

## Taliban demand US withdrawal by May 1

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — The Taliban warned Washington on Friday against defying a May 1 deadline for the withdrawal of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan, promising a “reaction,” which could mean increased attacks by the insurgent group.

The Taliban issued their warning at a press conference in Moscow, the day after meeting with senior Afghan government negotiators and international observers to try to jumpstart a stalled peace process to end Afghanistan’s decades of war.

President Joe Biden’s administration says it is reviewing an agreement the Taliban signed with the Trump administration. Biden told ABC in an interview Wednesday that the May 1 deadline “could happen, but it is tough,” adding that if the deadline is extended it won’t be by “a lot longer.”

“They should go,” Suhail Shaheen, a member of the Taliban negotiation team, told reporters, warning that staying beyond May 1 would breach the deal. “After that, it will be a kind of violation of the

agreement. That violation would not be from our side ... Their violation will have a reaction.”

He did not elaborate on what form the “reaction” would take, but in keeping with the agreement they signed in February 2020, the Taliban have not attacked U.S. or NATO forces, even as unclaimed bombings and targeted killings have spiked in recent months.

“We hope that this will not happen, that they withdraw and we focus on the settlement, peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue, in order to bring about a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire at the end of reaching a political roadmap (for) Afghanistan,” Shaheen said.

He also reaffirmed that the Taliban were firm on their demand for an Islamic government. Shaheen didn’t elaborate on what an Islamic government would look like or whether it would mean a return to their repressive rules that denied girls education, barred women from working, and imposed harsh punishments.

Shaheen did not say whether the Taliban would accept elections, but he em-

phasized that the government of President Ashraf Ghani would not fit their definition of an Islamic government.

In previous statements, the Taliban have said their vision of an Islamic government would allow girls to attend school, and women to work or be in public life. But in every conversation, they emphasized the need to follow Islamic injunctions without specifying what that would mean.

They have said they would not accept a woman as president, and while women could be judges they could not take the job of the Chief Justice.

But even without the Taliban in government in Afghanistan, The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Afghanistan said Afghanistan was one of the worst places in the world to be a woman in 2020.

Only one woman attended Thursday’s talks in Moscow, and in the two decades since the Taliban were ousted, successive governments in Kabul have been unable to ratify a law outlawing violence against women.

## Biden says US set to hit goal of 100M vaccinations

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — With the U.S. closing in on President Joe Biden’s goal of injecting 100 million coronavirus vaccinations weeks ahead of his target date, the White House said the nation is now in position to help supply neighbors Canada and Mexico with millions of lifesaving shots.

The Biden administration on Thursday revealed the outlines of a plan to “loan” a limited number of vaccines to Canada and Mexico as the president announced the U.S. is on the cusp of meeting his 100-day injection goal “way ahead of schedule.”

“I’m proud to announce that tomorrow, 58 days into our administration, we will have met our goal,” Biden said. He promised to unveil a new vaccination target next week, as the U.S. is on pace to have enough of the three currently authorized vaccines to cover the entire adult population just 10

weeks from now.

Ahead of Biden’s remarks, the White House said it was finalizing plans to send a combined 4 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to Mexico and Canada in its first export of shots. Press secretary Jen Psaki said the details of the “loan” were still being worked out, but 2.5 million doses would go to Mexico and 1.5 million would be sent to Canada.

“Our first priority remains vaccinating the U.S. population,” Psaki said. But she added that “ensuring our neighbors can contain the virus is a mission critical step, is mission critical to ending the pandemic.”

The AstraZeneca vaccine has not yet been authorized for use in the U.S. but has been by the World Health Organization. Tens of millions of doses have been stockpiled in the U.S., waiting for emergency use authorization, and that has sparked an in-

ternational outcry that lifesaving vaccine is being withheld when it could be used elsewhere. The White House said just 7 million of the AstraZeneca doses are ready for shipment.

The initial run of doses manufactured in the U.S. are owned by the federal government under the terms of agreements reached with drugmakers, and the Biden administration has faced calls from allies across the globe to release the AstraZeneca shots for immediate use. Biden has also fielded direct requests from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to buy vaccines produced in the United States.

Global public health advocates say wealthy nations like the U.S. need to do far more to help stem the spread of the pandemic.

# US, China officials trade barbs in talks

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Top U.S. and Chinese officials were set to meet again on Friday after offering sharply different views of each other and the world in their first face-to-face talks since President Joe Biden took office.

After the opening on Thursday, the two sides traded barbs, with the U.S. accusing the Chinese delegation of “grandstanding” for domestic consumption in China and Beijing firing back Friday by saying there was a “strong smell of gunpowder and drama” in the room that was entirely the fault of the Americans.

In unusually pointed remarks for a

staid diplomatic meeting, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi took aim at each other’s country’s policies. The contentious tone of their public comments suggested the private discussions would be even more rocky.

