

Report: Troops in Afghanistan undercounted

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The United States has about 1,000 more troops serving in Afghanistan than it has publicly acknowledged, a New York Times report said.

The number of American service members in the country was officially reduced to 2,500 in the final days of the Trump administration — the lowest level since the start of the war — but the number actually dropped to around 3,500, the newspaper reported Sunday.

The difference is the result of some special operations forces being “off the books” and some temporary and transitioning units being in theater, the report said. It cited unnamed American, European and Afghan officials.

The military’s method of reporting its overseas force numbers has drawn criticism before, including from then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in 2017, who pledged more straightforward accounting, shortly before the Trump administration began redacting numbers of troops in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan from quarterly reports.

The latest discrepancy comes as Presi-

dent Joe Biden weighs whether to pull all remaining U.S. forces out in the next 45 days under the terms of a U.S.-Taliban deal signed last February.

Some of the uncounted troops include Army Rangers, who work simultaneously under the Pentagon and the CIA while in Afghanistan, the report said. Washington has historically assigned service members to the CIA and other agencies while classifying information about their presence.

Since 2017, the Pentagon has said that it does not include some transferring troops in its total forces reporting because the period between two units transitioning is usually very short.

The U.S. military in Afghanistan refused to answer questions about troop numbers when asked by Stars and Stripes and directed all queries to the Pentagon.

A Pentagon official told The New York Times that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan stands at 2,500.

The U.S. had previously undercounted its military presence in the country after an Obama administration drawdown supposedly brought the U.S. troop strength to 8,400. After Mattis expressed frustration

with the way the numbers were counted, the Pentagon announced in late 2017 there were actually more than 11,000 troops there.

Under the deal last February, the U.S. agreed to a withdrawal of all foreign forces by May 1 if the Taliban meet counterterrorism pledges that critics have said are vague or unverifiable. The group insists it is meeting its commitments, which include not attacking foreign forces. The Taliban have threatened to resume attacks on foreign troops if they remain in the country past the deadline.

The Biden administration is in the process of reviewing the deal and whether to complete the pullout by May.

Former President Donald Trump campaigned on ending America’s longest war, now in its 20th year. But critics worried that his official troop drawdown from around 13,000 to 2,500 by January was based on political motives, and they said a full withdrawal in the coming months could benefit extremist groups.

In addition to American troops, there are roughly 7,000 NATO and coalition troops in Afghanistan training local forces.

Virtual learning to be limited to 2K DODEA students

By ERICA EARL
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — In the uncertainty of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Defense Department schools around the world will begin registration for virtual learning on March 23 for the 2021-22 school year.

The virtual option is available for all Department of Defense Education Activity students in kindergarten through 12th grade, though it is primarily geared toward those who are especially vulnerable to the virus, according to a letter to parents Monday from Joan K.

Mendel Elementary School on Yokota Air Base, Japan.

Sign-ups for all regions begin March 23, with full-time virtual school enrollments limited to 2,000 students in the entire DODEA system, Pacific district spokeswoman Miranda Ferguson told Stars and Stripes via email Monday. About 9,000 students enrolled for the current school year, DODEA officials said last fall.

Parents who opt to enroll their students in virtual school must agree to remain in the program for the full school year, according to the letter from Mendel’s acting principal,

Hoai-My Winder.

DODEA-Pacific also plans to keep in-person classes open, local health conditions permitting, according to the letter.

The cutoff date for virtual school request forms is April 7, and requests will be handled on a first-come, first-serve basis, according to Winder.

“Given the uncertainties of the ongoing pandemic, DODEA recognizes that students and families with health vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 may still have concerns about returning to school,” she wrote. “We understand that it will be a difficult decision for

many to commit to the full school year in [virtual school], but it is critical for planning and staffing.”

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus.

Parents may fill out the virtual school application in the Aspen Parent Portal, the web-based management system used by DODEA schools.

To be eligible for the virtual curriculum, students must be enrolled in a local DODEA brick-and-mortar school.

Schools will notify parents of the status of their children’s virtual school enrollment in May.

NCIS ups reward for info in sailor's death

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — The Navy is offering a 10,000 euro reward for information in the hit-and-run death of a Sigonella sailor in July.

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service put out flyers Friday in both English and Italian offering the reward to help identify the driver and the vehicle that killed Seaman Arturo Rivera.

Rivera, 22, was killed July 26 at about 3:20 a.m. on a coastal road near a Catania, Sicily, beach after leaving a nightclub and heading toward his car, the newspaper *ilSicilia* and other

media reported. The vehicle that hit him kept going.

Investigators recovered parts of the vehicle but nothing that could identify it, they said.

The reward was agreed to by NCIS and the Catania Municipal Police, which has jurisdiction in the case.

"We collaborated on it," NCIS Special Agent Daniel Slimer said. "We want to make sure that every stone is turned ... one, to get justice, and two, to get closure for the family."

In October, NCIS offered a 1,000 euro reward. That brought in tips but "nothing that panned out," Slimer said.

