flights while the drone was in the area. Flights were also held on the ground and one flight headed to Greensboro was diverted to another airport.

2 giraffes found dead after barn blaze at zoo

VA VIENNA — Two giraffes were found dead after firefighters battled a blaze at a Virginia zoo, officials said.

A two-story barn at Roer's Zoofari caught fire around 5:30 p.m. Monday night, news outlets reported.

The two giraffes were found after the fire was extinguished. Fairfax County Fire and Rescue said no other animals were injured.

"We are all devastated by this incident," said Vanessa Stoffel, an owner of Roer's Zoofari.

Stoffel said one of the giraffes who died was Waffles, a 6-year-old who came to the zoo in 2016. The other giraffe was Waffles' new companion who had not been at the zoo long enough to be named, Stoffel said.

Waffles "was extremely popular with all our staff and guests," Stoffel said.

Police: Dad jailed after 3-year-old shoots self

LA NEW ORLEANS — A New Orleans man has been jailed after his 3-year-old daughter got her hands on a gun and shot herself, New Orleans police said.

Barry Frelix, 41, was charged with second-degree cruelty to a juvenile, obstruction of justice and illegal possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, according to the New Orleans Police Department.

His daughter suffered a gunshot wound to her hand as well as

a second graze wound but was expected to recover, authorities said.

Police said Frelix first reported that he and the girl were out for a walk before 11 p.m. on Feb. 25 when she was struck by gunfire. Frelix took the child to the hospital in his car, according to investigators.

Detectives investigating the shooting said they later determined that the girl actually found a gun inside her house and it went off, wounding her.

Police: 19 cats, 3 dogs removed from home

MI PORT HURON — Nineteen cats and three dogs have been removed from a Port Huron home that a building inspector has deemed unfit for living.

Police and animal control officers found the animals after a report of animal cruelty and hoarding, according to Port Huron police.

Floors in the home were covered in animal urine and feces. Several of the animals were sick or diseased and a couple needed urgent care, police said.

A 53-year-old woman and her 44-year-old husband have made plans to move from the home.

The case was under investigation and charges were forthcoming, police said.

Sheriff: Girl threatened to shoot up her school

FL LAKE PLACID — A 13-year-old Florida girl was arrested after investigators learned she threatened on an Instagram account to shoot up her middle school, sheriff's officials said.

The girl's threats resulted in about 400 students staying home from Lake Placid Middle School

on Tuesday, the Highlands County Sheriff's Office said in a Facebook post.

The seventh grade student is charged with a written threat to kill or injure, disturbance of a school function and using a two-way device to facilitate a felony, Highlands County Sheriff's officials said.

The Instagram account where the threat was made has been deleted, officials said.

Investigators are looking into the motive and trying to determine whether anyone else was involved in the threat.

School reopens day after explosive injures 6

MI NEWAYGO — A high school in western Michigan reopened a day after a student accidentally detonated a homemade explosive in a classroom.

Newaygo High School was found to be safe after vents and the heating and cooling system were checked, the district said.

"Law enforcement and school administrators met with students to review the situation and share any pertinent details about what had happened," the district said in a statement.

Police said a 16-year-old boy brought a homemade explosive to school and accidentally detonated it, injuring himself, four other students and a teacher. The boy's injuries were described as "moderate to severe."

Newaygo Police Chief Georgia Andres said the student showed a "severe lapse in judgment" but it "was definitely not something he intended."

WXMI-TV reported that more explosives were found at a residence and safely detonated by authorities.

— From wire reports

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Reporting
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and Military News

76ers big man Embiid leading MVP race

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Joel Embiid sank a step-back jumper in the final minute of the best game of his NBA career, ran back with his arms raised high over his head as piped-in “M-V-P!” “M-V-P!” chants blared through the arena and beckoned with his hands for imaginary fans — for sure, the Philadelphia 76ers’ fanatics watching at home — to get loud.

Embiid plays with as much fun as any MVP front-runner, and on the February night he dropped 50 points on the Chicago Bulls, he sent a sign to the fans they are with him in spirit.