The meetings in Anchorage, which were expected to continue with a closing session on Friday, were a new test in increasingly troubled relations between the two countries, which are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and China’s western Xinjiang region, as well as over Taiwan, China’s assertive-

ness in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

Blinken said the Biden administration is united with its allies in pushing back against China’s increasing authoritarianism and assertiveness at home and abroad. Yang then unloaded a list of Chinese complaints about the U.S. and accused Washington of hypocrisy for criticizing Beijing on human rights and other issues.

A senior Biden administration official said that despite the acrimonious public airing of differences, the initial closed-door discussions had been “substantive, serious and direct” and lasted far longer than the two hours that been planned.

## Putin’s offer to call Biden an effort to save ties

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The Kremlin said Friday that President Vladimir Putin’s offer to speak by phone with U.S. President Joe Biden was intended to prevent bilateral ties from completely falling apart over the American’s remark that the Russian leader was a killer.

Putin made it clear that “it makes sense to have a talk to maintain Russia-U.S. relations instead of trading barbs,” and he wanted to make it public to help defuse tensions over Biden’s “very bad remarks,” said his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.

In an interview broadcast Wednesday, Biden replied “I do” when asked if he

thought Putin was a “killer.” Russia responded by recalling its ambassador in Washington for consultations and Putin on Thursday pointed at the U.S. history of slavery, slaughtering Native Americans and the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II in an “it-takes-one-to-know-one” response.

At the same time, Putin noted that Russia would still cooperate with the United States where and when it supports Moscow’s interests, adding that “a lot of honest and decent people in the U.S. want to have peace and friendship with Russia.”

He proposed the phone call with Biden in the next few days to discuss the coronavirus pandemic, regional conflicts and other is-

ssues, and he suggested that the conversation be open to the public.

Peskov said Putin’s offer to make the call public was intended to prevent Biden’s statement from inflicting irreparable damage to the already-frayed ties.

“Since Biden’s words were quite unprecedented, unprecedented formats can’t be excluded,” Peskov said. “President Putin proposed to discuss the situation openly because it would be interesting for the people of both countries.”

Peskov said the Kremlin hasn’t heard back from the White House on the call offer, adding that it wasn’t going to repeat the proposal.

## DOD looks to root out extremists recruiting US military

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military is focusing on identifying extremist organizations in the United States that are trying to recruit members from within the armed forces. A top official compared the recruitment effort to that undertaken by international terrorist groups trying to lure the support of service members.

Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman Ramón Colón-López said Thursday that the Defense Department is talking with federal law enforcement agencies as

they develop databases on domestic extremists groups, in the wake of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. Military leaders are intent on developing training for troops that makes clear they should not get involved with such groups.

The military has long been aware of small numbers of white supremacists and other extremists in its ranks. But Pentagon leaders launched an all-out effort to root out extremism in the force after it became clear that a significant number of military veterans and some current mili-

tary members were present at the January insurrection in Washington, D.C.

Speaking to a small number of reporters at the Pentagon, Colón-López said the Pentagon has to take the threat seriously, noting that the Islamic State and other terror groups in the Middle East used social media to recruit followers.

A recent Pentagon report noted that members of the military “are highly prized by these groups as they bring legitimacy to their causes and enhance their ability to carry out attacks.”

# Storms send TV anchors scrambling in NC

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Storms that left splintered homes and broken trees across Alabama and Mississippi moved east Thursday, forcing a TV newscast out of their studio for a few minutes, but largely sparing the Atlantic Coast states any significant damage.

There were scary moments. In High Point, N.C., WGHP-TV meteorologist Van Denton ordered everyone off the set during the 5 p.m. broadcast and into a makeup room for a few minutes after a storm with a tornado warning moved right over the station.

"I've never heard the roof rattle like that. We've never had to leave the studio during a broadcast," said anchor Neill McNeill, who has been with the station 37 years.

But no serious damage or injuries were immediately reported in North Carolina from the storms near High Point and Charlotte, which both had tornado warnings.

In southwest Alabama, at least two people were hurt Wednesday, when a tornado destroyed a house. Pieces of homes and twisted metal laid amid broken trees in the hardest-hit areas, but no one died and the region appeared to escape the kind of horrific toll many feared after ominous predictions of monster twisters and huge hail.

"Overall, we have a lot to be grateful for, as it could have been much worse," Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said in a statement.

Forecasters issued a string of tornado warnings Thursday morning around the region where Alabama, Georgia and Florida intersect, but there were no immediate reports of major damage.

Forecasters worried the storms would intensify as they moved into South Carolina and North Carolina on Thursday afternoon, but they mostly stayed below severe limits.

In South Carolina, the severe weather threat led the state Senate president to caution senators to stay home Thursday while urging staff to work remotely for their safety. House Speaker Jay Lucas kept his promise from the day before to meet less than an hour Thursday so members could beat the severe storms home.

The forecast led a number of the state's school systems to call off in-person classes Thursday and have students and teachers meet online.

The metro Atlanta area was pelted by heavy rain with intense lightning and strong wind gusts of up to 50 mph.