Still, rewards keep people talking about a case and can put pressure on both unknown suspects and those who have pertinent information, he said.

The new reward, equivalent to about \$12,000, was large enough to require approval by the NCIS director, Slimer said, and has already resulted in new leads.

Rivera, who was from Long Beach, Calif., joined the Navy in October 2018 after graduating high school in 2016 and attending classes at the University of East Bay in San Francisco. At Fort Sam Houston, Texas, he attended schools to become a hospital corpsman and pharmacy

technician. Rivera had been assigned to U.S. Naval Hospital Sigonella since November 2019, the Navy said.

"His intelligence, work ethic, along with the kindness and caring he showed everyone around him made us all proud and feeling privileged to have met an amazing human," his family said in his obituary. "While our memories of him leave smiles on our faces, we will forever be left with a void in our hearts that may never be filled."

Anyone with information can contact the Catania Municipal Police, or NCIS at +39-335-484-4145.

Dyess airman who led police on 16-day manhunt gets jail

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

An airman who spent 16 days as a fugitive after he assaulted police and fled a Texas base last spring was found guilty at a court-martial and sentenced to 30 months confinement earlier this month.

Airman 1st Class Erland Injerd, 38, was convicted of desertion, resisting apprehension, assault of a superior noncommissioned officer, failure to obey an order or regulation, carrying a concealed weapon, assault upon law enforcement and two counts of disorderly conduct, Air Force officials said.

He was given a dishonorable discharge and reduced in rank to airman basic during the March 6 court-martial at Dyess Air Force Base.

Injerd went on the run after he scuffled with three Air Force officials outside his on-base home April 22, then fled through the house, scaled a base perimeter fence and evaded a police search in the neighboring woods.

Several law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, U.S. Marshals Service and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations worked to find Injerd. He was arrested May 7 about 200 miles from the base at a Dal-

las apartment, and was transported to a county jail in Taylor County outside Dyess, records showed.

A criminal complaint the FBI filed in federal court said the altercation outside his house began when Senior Master Sgt. Klaxton Jett, Master Sgt. Derek L. Krahn and Security Forces officer John Breed visited to order him to surrender his firearms after he sent a threatening email to his chain of command.

Injerd began cursing at the men and refused to comply before Breed ordered him to turn around and put his hands behind his back, the complaint said. He resisted, punching the patrolman in the face, and when the two other men tried to restrain him, they all wound up on the ground.

"Injerd intentionally poked his finger in Officer Breed's right eye and struck SMSgt. Jett in the knee," knowing Jett had recently had knee surgery, the complaint alleged.

When his wife opened the front door to the house, Injerd fled inside and then out through a basement window. Officials warned in the hours afterward that he may have armed himself before escaping over the base fence and disappearing in a wooded area of Abilene.

Marine force issues apology for defense of its female troops

USA Today

A U.S. Marine expeditionary force apologized Saturday for comments its official account made on Twitter defending women in the military amid a larger dispute between the Pentagon and Fox News host Tucker Carlson over female service members.

Joining a larger debate over the role of women in the military, the II Marine Expeditionary Force's official account quipped back at one commenter, "Come back when you've served and been pregnant." The account later apologized for the apparent overreach after online backlash, explaining "we've strayed away from our brand and realize that."

"We are human and we messed up. We intended to speak up for female Marines and it was an effort to support them. They are a crucial part to our corps and we need them to know that. We will adjust fire and ensure the utmost professionalism in our tweets," the account later tweeted.

The expeditionary force, one of the three in the Marines Corps, posted a tweet in support of U.S. Master Gunnery Sgt. Scott Stalker, who was also condemning comments from the Fox News host.

3 nations suspend AstraZeneca vaccine

Associated Press

BERLIN — Germany, France and Italy on Monday became the latest countries to suspend use of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine over reports of dangerous blood clots in some recipients, though the company and European regulators have said there is no evidence the shot is to blame.

AstraZeneca's formula is just one of three vaccines in use on the Continent. But the move amounts to another setback for the European Union's vaccine rollout, which has been plagued by supply shortages and other complications and is lagging well behind the campaigns in

Britain and the United States.

The EU drug regulatory agency's safety committee called a meeting for Thursday to review experts' findings on the AstraZeneca vaccine and decide whether any action needs to be taken.

The furor comes as much of Europe is tightening restrictions on schools and businesses amid surging cases of COVID-19.

Germany's health minister said the decision to suspend AstraZeneca shots was taken on the advice of the country's vaccine regulator, the Paul Ehrlich Institute, which called for further investigation into seven reported cases of clots in the brains of people

who had been vaccinated.

"Today's decision is a purely precautionary measure," Jens Spahn said. "The most important thing for confidence is transparency," he added.

French President Emmanuel Macron said his country will likewise suspend shots at least until Tuesday afternoon. He said France hopes to resume using the formula soon.

Italy's medicines regulator also announced a precautionary, temporary ban, less than 24 hours after saying the "alarm" over the vaccine "wasn't justified."