“The fans are always there for me when I play,” Embiid said. “I play for the fans, I play for the city. All my goals when I play basketball are related to the city of Philadelphia. I feel like they’re here for us even when they’re not. I always feel their presence.”

Guess what, Joel: Sixers fans are allowed back in the building on Sunday, and if they are among the lucky 3,100 to snag a ticket — lower-center tickets can be found on StubHub for up to \$1,250 a pop — they’ll surely show the love worthy of 20,000 back to Embiid.

At 26, Embiid has not only led the Sixers (25-12) to the best record in the Eastern Conference, he’s at last blossomed into the durable, mature and downright dominant force the Sixers expected when they made

him the No. 3 pick of the 2014 draft.

“I just want to destroy everything in my path,” Embiid said.

Let’s not raise a “Mission Accomplished” banner quite yet in the Wells Fargo Center rafters.

But what Embiid has done through the All-Star break has made him the betting +200 MVP favorite (Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James is next at +225) and turned — along with fellow All-Star Ben Simmons and Tobias Harris — the Sixers into perhaps the only team that can give Brooklyn a run out of the East. The Sixers have not won the NBA championship since 1983.

“It’s nice to have a big guy in the MVP talk,” Hall of Famer Shaquille O’Neal told The Associated Press. “You have to take a high-percentage shot and take advantage of your opponent. He’s finally playing like that. This is how you play. You want to be good, you want to be great or you want to be the greatest? You decide.”

Embiid, who missed what would have been his first two seasons because of injuries, still put up strong numbers in his first four. But he always left hints there was so much untapped potential in his about 7-foot frame.

His 30.2 points are behind only Washington’s Bradley Beal and about 2½ points higher than his previous career best. Embiid has five games of 40-plus points and 10-

plus rebounds in 30 games — the rest of the NBA players combined hit that mark only four times — highlighted by that 50-point, 17-board game on Feb. 17 against the Bulls. Embiid was the first 76er to score 50 since Allen Iverson in 2005.

He is trying to become the first Sixer to win NBA MVP — the fans call it an MVBiid campaign — since Iverson in 2001. Moses Malone (1982-83), Julius Erving (1980-81) and Wilt Chamberlain (who won three straight from 1965-1968) all won the award.

■ Embiid’s 13 career 40-10 games tie him with Charles Barkley for second-most in team history, behind Chamberlain (31).

■ He leads the NBA in total free throws made (298), free throws made per game (9.9) and free-throw attempts per game (11.6).

■ Embiid, Barkley and Chamberlain are the only three 76ers with at least 900 points and 300 rebounds within their first 30 games of a season.

Embiid said he cared more this season about winning defensive player of the year — though he may have to fight off Simmons — than taking any other individual award.

“When I came in the league, I never thought I would be that good offensively,” he said. “I always focused on the defensive side. That’s been my goal, to win it.”

Leading the 76ers to their first NBA Finals trip since 2001 could bolster his credentials for individual awards.

Irving scores 40 to lead short-handed Nets past Celtics

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kyrie Irving scored 40 points to lead the Brooklyn Nets to a 121-109 victory over the Boston Celtics on Thursday night.

James Harden had 22 points and 10 rebounds for Brooklyn, which improved to 25-13 with its 12th win in 13 games. Landry Shamet added 18 points and fellow reserve Jeff Green finished with 11. Joe Harris added 12 as the Nets won without Kevin Durant and newcomer Blake Griffin.

Jayson Tatum scored 31 points but Boston had its four-game winning streak snapped. Marcus Smart added 19 in his return from injury.

Suns 127, Trail Blazers 121:

Devin Booker returned from the knee injury that kept him out of the All-Star Game to score 35 points and Phoenix beat host Portland for its fifth straight victory.

Bucks 134, Knicks 101: Giannis Antetokounmpo followed up his MVP performance in the All-Star Game with his fifth triple-double of the season to help Milwaukee rout visiting New York.

76ers 127, Bulls 105: Tobias Harris scored 24 points and Philadelphia beat host Chicago even though it was missing stars Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons for contact tracing.

Clippers 130, Warriors 104: Kawhi Leonard scored 28 points in three quarters and Los

Angeles sent visiting Golden State to its fourth consecutive loss.