## Atlanta cops 'looking at everything' in shootings

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Police said Thursday that "nothing is off the table" in the investigation of the deadly shootings at two Atlanta massage businesses, including whether the slayings were a hate crime.

Those attacks and a third one near the suburban town of Woodstock killed eight people and prompted President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to change their plans for a previously scheduled trip to Atlanta. The pair postponed a political event in favor of meeting Friday with Asian American community leaders.

A 21-year-old white man, Robert Aaron Long, is charged with murder in Tuesday's slayings. Six of those killed were women of Asian descent.

"Our investigation is looking at everything, so nothing is off the table," Deputy Atlanta Police Chief Charles Hampton Jr. said at a news conference.

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office said it also was

investigating whether the killings were hate crimes.

Georgia lawmakers last year passed a hate crimes law that allows additional penalties to be imposed for certain offenses when motivated by a victim's race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender or disability. A hate crime is not a standalone crime under the law, but it can be used to add time to a sentence once someone is convicted of another crime.

Investigators believe Long had previously visited two of the Atlanta massage parlors where four of the women were killed, Hampton said. Long told police that the attacks were not racially motivated. He claimed to have a sex addiction, and authorities said he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation.

Long's statements spurred outrage and widespread skepticism in the Asian American community, which has increasingly been targeted during the pandemic.

## Judge limits evidence, won't move Chauvin trial

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A judge on Friday denied a defense request to delay or move the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death after the announcement of a \$27 million settlement for Floyd's family raised concern about a tainted jury.

In a separate ruling, Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill said he would allow the jury to hear limited evidence from Floyd's 2019 arrest, but only that pertaining to the cause of Floyd's death in 2020. He acknowledged there are several similarities between the two incidents, including that Floyd swallowed drugs after police confronted him.

The rulings were a blow to Derek Chauvin's defense. His attorney, Eric Nelson, had sought to halt or move the trial due to concerns that the settlement announcement had tainted the jury pool.

Jury selection was halfway complete last week when the city of Minneapolis unanimously approved the payout to settle

a civil lawsuit over Floyd's death. Nelson called the timing of the settlement deeply disturbing and unfair, and said it jeopardized Chauvin's chance for a fair trial. Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter.

But Cahill, who has called the timing "unfortunate," said he thought a delay would do nothing to stem the problem of pre-trial publicity. As for moving the trial, he said there's no place in Minnesota that hasn't been touched by that publicity.

The judge had previously denied a defense attempt to allow the year-old arrest at trial. But he heard fresh arguments this week because of drugs found in January in a second search of the police SUV in which the four officers attempted to put Floyd in 2020.

He said Thursday that he would allow medical evidence of Floyd's physical reactions, such as his dangerously high blood pressure when he was examined by a paramedic, and a short clip of an officer's body camera video.



# Official: Herd immunity possible for Wis. by July

*Associated Press*

MADISON, Wis. — There will be enough coronavirus vaccine in Wisconsin by the end of June to immunize 80% of those age 16 and over in the state, hitting a key target to achieve herd immunity for COVID-19, a top state health official said Thursday.

“Wouldn’t that be a wonderful 4th of July celebration, to hit 80% community immunity in the state of Wisconsin?” said Wisconsin Department of Health Services Secretary Julie Willems Van Dijk.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, has said the nation must achieve a vaccination rate of about 80% to reach “herd immunity.” Other health experts have said “herd immunity” won’t be reached until 90% of the population is vaccinated.

As of Thursday, more than 23% of Wisconsin residents had received at least one dose of the vaccine and more than 13%, about 761,000 people, were fully vaccinated, according to the health department.

On Monday, more than 2 million people ages 16 to 64 with any of a broad array of preexisting conditions including being overweight, having high blood pressure or moderate asthma, will become eligible. Everyone over age 65, and all frontline health care workers, grocery store workers and restaurant employees are already eligible.

Everyone in Wisconsin will be eligible “no later” than May 1, Willems Van Dijk said.

## Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Kentucky’s governor has relaxed the curfew on bars and restaurants as the state’s rate of positive COVID-19 cases reached its lowest level since early July.

The curfew will be extended one hour, starting Friday, Gov. Andy Beshear said. Bars and restaurants can serve food and drinks until midnight local time

and stay open until 1 a.m., the governor said Thursday.

“Hopefully this is a little bit of relief given the positive movement of where we are right now as a state with vaccines going up and cases going down,” Beshear said.

Capacity limits at bars and restaurants will remain at 60% and the spaced-out seating rule still applies, the governor said.

Kentucky’s rate of positive cases fell to 3.23% Thursday, the lowest level since July 3.

## Connecticut

Yale epidemiologist Dr. Albert Ko, a top pandemic adviser to Gov. Ned Lamont, said Thursday he’s concerned about the different variants that have been detected in Connecticut, but he’s not opposing the state’s plans to eliminate capacity limits.