AstraZeneca said on its website that there have been 37 reports of blood clots out of

more than 17 million people vaccinated in the 27-country European Union and Britain. The drugmaker said there is no evidence the vaccine carries an increased risk of clots.

The World Health Organization and the EU's European Medicines Agency have also said that the data does not suggest the vaccine caused the clots and that people should continue to be immunized.

Denmark last week became the first country to temporarily halt use of the AstraZeneca vaccine in recent days. The other countries include Ireland, Thailand, the Netherlands, Norway, Iceland, Congo and Bulgaria.

Colleagues: Alleged Capitol rioter was Nazi sympathizer

The Washington Post

A U.S. Army reservist arrested on suspicion of participating in the Jan. 6 Capitol riot was known to most of his co-workers as a white supremacist and Nazi sympathizer and also grew a "Hitler mustache" while working as a Navy contractor with security clearance, according to federal prosecutors.

Timothy Hale-Cusanelli, of Colts Neck, N.J., is among a growing number of people connected to the military or police who are charged with participating in the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol. Hale-Cusanelli faces five federal charges, including three counts of crimes on restricted grounds. He is a sergeant in the Army Reserve, serving in the

174th Infantry Brigade out of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey, according to the Army.

Arguing in a Friday filing that Hale-Cusanelli should remain in pretrial detention, the U.S. District Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia released parts of interviews with his co-workers at Naval Weapons Station Earle, N.J. Several of the nearly four dozen Navy service members and contractors told Naval Criminal Investigation Service agents that Hale-Cusanelli was a white supremacist.

Hale-Cusanelli's attorney, Jonathan Zucker, said in a filing arguing for his release that there is no evidence that he is a member of "any white supremacist organizations."

Soldier pleads not guilty in plots to attack NYC

New York Daily News

NEW YORK — A U.S. Army soldier pleaded not guilty Monday to plotting terrorist attacks on New York City landmarks with an undercover FBI employee posing as a member of the Islamic State militant group.

Cole Bridges faces a maximum of 40 years in prison for attempting to provide material support to ISIS and attempted murder of U.S. military service members. Prosecutors say Bridges, 20, shared his disenchanted with the military in online chats with the undercover FBI employee starting in 2019.

The radicalized soldier even-

tually began advising the fake ISIS sympathizer on how to thwart U.S. military attacks in the Middle East and "provided advice" on potential targets in New York City, including the 9/11 Memorial, according to a complaint.

Bridges, a resident of Stow, Ohio, and member of the 3rd Infantry Division, was arrested in January at the Army base at Fort Stewart, Ga.

Bridges' attorney Sabrina Shroff said during the Manhattan federal court hearing that she expected to discuss a "disposition" of the case before it goes to trial — meaning the soldier could soon plead guilty.

2 charged in assault on officer who died after Capitol riot

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — U.S. authorities have arrested and charged two men with assaulting U.S. Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick with bear spray during the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, but have not determined whether the exposure

caused his death.

Julian Elie Khater, 32, of Pennsylvania, and George Pierre Tanios, 39 of Morgantown, W.Va., were arrested Sunday and are expected to appear in federal court Monday.

"Give me that bear s---," Khater allegedly

said to Tanios on video recorded at the Capitol at 2:14 p.m., where Sicknick and other officers were standing guard, arrest papers say. About nine minutes later, Khater is seen on video discharging a canister into the face of Sicknick and two other officers, arrest papers allege.

Birmingham may extend mask mandate

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Leaders in Alabama's largest city likely will extend a mandate requiring face masks in public to slow the spread of the new coronavirus despite the state's plan to end the statewide rule next month, said City Council President William Parker.

While Gov. Kay Ivey has said the state order will expire April 9, Parker said officials in Birmingham had been in discussions with medical experts and will push to keep a requirement in place for face masks in public places.

"I feel very confident that there will be a mask ordinance for the city of Birmingham," he said Saturday at the opening of a new vaccination site.

A City Council vote likely will be held April 6, he said.

Birmingham is located in Jefferson County, which is among multiple counties the Alabama Department of Public Health rates as having a high infection rate over the last two weeks even as cases and hospitalizations decline overall in the state during a surge in vaccinations.

Alaska

ANCHORAGE — Exactly one year after Alaska announced its first case of the coronavirus, the state reported that over one-third of its residents over the age of 16 have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

The figures were reported last Friday just days after the state dropped restrictions on who could get coronavirus vaccinations, opening eligibility to anyone 16 or older living or working in the state.

Alaska was the first state in the U.S. to remove vaccine eligibility requirements.

About 187,000 people, about 33.1% of all state residents over 16, had received at least one dose of the vaccine as of Friday. About 69% of residents aged 65 or older had received at least

one vaccine dose.

Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson said he's still considering removing the state's mask mandate at the end of March even as many residents turn down a coronavirus vaccine.

Speaking Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation," the Republican governor said the vaccine skepticism in the state is "troubling."