Heat 111, Magic 103: Jimmy Butler had 27 points and 11 assists, Kelly Olynyk scored 20 points and host Miami beat Orlando to move over the .500 mark for the first time this season.

Hornets 105, Pistons 102: P.J. Washington had 20 points and nine rebounds, Terry Rozier hit some big shots down the stretch and Charlotte beat visiting Detroit to get back to .500 for the first time since Jan. 13.

Hawks 121, Raptors 120: Tony Snell hit a three-pointer at the buzzer and Atlanta came back from a 15-point deficit in the final six minutes to beat To-

ronto in Tampa, Fla..

Timberwolves 135, Pelicans 105: Jaylen Nowell hit six three-pointers on his way to a career-best 28 points, top overall draft choice Anthony Edwards scored 27 points and Minnesota routed host New Orleans.

Kings 125, Rockets 105: De’Aaron Fox had 30 points, nine assists and seven rebounds host Sacramento sent Houston to its 14th consecutive loss.

Thunder 116, Mavericks 108: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 32 points and Oklahoma City beat a visiting Dallas team that rested both Luka Doncic and Kristaps Porzingis.

Extra value on NFL free agents this year

Associated Press

DENVER — Teams searching for an antidote to the high-octane offenses and mobile quarterbacks that dominate the modern NFL won't have to wait around for the draft.

Free agency this year promises a deeper pool of possibilities than usual because the league's lost revenues during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 resulted in the first decrease in the salary cap in a decade.

"You're going to see more veteran guys released for cap purposes than you would otherwise," ex-NFL GM and Hall of Famer Bill Polian said after the league announced a salary cap of \$182.5 million in 2021,

an 8% reduction from last year.

COVID-19 also produced an irregular college season complete with opt-outs and cancellations, including the East-West Shrine Game.

Then, the league scuttled its annual scouting combine in Indianapolis, making it harder still for teams to evaluate the incoming class.

"In the draft, you're just shooting from the hip because you just haven't really spent any time around players," former Bucs GM Mark Dominik said.

Society has turned to videoconferences and remote work over the last year, and the NFL is no different. With scouts unable to visit schools and do

their usual vetting of players, personnel departments are relying on hour-long Zoom calls to get to know these prospects.

"It's just a lot more difficult to gauge character," Dominik said. "So, that might just make somebody be a little bit more aggressive in free agency."

While the veteran possibilities come with the caveat of more wear and tear, they also carry fewer unknowns, making the risk/reward equation easier to stomach.

"Guys are going to say, 'I know who this guy is, as much as I want to build through the draft because I need to financially, especially this year,'" Dominik said. "That's part of the reason John Schneider

said, 'I'll take Jamal Adams and I'll give away my draft picks.'"

The Seahawks' GM traded away multiple first-round picks as well as a third-rounder for the veteran safety before the 2020 season, leaving him with four selections this year, including just one pick in the first three rounds.

Dominik said those who cash in the most and the soonest will share one trait in particular.

"I think the guys with speed are the guys that are going to find the biggest paychecks on defense, because it's just such a fast game now that you have to be able to find ways to combat that," he said.

No. 2 Baylor holds on, beats K-State in Big 12 quarters

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — MaCio Teague scored 24 points, Davion Mitchell added 23 and second-ranked Baylor held on to beat Kansas State 74-68 on Thursday and avoid what would have been one of the biggest upsets in the history of the Big 12 Tournament.

The top-seeded Bears (22-1) rolled into T-Mobile Arena after their first regular-season conference title since 1950 and with a No. 1 seed in next week's NCAA Tournament nearly locked up.

Yet the Wildcats (9-20), who lost their two regular-season games to Baylor by an average of 40 points, never allowed the high-powered Bears to slip away. They trailed by four points with just over a minute to go, but Jared Butler made a couple of free throws to seal the win.

It sent Baylor into a semifinal matchup with No. 12 Oklahoma State on Friday night.

No. 9 Ohio State 79, Minnesota 75: At Indianapolis, Duane Washington Jr. and Jus-

tice Sueing each scored 16 points and the Buckeyes fended off the Golden Gophers' late charge in the Big Ten Tournament.