Beginning Friday, limits will be lifted at restaurants, non-theater indoor recreation centers, libraries, museums, aquariums, gyms and fitness centers, retail shops, offices, personal services establishments and houses of worship. Mask-wearing, distancing and cleaning protocols will still be required.

Also, movie theaters and performing arts venues will only be allowed to open at 50% capacity. Restaurant seating will be limited to eight people per table and hours of operation capped at 11 p.m. Bars, meanwhile, will remain shuttered.

## Maryland

ANNAPOLIS — Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan announced Thursday when the next phases of COVID-19 vaccine eligibility will take effect, with residents 60 and older becoming eligible starting next week and plans for all residents over 16 becoming eligible no later than April 27.

In what’s known as Phase 2A, starting Tuesday, residents over 60 will be eligible, and they can now begin preregistering for an appointment at the state’s

mass vaccination sites on the phone or online, Hogan said. The governor said nearly 90% of COVID-19 deaths in the state have been in people over 60.

On March 30, Maryland residents 16 and over with underlying medical conditions will be eligible for Phase 2B. On April 13, everyone 55 and over and all essential workers in critical industries will be eligible in Phase 2C. Maryland residents over 16 will be eligible no later than April 27 for Phase 3.

## Michigan

HOLLAND — A western Michigan woman who has defied coronavirus restrictions while operating her restaurant was stopped in her car and arrested before dawn Friday, authorities said.

Marlena Pavlos-Hackney was operating a Holland restaurant without a license and had refused to surrender by Thursday, Attorney General Dana Nessel said. Pavlos-Hackney, 55, was arrested by state police and driven to the Ingham County jail, Nessel said.

State investigators said the owner had ignored caps on restaurant capacity at Marlena’s Bistro and Pizzeria and wasn’t enforcing mask rules. Her food license was suspended Jan. 20, but the eatery remained open.

An Ingham County judge declared Pavlos-Hackney in contempt of court.

## Florida

TAMPA — A handful of students who were disappointed that the University of Tampa is holding a virtual spring graduation ceremony have planned their own in-person ceremony.

When university officials announced last month that the Class of 2021 would have an online ceremony due to the uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic, Jacie Steele sprang into action, the Tampa Bay Times reported.

Steele, a graduating senior,

started a change.org petition asking UT president Ronald Vaughn and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, among others, to reconsider the decision. She noted that the university had been holding most of its courses in-person since last fall. And the university said it would host other in-person graduation week events for seniors, including photo opportunities.

“I’m baffled,” Steele told the newspaper. “I’m confused. I don’t understand why we can’t have an in-person ceremony when I see so many in-person things in Tampa.”

The petition received more than 3,500 virtual signatures from people who supported an in-person graduation for the school’s 1,850 expected graduates. However, the university responded that the decision was final.

Steele, along with students Allison Clark and Emma Stange, started organizing their own ceremony for May 8 at the Tampa Convention Center. It will follow the university’s online version.

Clark started a GoFundMe drive that’s raised more than \$1,200.

“After this whole past year, we’ve all had to learn to adapt to a new way of life, and that’s what we’re doing,” she told the newspaper.

## Texas

AUSTIN — The number of COVID-19 cases in Texas was still declining on Thursday, as were the number of people hospitalized with the virus.

The 4,373 new confirmed and probable cases Thursday were 373 fewer than Wednesday’s report, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. The state’s pandemic total is about 2.74 million cases.

The researchers also said the rolling average of daily new cases has fallen by 2,695 cases over the past two weeks, a 37% decrease.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Man swings metal rod in highway standoff

**UT** SALT LAKE CITY — A Utah highway was shut down midday Wednesday as a SWAT team responded to a man confronting them with a metal rod.

Officers tried to stop the man because he was driving erratically in a pickup truck that had spray-painted windows, as well as a United States flag obscuring the back window and license plate, KSL-TV reported.

The driver fled, but eventually the truck died on an overpass over Legacy Parkway north of Salt Lake City, according to North Salt Lake Police Sgt. Mitch Gwilliam.

The driver got out, but refused to talk to officers or do what they told him, police said. He swung the rod around aggressively and claimed to have a bomb and a shotgun in his truck, police said.

A SWAT team responded and tried to get the man to surrender using foam, gas and pepper spray rounds, as well as flash bangs. He nevertheless managed to jump over a barrier on the overpass and run down an embankment on the other side before he was taken into custody.

## 2 charged with zip-tying boy on cold day

**MO** SPRINGFIELD — Multiple felony charges have been filed against a man and woman who are accused of zip-tying a 13-year-old boy to a Springfield porch swing last year on a day when temperatures barely inched

above freezing.

The Springfield News-Leader reported that Jerry Smith, 43, and Rebecca Herndon, 51, were charged Tuesday with four counts of child abuse and two counts of endangering the welfare of a child.

Court documents say the boy told police that Smith punched him in the face and zip-tied him to a porch swing outside in February 2020 to prevent him from running away. The boy had been living at the time with Herndon, a family friend, in a home she shared with Smith.