"Whenever we are opening up eligibility for the vaccine, we're moving through it very quickly because we're not having everybody sign up to take it," he said.

As of Sunday, nearly 300,000 people in Arkansas had been fully vaccinated, or about 10% of the state's population. The state reported 130 new cases of the virus and 19 more deaths, while hospitalizations continued to decline.

California

SAN FRANCISCO — San Francisco will allow people with HIV to get vaccinated, along with people who identify as deaf or disabled, starting on Monday when California opens up the number of residents eligible for the coronavirus vaccine to people with certain significant, high-risk medical conditions or disabilities.

An estimated 4.4 million Californians meet the state criteria, which includes more essential workers, people who work or live in jails, homeless shelters and other congregant places, and those with disabilities and health conditions that put them at risk of severe COVID-19.

San Francisco is going beyond the state's eligibility rules by covering developmental, medical, physical, sensory or behavioral health disabilities, including severe mental health or substance use disorders, the San Francisco Chronicle reported Sunday.

"Getting vaccinations to people with disabilities and who have severe underlying conditions, and people who are in congregate settings, is an important part of our efforts to save lives and protect our most vulnerable residents," Mayor London Breed said in a statement.

Florida

ORLANDO — With Florida on Monday opening up vaccinations for the first time to people age 60 and up, Lynn Duke wanted to be among the first people in her age category to get the shot.

She arrived at a FEMA mass vaccination site at a community college campus in Orlando at 6:15 a.m. and was out of observation a little after 7:30 a.m.

Florida previously had limited shots to people 65 years old and up, frontline health care workers, law enforcement, firefighters and school employees. Gov. Ron DeSantis extended eligibility starting Monday to those 60 and over.

Duke said she had no problem waiting until now to get the vaccine. Until vaccinations ramped up recently, she hadn't been expecting to get a shot until May.

"I'm 61 and have no other risk factors so I understand there are other people who need it more than I do," Duke said.

Indiana

INDIANAPOLIS — Teachers and other school employees became eligible Monday for COVID-19 vaccinations through shot clinics across Indiana.

State health officials said last week that the eligibility expansion comes at the direction of the Biden administration, which earlier allowed teachers to be vaccinated at pharmacies taking part in a federal program.

Indiana previously only allowed anyone aged 50 and older and those with at-risk health conditions to make vaccine ap-

pointments. The expansion for teachers now includes educators up to grade 12, as well as other school workers such as classroom aides, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and substitute teachers.

Gov. Eric Holcomb and top state health officials had repeatedly said they believed that targeting vaccinations to older age groups and health care workers, rather than school employees, was more effective at preventing serious illnesses and deaths.

Massachusetts

BOSTON — The leaders of three Massachusetts teachers unions are supporting emergency legislation filed by state lawmakers that would require the state's education commissioner to give school districts more time to prepare for the return of elementary school students to full-time, in-person lessons.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association, the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, and the Boston Teachers Union said the legislation would allow more school workers to get a vaccine before returning, The Boston Globe reported.

Teachers and other school workers became vaccine eligible last week.

State Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley has ordered school districts to return pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students to classrooms for full-time instruction by April 5. Middle schoolers are scheduled to return April 28.

Beth Kontos, president of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, said it is unfair and unrealistic to require school staff to return to in-person classes without the protection of a vaccine.

Gov. Charlie Baker last week announced that the state has set aside four weekend days over the next month exclusively for educators to receive shots at the state's mass vaccination sites.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City: Publicly owned maples aren't for syrup

MI ANN ARBOR — A Michigan city has a message for its residents: There's nothing sweet about tapping publicly owned trees for maple sap.

As the weather gets warmer, Ann Arbor is warning people not to poke trees in parks or along streets.

"When we find this equipment, staff will remove it," city spokesman Robert Kellar told MLive.com. "Tapping causes damage to these trees, which already face challenges, and leave them susceptible to insects and disease."

It's OK for an Ann Arbor resident to tap a maple tree on their own property, the city said.

Car crash sparks fire that burns down nearby home

FL DOVER — The Florida Highway Patrol said the crash of a car by a driver with a suspended license sparked a fire that destroyed a home over the weekend.

The car was traveling eastbound on Highway 92 in Hillsborough County, east of Tampa, when the driver lost control and crossed into westbound traffic. The car then collided with a tree, hit a wooden utility pole and overturned in a ditch, according to a report from the Florida Highway Patrol.

After being hit, the utility pole fell over, pulling power wires from a nearby house that was unoccupied. The sparking wires ignited the house that burned down. A nearby pickup truck also was damaged, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

The 31-year-old driver, who

had serious injuries, was cited for careless driving and driving while his license was suspended. His passenger suffered minor injuries, according to the report.

Barns built by 'Lion King' set for demolition

IN PERU — Historic barns that a man once known as "The Lion King" built in northern Indiana to house circus animals are set for demolition this spring once crews salvage artifacts from them.