No. 12 Oklahoma State 72, No. 10 West Virginia 69: At Kansas City, Mo., Avery Johnson III hit the go-ahead bucket for the Cowboys with less than a minute to go, and Sean McNeil's tying three-pointer came a split-second after the final buzzer, allowing them to escape the Mountaineers in the Big 12 Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 11 Kansas 69, No. 25 Oklahoma 62: At Kansas City, Mo., Ochai Agbaji scored a career-high 26 points, Marcus Garrett added 17, and the Jayhawks held on after blowing most of a 20-point halftime lead to beat the Sooners in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 Tournament.

No. 13 Texas 67, No. 20 Texas Tech 66: Matt Coleman scored 19 points, including the go-ahead free throws with 1.8 seconds left, and the Longhorns rallied in the closing minutes to beat the Red Raiders at Kansas

City, Mo., in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 Tournament.

Georgetown 72, No. 14 Villanova 71: Dante Harris made two free throws with 4.7 seconds left to cap a perfect game from the line for the Hoytas, and they upset the Wildcats to reach the Big East Tournament semifinals

for the first time since 2015.

No. 16 Virginia 72, Syracuse 69: At Greensboro, N.C., Reece Beekman hit a three-pointer as time expired to help the Cavaliers edge the Orange in the quarterfinals of the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament.

Virginia was to face Georgia Tech in Friday's semifinals, but that game was cancelled due to a positive COVID-19 test, quarantining and contact tracing within the Cavaliers program.

That means Georgia Tech will advance to Saturday's championship game to face the winner of the North Carolina-Florida State matchup.

No. 17 Creighton 87, Butler 56: With coach Greg McDermott back on the bench after a one-game suspension, the Blue-

jays cruised past the Bulldogs and into the semifinals of the Big East Tournament.

No. 19 San Diego State 69, Wyoming 66: At Las Vegas, Terrell Gomez scored 20 points and the Aztecs beat the Cowboys to advance to the Mountain West Conference Tournament semifinals.

North Carolina 81, No. 22 Virginia Tech 73: At Greensboro, N.C., Armando Bacot had 17 points and 13 rebounds while sparking a second-half surge that helped the Tar Heels beat the Hokies in the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 23 Colorado 61, California 58: At Las Vegas, Evan Mobley scored 15 points and the Buffaloes shook off a sluggish start to beat the Golden Bears in the Pac-12 Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 24 Southern California 91, Utah 85 (2OT): Evan Mobley scored 13 of his 26 points in the two overtimes and the Trojans outlasted the scrappy Utes in Las Vegas during the Pac-12 quarterfinals.

Maple Leafs top Jets to end 3-game skid

Associated Press

TORONTO — Auston Matthews scored his NHL-leading 21st goal of the season 59 seconds into overtime and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-3 on Thursday night to snap a three-game losing streak.

Mitch Marner, William Nylander and Ilya Mikheyev scored in regulation to help Toronto regain the overall NHL lead at 19-7-2. Frederik Andersen made 23 saves, and Matthews and Marner each added an assist.

Nikolaj Ehlers had two goals and an assist, and Paul Stastny also scored for the Jets. Connor Hellebuyck made 34 saves.

Capitals 5, Flyers 3: Alex Ovechkin scored his 715th career goal to help visiting Washington beat Philadelphia for its third straight victory and seventh in eight games.

Ovechkin moved within two goals of matching Phil Esposito for sixth on the NHL's career goals list.

Islanders 5, Devils 3: Matt Martin and Adam Pelech scored first-period goals, rookie Ilya Sorokin made 19 saves and New York welcomed back

fans to Nassau Coliseum by beating New Jersey for its seventh straight victory.

The Islanders are 12-0-2 at the arena this year, and this win came with 1,000 frontline workers in the stands. They were the first fans at Nassau Coliseum since March 7, 2020, five days before last season was suspended due to the pandemic.

Flames 2, Canadiens 1: Josh Leivo scored twice and host Calgary beat Montreal in Darryl Sutter's first game behind the bench in his Flames return.

Sutter took over last week for the fired Geoff Ward. Sutter previously spent eight years in the Flames organization as coach and eventually GM between 2002-10. The 62-year-old former player last coached the Flames on April 17, 2006, in a playoff game.