Court documents say police found cut zip ties on the front porch. Smith said in an interview that he zip-tied the boy to the porch swing at Herndon's request.

Court documents said Herndon showed police pictures that had been taken of the boy while he was restrained, saying the boy was not in distress.

## Officers rescue goose with arrow lodged in body

**CO** BOULDER, Colo. — Police in Colorado are looking for whoever shot a goose with an arrow, leaving it lodged in its body near its beak.

Police on Wednesday released video of the animal's rescue in Boulder the day before to help find those responsible.

The video shows animal control officers using a net to capture the goose and then cutting off most of the arrow before taking it in for medical attention.

It wasn't immediately clear how the animal was doing. But it had been wounded for over a week and was still able to fly, city public safety spokesperson Dionne Waugh said. The arrow

was first seen in the goose on March 5 at a different location, but it flew away when officers tried to capture it then, she said.

## Sheriffs: Slain cattle dumped along roads

**IA** AMES — Sheriffs in two central Iowa counties say their offices are looking for the person or people who dumped slain cattle along gravel roads in their jurisdictions.

Two cows and a calf were found dead in Boone and Greene counties on March 10, the Ames Tribune reported. Investigators said the calf, found in Boone County, had its front legs bound with twine.

A red shorthorn cow was found a short distance away in a creek with its throat slashed, Boone County Sheriff Gregg Elsberry said. The carcass of the other cow, also a red shorthorn, was found in a Greene County ditch. Scuff marks on the animals' hides indicated they were dumped on the roads from a vehicle, authorities said. The animals' bloated condition led investigators to believe they had been dead several days.

## Police dog bites 2 after escaping fenced yard

**OR** PORTLAND — Two people walking their dog in Happy Valley were bitten by a Portland Police Bureau dog that escaped his handler's fenced yard recently, police said.

An initial investigation shows the dog broke through a piece of fencing, encountered the people walking the dog and bit them both, police said in a news release.

Police didn't say how severe their injuries were.

The dog has been "secured, kenneled, and quarantined and will remain out of service until the investigation is complete," police said. The dog will also undergo further assessment.

"The Portland Police K9 Unit and the Bureau regret this unfortunate incident," said Deputy Chief Chris Davis.

## Former worker gets new trial in fake-gun stickup

**NJ** TRENTON — A man convicted of using a fake gun to try robbing a McDonald's restaurant where he once worked has been granted a new trial.

In a unanimous ruling, New Jersey's Supreme Court held that a trial judge unfairly prevented Thomas Outland from acting as his own attorney at his 2017 trial.

Outland was convicted of conspiracy and possession of an imitation firearm for an unlawful purpose after he and an accomplice were accused of trying to rob a McDonald's in Union County in 2015. According to trial testimony cited in Tuesday's ruling, Outland and the accomplice entered the restaurant and demanded money. But the caper was foiled when an employee noticed that Outland's shotgun was a fake and called him out on it. When Outland took off his mask, a manager recognized him as a former employee.

Outland laughed, said it was a joke and tried to hug the manager before leaving, according to testimony.

— From wire reports

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# Some familiar names in unfamiliar place

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Nobody will get a lump in their throat or start sizing up glass slippers for programs like these — Alabama, Illinois, Baylor.

They're not underdogs. They're hardly unknown. What they are is a group of new teams with well-recognized names in the NCAA Tournament, and they're hoping to keep making life hard on some of the programs that have long had a stranglehold on March.

Alabama is a 2 seed, matched for the best in its history, on the strength of its first SEC Tournament title in 30 years.

Baylor, building momentum for a while now, beat out Kansas for the Big 12 regular-season title despite a three-week break induced by the coronavirus. The Bears are top-seeded for the first time.

Illinois is making its first trip to the tournament since 2013, joining a more traditional Big Ten power, Michigan, as a No. 1 seed.

"I'd be lying if I said there weren't a lot of 'uh-oh' moments" along the road to rebuilding Illinois, coach Brad Underwood said.

All these programs have, indeed, had their uh-oh moments over the years, which is what makes their trip to the top of the brackets that much more unique.

Even before the pairings were announced, the pandemic ensured this NCAA Tournament was going to be a much different affair. Then, some dominoes started falling. Duke and Kentucky, two longtime maestros of March, didn't even make the field of 68 — the first time that pair has missed the tournament together since 1976.

Michigan State struggled. Kansas had a not-quite-Kansas kind of year. North Carolina found itself with a late-season match-up against Duke not for the ACC title but basically to keep its tournament chances alive.

Meanwhile, the Crimson Tide were rolling, and it had nothing to do with the football field. They make movies about the history of Alabama football. The history of Alabama basketball can be written on a postcard: Wimp Sanderson and his plaid sports coat, Robert Horry, one trip to the Elite Eight in 21 previous, mostly unmemorable tournament berths.