The Indiana Department of Transportation recently began delivering demolition equipment to the former site of the Terrell Jacobs Circus Winter Quarters. The agency said two deteriorating barns and five other buildings must come down because they pose a public danger.

Crews will work with the International Circus Hall of Fame to salvage and preserve historic items from the decrepit buildings, which sit along U.S. 31 near Peru about 80 miles north of Indianapolis, said INDOT spokesman Hunter Petroviak.

During the \$332,000 demolition, which should be finished by June, all of the structures at the site will be razed except for a slaughterhouse.

Dog is finally adopted after 2 years in shelter

IL COLUMBIA — A dog that spent more than two years at a southern Illinois animal shelter waiting to be adopted has finally found a new family.

Demi spent 809 days at Helping Strays of Monroe County before a family adopted her March

7 from the shelter in Columbia, Ill., just south of St. Louis, the Belleville News-Democrat reported.

The shelter said in a Facebook post that Demi is a "sweet girl" with specific home needs, but she finally found the perfect match in her new family.

The shelter's posting about Demi's adoption led several people to post congratulations to the canine and her new owners.

Woman pleads guilty to prescription drug scheme

NV LAS VEGAS — A Nevada woman who imported prescription drugs and sold them to the tune of \$2 million over a seven-year period now faces up to 15 years in federal prison.

Patricia Padilla, 62, pleaded guilty to three counts, including conspiracy to import prescription drugs and distributing prescription drugs when not licensed as an importer.

The Drug Enforcement Administration and Las Vegas Metro Police said Padilla's illegal enterprise lasted from 2013 to 2018.

Padilla distributed drugs at her two stores, named Sinaloa Store and Deportes Y Mas. She would provide customers a fake prescription, then fulfill the order at the front of the store.

Man charged with impersonating officer

NC CHARLOTTE — A 52-year-old North Carolina man dubbed the "blue light bandit" was charged with impersonating a law enforcement officer.

James Douglas Miller, of Charlotte, was accused of using

blue lights to try to pull over cars on an interstate highway in western North Carolina, the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

Miller was arrested and charged with felony impersonation of a law enforcement officer.

The sheriff's office said Miller was accused of activating blue lights to stop drivers on U.S. 74 in Rutherford County on two separate occasions between Feb. 27 and Feb. 28.

Tourists can now ride in President Truman limo

FL KEY WEST — Visitors to the Florida Keys can now take a ride in one of Harry S. Truman's presidential limousines.

The nonprofit Key West Harry S. Truman Foundation recently acquired the vintage Lincoln Cosmopolitan stretch limo from a private collector in Texas.

The vehicle was based in New York City during Truman's presidency, which ran from 1945-53. Its new home is the Harry S. Truman Little White House in Key West.

The car, which has about 32,000 original miles on its odometer, features an intercom system, interior privacy shield, security elements and an airflow controller for the president's comfort.

Limo rides are part of the museum's new small-group White Glove Tour, where participants can view galleries of Truman objects not on public display. They can even wear white gloves to hold presidential belongings, like Truman's prized whiskey jigger.

— From wire reports

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68 tickets punched for March Madness

Associated Press

The 68 teams whose names popped up in the March Madness bracket only thought it was time to celebrate: The next four or five days figure to be the most nerve-wracking part of their seasons.

Welcome to Bubble Ball — the NCAA Tournament is being played in a pandemic, where no player can show up for the games in Indianapolis without seven negative COVID tests, and no team is really “in” the tournament until the ball is tipped off.

“Which potential season-ending test was more stressful than the other?” Drexel coach Zach Spiker said, meaning the challenges that still await. “Testing, practice, getting on the bus in Philadelphia, waiting for that reply, that response time to say, ‘We’re all negative here. OK, let’s get out of here. Let’s get to Indianapolis.’”

Because of COVID-19 issues, Drexel played a grand total of 19 games — about 11 fewer than usual — en route to the Colonial Athletic Conference title. That earned the Dragons an automatic bid into the tournament. The reward? In addition to a battery of nasal swabs, they get a No. 16 seed and an opening-round meeting with top-seeded Illinois.

The other top seeds were Michigan, Baylor and Gonzaga, which is the overall No. 1, and a 2-1 favorite to win it all and complete the first undefeated season since the 1976 Indiana Hoosiers.

In the biggest adjustment to a normal March Madness, all the games will be played in and around Indianapolis over 19

days. No more worrying about who got shipped to Spokane or mired in Memphis. The NCAA did, however, keep the region names — West, East, South and Midwest — to at least make the bracket look normal.

More about that bracket: A few bubble teams are coming from unexpected places, namely UCLA and Michigan State. Both were widely projected to make the field with ease, but they ended up as 11 seeds, paired in a First Four matchup on Thursday. The other 11-11 game pits Wichita State against Drake.

Teams like Louisville, Saint Louis, Colorado State and Mississippi would gladly trade places with them. And still might. In one of many first-of-its-kind moves made to accommodate a one-of-a-kind tournament, the NCAA put team Nos. 69-72 on standby in case a program in the 68-team draw has to withdraw because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

They have until Tuesday night to notify the NCAA they can’t make it. After that, a team that withdraws will simply go home, and its opponent will get a walkover into the next round.