Hurricanes 5, Predators 1: Morgan Geekie scored his first two goals of the season and host Carolina used a rapid-fire scoring spree in the first period to beat Nashville for its seventh straight victory.

Geekie scored the game's first and fourth goals. His opening tally began a span of

three goals by the Hurricanes in less than 2½ minutes.

Bruins 4, Rangers 0: Jake DeBrusk returned to the Boston lineup after being benched one game for lack of effort and scored his first goal in almost a month, chasing visiting New York goalie Alexandar Georgiev early in the second period.

David Krejci scored his first goal of the season and Brad Marchand had two assists — one of them after sliding the puck through his own skates to set up Patrice Bergeron's short-handed goal that gave Boston a 2-0 lead after one. David Pastrnak also scored for Boston, and Jaroslav Halak stopped 28 shots for his second shutout of the year.

Red Wings 6, Lightning 4: Anthony Mantha broke a tie late in the first period, Jonathan Bernier stopped a season-high 40 shots and host Detroit beat Tampa Bay.

Brayden Point scored twice in a 1:14 stretch late in the game to pull the Lightning within one before they gave up an empty-net goal to Vladislav Namestnikov. Troy Stecher and Dylan Larkin also scored.

Penguins 5, Sabres 2: Ev-

geni Malkin had a goal and an assist and visiting Pittsburgh beat free-falling Buffalo for its fourth straight victory.

Jake Guentzel scored the go-ahead goal on the power play with 8:24 left in the second period. Brandon Tanev, Anthony Angelo and Bryan Rust, with an empty-netter, also scored in a game the Penguins never trailed.

Panthers 5, Blue Jackets 4 (OT): Frank Vatrano scored 2:48 into overtime, Sergei Bobrovsky made 28 saves and visiting Florida beat Columbus to sweep the two-game series.

The Panthers scored three times in the third period to erase a 4-1 deficit before Vatrano tipped in a rebounded shot from Jonathan Huberdeau to win it.

Blackhawks 4, Stars 2: Carl Soderberg and Alex DeBrincat scored power-play goals in the second period and visiting Chicago scored on four of its first eight shots against Dallas.

Thirty-seven-year-old defenseman Duncan Keith had his first goal in exactly a calendar year, Dominik Kubalik also scored and rookie Kevin Lankinen made 28 saves.

Hendrick off to fast start with two wins in four races

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Hendrick Motorsports celebrates each race win with a Victory Bell that is carted across the campus for every employee to ring.

If not for the pandemic, the bell would have made two trips so far this season.

The Hendrick folks believe the count should actually be four.

Hendrick Motorsports is off to a blazing start this season with two wins through NASCAR's first four races, a marked uptick for an organization that went deep into the

schedule the last few years before its program found a rhythm.

William Byron and Kyle Larson have Hendrick on a two-race streak heading into this weekend's race at Phoenix Raceway, where Chase Elliott won in November to clinch his first Cup Series championship. Elliott and Alex Bowman are winless through the first month, but Bowman won the pole for the Daytona 500 and Elliott, a week after a runner-up finish in that marquee event, had the field covered at Daytona's road course until a questionable caution jumbled the

race.

"I mean, certainly the Hendrick guys have come to play," said Kyle Busch, a former Hendrick driver who has since won two Cup championships with Joe Gibbs Racing.

The momentum is a carryover from last season when Elliott gave Rick Hendrick his first title since Jimmie Johnson won it in 2016. The team had failed to advance a driver into the championship round in the three years between titles, a stretch that included an embarrassing 2018 season in which Elliott accounted for the only three wins for the entire organization.

The slow rebuild has focused on behind-the-scenes reorganizations and improving performance on 1.5-mile tracks. Hendrick Motorsports trailed its rivals in nearly every statistical category, including victories, at those tracks last season.

But after two stops at the bread-and-butter NASCAR circuits, Hendrick Motorsports is undefeated on intermediate tracks. NASCAR this year has diversified the schedule but there are still two 1.5-mile tracks in the third round of the playoffs, where a win earns an automatic berth into the championship finale.