"They weren't terrible at basketball, and it seemed like they were on the verge of being a good basketball school," said Herb Jones, the third-team All-American out of Greensboro, Ala. "It looked like the perfect place to come in and turn the narrative, and give kids from Alabama a place to play basketball instead of going out of state."

Illinois was a powerhouse once, but its last trip to the Final Four was in 2005, and that came nearly a decade after Lou Henson left and brought an end to a golden era for Illini hoops. Underwood said when he arrived four years ago, he did an informal poll of his players to start each season, asking them which team in the Big Ten plays the hardest.

"They would all say it's Michigan State. Michigan State, Michigan State, Michigan State," Underwood said. "Then, it was start of last year, before they finally figured out what I wanted to hear. They finally said 'Us.' They had to start believing that."

Michigan State slipped in this season as an 11 seed. So did UCLA and Syracuse, a few more familiar names that took a little longer to find in this year's bracket.

Meanwhile, some other Power Five teams are finding themselves enjoying a new cachet — maybe not tournament regulars, but certainly not to be overlooked.

Rutgers is in for the first time since 1991. Its first-round opponent, Clemson, is a once-proud program that has been overshadowed by football in recent years. Another "football school," Florida State, is in Year 5 as a burgeoning hoops power in the ACC, coming in as a 4 seed after two straight trips to the Sweet 16.

## NCAA Tournament returns with 'First Four'

Associated Press

Who are we kidding? "First Four" still sounds more like an educational toy than the prelude to three of the best weeks in sport.

But because of the pandemic, it's been 710 days since last we saw the NCAA Tournament — who's counting? — so let's not quibble over names and go straight to the opening-night review:

Pretty, pretty good.

In the finale pitting two of college hoops' marquee programs, UCLA outlasted Michigan State 86-80 in overtime. Two other games were decided by a single point: Drake beat Wichita State 53-52, and Norfolk State squeezed Appalachian State 54-53. In Thursday's opener, Texas Southern pulled steadily away

from Mount St. Mary's and won 60-52.

The first four games were grafted onto the 64-team main bracket in 2011, naturally, to pad the NCAA coffers. They were originally dubbed "play-in" games, and then briefly the "First Round," which the NCAA quickly squashed to avoid any confusion with the 16 games that began the tournament in earnest Friday.

Only one First Four team has also made it all the way to the Final Four — Virginia Commonwealth in 2011 — but survivors tend to punch above their weight. Four teams have made it to the Sweet 16 and 2019 marked the only year at least one of the first four survivors failed to win a game in the big-boy bracket.

Michigan State's brief appearance in the tournament was coach Tom Izzo's 23rd straight, but it was small consolation. He got into a heated exchange with one of his own players — and not for the first time — after what appeared to be a defensive miscommunication on the final play of the first half.

The Spartans still led by six points with four minutes left. Then the house fell in. The Bruins' Jaime Jaquez Jr., who finished with 27 points, banged in a layup and added the game-tying free throw in regulation. Johnny Juzang hit back-to-back baskets to begin the extra period and UCLA kept its nose in front the rest of the way.

The reward for winning the clash of No. 11 seeds is a short drive to Hinkle Fieldhouse in

Indianapolis, where the Bruins will face No. 6 Brigham Young.

Drake's win was a long time coming — 50 years to be exact — and didn't go into the books until a last-second three-point try by Wichita State's Alterique Gilbert clanged off the front rim.

Texas Southern simply had too much pace for a deliberate Mount St. Mary's squad in a matchup of No. 16 seeds. The win was the Tigers' 10th straight.

Norfolk State won the other battle of No. 16s, but did so drenched in sweat. The Spartans built a big first-half lead, squandered it and then some in the second and had to close with a 9-2 run — capped by Devante Carter's free throws with 8.6 seconds left — to prevail.



# NFL investigating Houston's Watson

*Associated Press*

DALLAS — The NFL said Thursday that it was investigating allegations that Houston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson sexually assaulted multiple women after three massage therapists filed lawsuits against the star player.

In lawsuits filed this week, two of the women claim that Watson touched them with his penis during massages last year, and the third alleges he forced her to perform oral sex.

Watson, 25, has broadly denied that he acted inappropriately and said he looks forward to clearing his name.

The women, who are not named in the lawsuits, are represented by Houston lawyer Tony Buzbee, who posted a picture Thursday of a letter from the NFL on his verified Instagram account that said the league had launched an investigation. Buzbee later deleted the post.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that the matter was “under review of the personal conduct policy.”

Watson's attorney and agent did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday.

“I have never treated any woman with anything other than the utmost respect,” the quarterback said in a statement posted to Twitter Tuesday.

Houston police spokeswoman Jodi Silva declined to comment on whether any of the alleged sexual assaults were reported to police, saying the department does not identify people who have not been charged with a crime.

Buzbee did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday, but wrote in one of the lawsuits that “Watson's behavior is part of a dis-

turbing pattern of preying on vulnerable women.”