“If the teams continue to do the great work that they’ve done just to get to the tournament, we will have a very safe, very healthy 67-game tournament and we’ll crown a champion,” selection committee chairman Mitch Barnhart said.

But to underscore what a different, and difficult, season this has been, the committee spent a lot of time stressing over two shoo-ins, Kansas and Virginia, each of which pulled out of their conference tourna-

ments last week because of outbreaks.

Barnhart said both are following proper protocols to make it to Indianapolis for their games on Saturday. Kansas is the No. 3 seed in the West and Virginia, the defending champion (from 2019), is the fourth seed in the same region.

“The one thing I’ve found out through this, probably as much as anybody, is expect the unexpected,” Kansas coach Bill Self said.

That is, after all, what March Madness is about — three weeks filled with busted brackets, out-of-nowhere surprises, teams that take care of unfinished business and an occasional visit from an old friend.

Remember Sister Jean? She’s 101 now, and her team, Loyola Chicago, is back in the dance, hoping for a reboot of the, shall we say, “miracle” run to the Final Four in 2018.

Remember Patrick Ewing? He lifted Georgetown to national prominence back in the 1980s, and now he’s back as the coach, guiding the underdog — yes, underdog — Hoyas to a Big East Tournament title and a trip to the tourney.

And Rick Pitino? His career was left for dead after his ouster from Louisville following that school’s unseemly recruiting scandal a few years back. He’s back, too, as coach of Iona, which played only 13 regular-season games, but won its conference tourney and made it to Indy. The Gaels are a 15th seed — not what Pitino is used to this time of year.

“A little role reversal,” he said, “but still you have to play the game.”

No. 3 Illinois tops No. 9 Ohio State in OT for Big Ten title

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Kofi Cockburn and Ayo Dosunmu both scored 16 points, grabbed nine rebounds and made key plays in overtime to give No. 3 Illinois a 91-88 victory over No. 9 Ohio State on Sunday for its first Big Ten Tournament title since 2005.

Cockburn made the go-ahead free throw with 1:39 to play, Dosunmu made a 15-footer with 50 seconds to go and the Illini (23-6) sealed it at the free-throw line. Illinois has won seven straight overall, six in a row over top-10 foes and 14 of its last 15 overall to claim the conference’s

automatic NCAA Tournament bid.

No. 6 Alabama 80, LSU 79: Herbert Jones drove for a go-ahead layup with 19.5 seconds remaining and the Crimson Tide won the Southeastern Conference Tournament for the first time since 1991, holding off a late flurry by the Tigers.

Coach Nate Oats and Alabama added to their regular-season title with a victory that should help it at least match its highest seed in the NCAA Tournament — it was No. 2 in both 1987 and 2002.

The Crimson Tide, the reigning national champion in foot-

ball, won its seventh tournament title overall, second in the SEC only to Kentucky’s 31. Alabama (24-6) hadn’t even reached this game since 2002.

LSU (18-9) hadn’t won this tournament since 1980, and this was the Tigers’ first time in the final since 1993.

No. 7 Houston 91, Cincinnati 54: Quentin Grimes scored 21 points with five three-pointers, Marcus Sasser had 16 points and the Cougars beat the Bearcats in the third consecutive American Athletic Conference Tournament championship game in between the two.

Houston (24-3) was a lock for

its 22nd NCAA Tournament berth even before leading the entire game to win its first conference tournament title since 2010.

Colgate 85, Loyola (Md.) 72: Tucker Richardson scored 17 points and Jordan Burns and Jack Ferguson 16 each to lead the Raiders to a win in the Patriot League Tournament title

St. Bonaventure 74, VCU 65: Kyle Lofton scored 23 points and Osun Osunniyi scored 14 points with 12 rebounds and the Bonnies beat the Rams in the Atlantic 10 Conference tournament to clinch an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

Record-setting Saints QB Brees retires

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The Drew Brees era with the New Orleans Saints — marked by a Super Bowl celebration, raucous record-setting nights in the rebuilt Superdome and the undersized quarterback's outsized role in a historic city's rebirth — has ended.

Brees, the NFL's leader in career completions and yards passing, has decided to retire after 20 NFL seasons, including his last 15 with New Orleans.

"Til the very end I exhausted myself to give everything to the Saints organization, my team and the great city of New Orleans," Brees said in social media post on Sunday, 15 years to the day after he signed with the Saints.

"We shared some amazing moments together, many of which are emblazoned in our hearts and minds and will forever be a part of us," Brees continued. "I am only retiring from football. I am not retiring from New Orleans. This is not goodbye."

The post also included a short video in which his four young children — the three boys wearing No. 9 Saints jerseys — exclaimed, "Our dad is finally going to retire

so he can spend more time with us!"