The letter that he briefly posted was from Lisa M. Friel, special counsel for investigations for the NFL. It said it is her job to “look into any allegations that might involve a violation of the League's Personal Conduct Policy.” The letter went on to say that the league had “opened an investigation into these allegations and to request the cooperation of your clients in our investigation.”

According to the suits, the women live in Texas, Oregon and Georgia and work giving massages. Two claimed that during massages in March and August of last year Watson was sexually suggestive, exposed his genitals and moved toward them in ways that caused his penis to touch their hands.

The lawsuit from the third woman describes similar behavior and alleges that during a

massage in December, Watson “coerced” her into giving him oral sex. The woman did not consent and then “blackout for a few minutes from fear,” the lawsuit states.

The alleged assaults took place at one of the women's homes, a Houston hotel and an office building in the city, according to the suits. They state that Watson connected with the women over social media, where they advertised their businesses, and flew one of them from Atlanta to Houston for a massage.

Each woman is suing for compensatory and punitive damages, as well as court costs.

Texans spokesman Omar Majzoub released a statement on behalf of the team Thursday saying it had been informed by the NFL about its investigation. The statement said the team “will stay in close contact with the league” as it investigates.

## Harvick reflects on 20th anniversary of emotional win

*Associated Press*

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The first three weeks following Dale Earnhardt's death were a whirlwind for Kevin Harvick, the driver suddenly tasked with carrying a race team reeling from grief.

Harvick was slated to race for the 2001 championship in NASCAR's second-tier series but Richard Childress needed him to fill Earnhardt's seat. Harvick, admittedly “young and dumb” at the time, told Childress he'd do both.

Attempting to replace Earnhardt was an unenviable ask of any driver, let alone a 25-year-old at the start of his NASCAR career. By committing to that frantic two-series schedule, Harvick created a shield from the intense scrutiny of an emotionally draining season.

His Cup Series debut came

seven days after Earnhardt's death and then Harvick was off to Las Vegas for his wedding — it had been built into the NASCAR schedule before the season began — and the start of a year spent primarily in race cars and airplanes.

The standout moment of that season came in his third Cup race when Harvick held off Jeff Gordon by 0.006 seconds — the edge of his front bumper — to win at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Harvick returns to Atlanta on Sunday for the 20th anniversary of that victory. He says he wishes he “would have realized then how big this moment was.”

His memories of that emotional win two decades later are scattered. He recalls the five-car battle over the final 10 laps, the fans lining the fence along the back straightaway and the backward victory lap when he

flashed three fingers out his window to honor Earnhardt.

The rest is a bit of a blur.

“It was obviously a moment I don't think any of us expected, but there are a number of things that obviously changed in the weeks before that,” Harvick said. “It took me a long time to really get comfortable, to really even think about things that happened that day. There were so many things that happened backwards in my career.”

Harvick won two Cup races that year and beat Kurt Busch for top rookie honors. He won another five times in the Xfinity Series (then called the Busch Series) and the championship. All told, he made 69 starts and crisscrossed the country, often borrowing planes from Childress or teammate Mike Skinner, to get between tracks when

the two series raced at different venues.

“Racing that much really hid me from a lot of things because of the fact I was so busy. It really allowed me to kind of hide under a rock,” Harvick said. “But 2002 was when I realized the magnitude of the situation we were in. Racing so much and often in 2001 really covered all that stuff up.”

Harvick spent 13 years driving for Richard Childress Racing and recognizes now how critical that 2001 season was. It was imperative that the organization keep Earnhardt's car on track all season and the Atlanta victory was a morale boost for a heartbroken crew.

“Knowing now what it meant to the sport, and just that moment in general of being able to carry on, was so important,” Harvick said.

# Vasilevskiy's 19 saves help Tampa prevail

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Andrei Vasilevskiy made 19 saves for his 10th consecutive victory, rookie Ross Colton broke a third-period tie with his second career goal and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the Chicago Blackhawks 4-2 on Thursday night.

Victor Hedman, Alex Killorn and Yanni Gourde also scored for Tampa Bay.

Dylan Strome and Mattias Janmark had power-play goals for the Blackhawks. They have lost three straight and are 1-5 in their last six games.

The teams will complete the two-game series Saturday.

Colton gave Tampa Bay the lead at 5:32 of the third period. He raced up ice and took a pass from Mathieu Joseph, skated in alone on Kevin Lankinen, pulled the puck back to his forehand and tucked a shot between the post and the pad.

Hedman added an empty-net goal with 16 seconds.

Barclay Goodrow put Chicago on a power play in the opening minute as he tried to engage Connor Murphy in a fight for a hit Murphy delivered to Erik Cernak the last time the two teams met March 7. But Mur-

phy didn't fight and Goodrow was called for unsportsmanlike conduct, leading to Janmark's goal at 2:10.

Killorn pulled Tampa Bay even with his eighth of the season, taking a pass from Hedman and sweeping around the back of the net for a wraparound that hit the skate of Lankinen and banked in at 13:15.