The decision comes after the 42-year-old quarterback won nine of 12 regular-season starts while completing 70.5% of his passes in 2020, and won a wild-card round playoff game before New Orleans' season ended with a divisional-round loss to eventual Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay.

Brees missed four games this season with multiple fractured ribs and a collapsed lung. It marked the second straight season Brees had to miss part of a season with an injury after missing just one game because of injury in the previous 13. In 2019, Brees missed five games because of a thumb injury on his throwing hand that required surgery.

Saints coach Sean Payton said Brees had plenty of other injuries or ailments during his Saints tenure, but willed himself to play through them whenever possible.

"Over the years his durability and availability is quite amazing. I can recall so many of these different injuries," Payton said. "He's as courageous and as tough a player as I've ever been around."

Brees is the NFL's all-time leader in yards passing with 80,358, although that

mark will be under threat next season by 44-year-old Tom Brady, who has 79,204 career yards passing. Brees' 571 career touchdown passes rank second behind Brady's 581.

Brees had dropped hints about his intentions, saying he considered himself to be on "borrowed time." After his final game, he returned to the Superdome field in street clothes, embraced his wife, Brittany, and played catch with his children for nearly two hours. When Brady saw them on his way to the Tampa Bay bus, he stopped, chatted, threw passes to Brees children and hugged Brees before departing.

Still, Brees declined to confirm his plans until now, even throwing many for a loop when a video of one of his recent workouts appeared on social media.

"Congrats my friend on an incredible career," Brady said in a social media post Sunday. "Thank you for the inspiration and dedication on and off the field! Look forward to seeing what's next."

The Saints currently have one quarterback under contract: Taysom Hill, who went 3-1 as a starter during Brees absence in 2020.

Green's triple-double lifts Warriors past Jazz

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Draymond Green had his 26th career triple-double with 11 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists and the Golden State Warriors held off the NBA-leading Utah Jazz 131-119 on Sunday to end a season-worst four-game losing streak.

Green also had four steals in his second triple-double of the season. Stephen Curry had 32 points with six three-pointers to go with nine assists.

"Now it matters what we do coming out of it," Green said. "This could be a turning point."

Andrew Wiggins added 28 points as Golden State returned home for a rare Sunday matinee at Chase Center, where the Warriors had played just one time over the previous 24 days.

Rudy Gobert had 24 points and a career-high 28 rebounds for Utah (28-10), which became the league's last team to reach double-digit losses.

"I think he's keeping his focus and there's times when Rudy can let what's happening on one end of the floor impact the other," Jazz coach Quin Snyder said. "He's just

been much more consistent than that. When he does that, he's obviously very impactful."

Donovan Mitchell added 24, Mike Conley 23 and Jordan Clarkson 21 for Utah.

The Jazz had won the last five against Golden State and two in a row on the Warriors' home floor.

Golden State won for the first time since Feb. 26 against Charlotte, a stretch that included an embarrassing road 130-104 loss to the Clippers on Thursday night as the team returned from the All-Star break.

"A big part of competing is learning how to bounce back from losing," coach Steve Kerr said.

76ers 134, Spurs 99: Tobias Harris scored 23 points and host Philadelphia won its first game since Joel Embiid was lost to a knee injury, beating San Antonio.

The Sixers' hold on the top spot in the Eastern Conference appears tenuous with Embiid out for at least two weeks with a bone bruise on his left knee. Embiid was injured Friday night in a victory at Washington.

Pelicans 135, Clippers 115: Zion Williamson scored 27 points, Brandon Ingram

added 23 and host New Orleans beat Los Angeles for its second straight blowout.

Heat 102, Magic 97: Jimmy Butler scored 29 points, Tyler Herro added 22 and Miami rallied in the fourth quarter to win at Orlando.

Hawks 100, Cavaliers 82: John Collins scored 22 points, Danilo Gallinari had 20 and host Atlanta beat Cleveland for its fifth consecutive victory under interim coach Nate McMillan.

Celtics 134, Rockets 107: Jaylen Brown scored 24 points, Jayson Tatum added 23 and visiting Boston handed Houston its 16th straight loss — one short of the franchise record.

Timberwolves 114, Trail Blazers 112: Anthony Edwards scored a career-high 34 points and short-handed Minnesota held off visiting Portland.

Bulls 118, Raptors 95: Rookie Patrick Williams had a career-best 23 points to lead host Chicago past Toronto.

Thunder 128, Grizzlies 122: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 30 points and Aleksei Pokusevski had a career-high 23, helping host Oklahoma City beat Memphis.

Ninth straight win puts Isles atop NHL

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Anthony Beauvillier and Oliver Wahlstrom scored on New York's final two shootout attempts and the Islanders won their ninth straight game, beating the New Jersey Devils 3-2 on Sunday night to take the NHL overall lead.

The Devils thought they had won 27 seconds into overtime on a goal by P.K. Subban, but a lengthy review showed Jesper Bratt was offside.