**Flyers 4, Islanders 3:** Oskar Lindblom scored his second goal with 2:22 left, Carter Hart made 22 saves and visiting Philadelphia recovered after blowing a late, three-goal lead to beat New York.

Lindblom's shot from between the circles beat goalie Semyon Varlamov for this fourth goal this season. Travis Konecny assisted, his third of the contest, and the Flyers won in regulation for only the second time in their last 10 games.

**Bruins 4, Sabres 1:** David Krejci had three assists to cross the 700-point threshold and visiting Boston extended Buffalo's skid to 13 games.

David Pastrnak had a goal and an assist for the Bruins, Craig Smith, Jake DeBrusk and Greg McKegg also scored, and Jaroslav Halak made 23 saves

**Oilers 2, Jets 1:** Connor McDavid scored twice to close in on the NHL lead and host Edmonton beat Winnipeg to move into a tie with Toronto for the North Division lead.

McDavid has 20 goals — a goal behind Toronto's Auston Matthews — and leads the league in points with 58 and assists with 38.

**Avalanche 5, Wild 1:** The top line of Nathan MacKinnon, Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen combined for four goals to help host Colorado end Minnesota's winning streak at five.

Rantanen scored twice for the Avalanche, Joonas Donskoi also scored, and Philipp Grubauer made 19 saves.

**Devils 3, Penguins 2:** Scott Wedgewood made 40 saves, Jack Hughes had a goal and an assist and host New Jersey beat Pittsburgh.

P.K. Subban and Travis Zajac also scored, and the Devils won their second straight at home following a losing streak of 11 games (0-10-1) in Newark.

**Blue Jackets 3, Hurricanes 2 (OT):** Seth Jones scored his second goal with 50.4 seconds remaining in overtime to lift visit-

ing Columbus past Carolina.

Kevin Stenlund also scored for the Blue Jackets, Oliver Bjorkstrand assisted on all three goals, and Joonas Korpi-salo stopped 25 shots.

**Red Wings 3, Stars 2:** Robby Fabbri scored three goals, one in each period, and host Detroit held off Dallas.

The Red Wings did have a setback, losing goaltender Jonathan Bernier to an injury late in the second period after he stopped all 22 shots he faced. Thomas Greiss finished the game in net and had 16 saves.

**Ducks 3, Coyotes 2 (OT):** Adam Henrique scored a power-play goal 43 seconds into overtime, Jamie Drysdale had a goal and an assist in his NHL debut and host Anaheim overcame a two-goal deficit to beat Arizona.

Trevor Zegras scored his first career goal, and Ryan Miller made 23 saves to help the Ducks end a four-game losing streak.

**Predators 2, Panthers 1:** Calle Jarnkrok scored twice, leading visiting Nashville past Florida.

Juuse Saros stopped 40 shots, allowing only Jonathan Huberdeau's goal.

# Beal, Westbrook lead Wiz past league-leading Jazz

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bradley Beal scored 43 points, Russell Westbrook had 35 points, 15 rebounds and 13 assists in his 13th triple-double of the season and the Washington Wizards beat the Utah Jazz 131-122 on Thursday night.

Washington broke a five-game losing streak overall and a nine-game skid against Utah.

Donovan Mitchell equaled a season high with 42 points for the Jazz, who at 29-11 still have the NBA's best record but have lost four of six in March. Joe Ingles added a career-high 34 points, including eight three-

pointers.

**Timberwolves 123, Suns 119:** Anthony Edwards scored a career-high 42 points, Karl-Anthony Towns had 41 and visiting Minnesota rallied to stun Phoenix.

The Timberwolves still have the worst record in the NBA at 10-31 but have played better since the All-Star break, winning three of five games.

**Lakers 116, Hornets 105:** LeBron James had 37 points, eight rebounds and six assists, and host Los Angeles moved back into second place in the Western Conference with its fourth straight victory.

Dennis Schröder had 22 points and seven assists as the defending NBA champions moved past Phoenix and pulled 1 ½ games behind the league-leading Utah Jazz with their sixth win in eight games.

**Knicks 94, Magic 93:** Julius Randle had his third triple-double of the season with 18 points, 17 assists and 10 rebounds to lead New York past visiting Orlando.

Alec Burks scored 21 points to help the Knicks improve to 21-21. Reggie Bullock added 20, RJ Barrett had 17 and Frank Ntilikina 13.

**Trail Blazers 101, Pelicans 93:** Damian Lillard scored 36

points, 21 in the opening quarter alone, and host Portland swept the two-game set with New Orleans.

Enes Kanter had 16 points and 13 rebounds, and Carmelo Anthony added 15 points. The Trail Blazers beat the Pelicans 125-124 on Tuesday night.

**Hawks 116, Thunder 93:** Trae Young and Bogdan Bogdanovic each scored 23 points and Atlanta won its seventh straight, beating visiting Oklahoma City.

The Hawks have put together the streak since Nate McMillan took charge as interim coach and have won seven in a row for the first time since 2016-17.