"I mean you're thinking the game's over and then you get the hold up call, and they started to take a look at it," Islanders center Brock Nelson said. "Our video guys are calling down saying they're pretty sure it's offside so it's game changing, obviously, and gives us some life."

Beauvillier beat Scott Wedgewood on New York's third attempt to extend the shootout, and Wahlstrom extended New Jersey's winless run at home to 0-10-1.

"I thought a really huge goal by Beauvillier when the pressure is on you," Islanders coach Barry Trotz said. "If you don't score, game over, you get that goal and keep your-

self alive and then obviously Wahlstrom getting the winner."

Kieffer Bellows and Nelson scored in the first period for New York, which pushed its points streak to 11-0-1. Rookie Ilya Sorokin made 29 saves, allowing only Nikita Gusev to score in the shootout.

Hurricanes 2, Red Wings 1: Dougie Hamilton and Nino Niederreiter scored, Alex Nedeljkovic made 25 saves and visiting Carolina beat Detroit for its eighth consecutive victory.

The Hurricanes moved into the Central Division lead at 20-6-1, a point ahead of idle Tampa Bay and Florida.

Wild 4, Coyotes 1: Nick Bonino and Kevin Fiala scored in a three-goal third period and surging Minnesota beat visiting Arizona.

Victor Rask and Joel Eriksson Ek also scored to help the Wild move within two points of West-leading Vegas. Minnesota is 11-2-1 in its past 14 games, has won four straight overall and seven in a row at home.

Cam Talbot made 21 saves after shutting out the Coyotes 4-0 on Friday night in the

opener of the three-game set.

Senators 4, Maple Leafs 3: Drake Batherson scored twice in 53 seconds in the second period in host Ottawa's victory over slumping Toronto.

The North-leading Maple Leafs have lost two straight and five of six to drop out of the top overall spot in the NHL.

Joey Daccord made 33 saves for his first NHL victory.

Avalanche 4, Kings 1: Philipp Grubauer made 27 saves, Andre Burakovsky and Nazem Kadri each had a goal and an assist and host Colorado beat Los Angeles.

The Avalanche swept the two-game series with the Kings and allowed fewer than 30 shots on goal for the 16th straight game, extending a franchise record set Friday night.

Stars 2, Blue Jackets 1 (SO): Alexander Radulov returned after missing 15 games due to a lower-body injury and scored in the third round of the shootout to lift visiting Dallas past Columbus.

Truex tops Logano on final restart, wins in Phoenix

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — Joey Logano has won a few times at Phoenix Raceway and knows a good restart when he feels one. With 25 laps to go Sunday, he got a good run on the green flag, dipped down low on the dogleg and felt great.

Then he realized Martin Truex Jr.'s No. 19 Toyota was still right next to him. That was a big problem.

Truex blew past Logano on the final restart and pulled away for his first NASCAR Cup Series victory of the season and 28th overall. That set off a hearty celebration from the Joe Gibbs Racing team, especially after a frustrating 2020 season that included just one win.

"I'd say we were really hungry for it," Truex said. "We really wanted it, obviously. We worked really hard, we've got a great team and it just seemed like for whatever reason, it was

always little things biting us. We were always so close, always second or third."

This time he was first. By a lot.

Truex beat the four championship finalists from last year. He had failed to advance into the season-ending finale for the first time in four years and could only watch as Chase Elliott beat Logano, Denny Hamlin and Brad Keselowski for the title at the desert oval. All four tailed Truex across the finish line Sunday.

Phoenix Raceway will again host the championship race in November.

"To come here and win this, I wish it was November," Truex said. "Hopefully, we can come back in November and have a shot at the championship."

The 40-year-old Truex struggled earlier this year, finishing 25th at Daytona. But he's raced much better in recent weeks, finishing third at Homestead

and sixth at Las Vegas last week.

He was dominant during the final half Sunday and became just the second driver from last year's 16-car playoff field to qualify for the postseason. It was good day for Toyota and Joe Gibbs Racing, which had the winner in Truex and Hamlin in the third spot.

Logano finished second. He said even if he was able to hold Truex on the restart, he probably would have passed him before the checkered flag.

"They just had a fast car," Logano said.

Truex, who announced a contract extension with JGR days before the season-opening Daytona 500, rebuked questions about retirement before he'd even been asked. After last year's one-win season, there had been speculation the veteran was contemplating retirement. But Truex also collected 11 finishes of second or third and

missed the championship finale for just the second time in six years.

Kyle Larson — who raced to his first victory with Hendrick Motorsports last week in Las Vegas — had to start at the back of the field after a pre-race inspection failure. He worked his way back to the front and briefly led about halfway through the race.

But soon after he made a critical error, getting flagged for speeding on pit road. He had to pass through pit road as a penalty, causing him to fall to the back of the lead lap in 22nd place. He finished seventh.

Logano — who led 143 laps — won the second stage after leading the final 35 laps during a long stretch of green-flag racing. But he couldn't hold back Truex, who won his ninth race with JGR.

Hamlin was fast early in the race, leading for 31 laps until the competition caution.