

## Soldiers have new fitness scoring tiers

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army has for a third time in three years adjusted its long-awaited, combat-driven fitness test to include new scoring tiers for male and female soldiers meant to acknowledge their “biological differences,” top service officials announced Monday.

The Army will begin testing its soldiers on the Army Combat Fitness Test version 3.0 in April, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston told reporters. The test’s new version will include new gender-based performance scoring tiers and the permanent implementation of the plank as an option for the six-event test.

The changes come as Army officials work to alleviate concerns raised by lawmakers that past versions of the ACFT were unfair to women, who posted a sub-50% pass rate of the Crossfit-style evaluation. In January, Congress halted the Army from fully implementing the ACFT until it was adjusted and studied by an independent group to ensure it did not favor men.

The new scoring system has not been finalized, but planning calls for the creation of five performance tiers for each gender, said Army Maj. Gen. Lonnie Hibbard, who leads the Army Center of Initial Military Training, which has spearheaded ACFT efforts. The revised test would create a platinum tier for soldiers who scored within the top 1% of their gender on the ACFT. It also creates a gold tier for those scoring in the top 10% of their gender, a silver tier for those scoring in the top 25%, a bronze tier for those scoring within the top 50% and a green tier for those who score in the bottom 50% among passing grades within their gender.

A soldier’s performance tier would then be included on evaluations and reported to boards to inform promotion decisions, instead of just a soldier’s actual ACFT score.

“This new [tiered] evaluation system has a goal of achieving two objectives,” Hibbard said. “First, it recognizes above average physical performance — something that’s inherent to the Army’s culture. And, sec-

ond, it accounts for the recognized physiological differences between men and women and removes the direct competition between males and females.”

Lawmakers, when they halted the Army’s ACFT efforts earlier this year, said they were worried struggles with the new test among female soldiers might slow the rate of promotions for women in the service, who compete with their male counterparts for advancements and jobs.

The actual scoring system for the test will not change, Hibbard said. All soldiers, regardless of age or gender, must score a minimum of 360 of a possible 600 points — 100 points per event — to pass the test, which in the future will be a requirement to enter and remain in the Army.

For now, scores do not count for or against soldiers, as the Army is using its ACFT testing primarily to gather data to adjust its scoring system. But Hibbard and Grinston said the service aims to re-introduce the testing as a requirement by March of next year.

## Officials at base take steps to counter vaccine skepticism

*The Washington Post*

In early February, as military officials faced a wave of skepticism among service members about the coronavirus vaccine, leaders at Fort Bragg took a hard look at what soldiers were hearing.

The feedback was concerning. Misinformation on social media fueled doubt about its safety and efficacy, and endorsements from experts were not getting through. By the end of February, fewer than half of the soldiers at Fort Bragg, N.C., said they would get the vaccine, an Army official said. The vaccine is voluntary for troops at the moment.

So officials at the Army’s most populated installation developed a solution they say has

shown promise: listen to soldiers, walk them through concerns and mint ambassadors out of skeptical soldiers who changed their minds.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has encouraged service members to get vaccinated, joining leaders who point to inoculations as a way to help prepare troops for worldwide missions. The virus has strained global movement, has delayed training with key allies and took an aircraft carrier out of commission for weeks last spring, when a quarter of the roughly 4,900 sailors aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt were infected.

Hesitancy among service members — who have said they fear the vaccine was rushed, be-

lieve it has been politicized and worry about long-term effects — in many ways mirrors doubts in the civilian population. About a third of U.S. troops opted out of the vaccine, defense officials testified last month, using preliminary data.

But the approach at Fort Bragg — including a recent podcast that hosted three skeptical soldiers discussing how they went from no to yes on vaccination — could help commanders throughout the Army tailor a plan to meet soldiers where they are as they try to vaccinate more of the force.

Staff Sgt. Kiera Holbrook, who appeared on the podcast, was at first a hard no. The 29-year-old logistics specialist had concerns the vaccine was devel-

oped too fast or could complicate her ability to get pregnant. She opted out of the vaccine earlier this year, then was infected by the virus, she said.

But her attitude changed once her company commander and first sergeant brought in experts to dispel rumors and answer questions. Her position flipped when she learned her superiors were vaccinated.

“Once they got it, it made me feel comfortable,” Holbrook told *The Washington Post*. “It was a sigh of relief.”

She received her first dose of the vaccine in late February, she said. Her soldiers followed her along the way, first opting out, then scheduling their own shots when Holbrook received hers.

# Virus spike reduces Okinawa indoor dining

BY JOSEPH DITZLER  
*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — The Marine Corps and Air Force ordered an indefinite end Monday to indoor dining at off-base restaurants on Okinawa, citing an increase in coronavirus cases on the island and at their respective installations.

Since March 5, the Marines have seen “a steady rise in COVID-19 cases both on and off-base,” Marine Corps Installations Pacific announced in a Facebook post. “Due to this result, the [health protection condition] measures were re-evaluated and changed for the health and safety of everyone on island.”

Okinawa prefecture reported 66 new infections Saturday, the peak of a steady rise that

began with seven on Feb. 21, according to the prefecture’s data. In between, case numbers rose through the low teens to 28 on March 4 and into the 30s by mid-month. The winter surge on the island peaked at 131 new patients on Jan. 27.

The Okinawa Marines on March 5 lifted a ban on indoor dining, with limits on group size and table spacing. They last publicly reported one new COVID-19 patient on March 10.

U.S. Forces Japan on its website, however, listed 13 active coronavirus patients within the Marine Corps on Okinawa as of Thursday — 11 at Camp Foster and two at Camp Hansen.

“In the past week, we have seen an increase in COVID

cases on Okinawa in both the local population and in the joint-service community,” a spokesman for III Marine Expeditionary Force, Capt. Pawel Puczko, wrote Monday by email to Stars and Stripes.

He said most service members and eligible civilians offered the COVID-19 vaccine are choosing to receive it. III MEF is in phase 1c of the Defense Department priority table, which includes DOD beneficiaries ages 65 to 74 and those ages 16 to 64 with increased risk for severe illness if they contract the virus.

At Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, 18th Wing commander Brig. Gen. Joel Carey also ordered an end to off-base indoor dining “and physically waiting inside a restaurant for car-

ryout/takeout,” not including waiting in malls and food courts. Kadena had lifted that prohibition March 4.

Carey’s order Monday cites rising infection numbers on and off base. Kadena has reported 11 cases so far in March, including four new coronavirus patients Sunday.

Three developed COVID-19 symptoms and isolated themselves before testing positive, according to a base Facebook post. The fourth tested positive after contact with a previously infected person.

Kadena health officials quarantined an unspecified number of the four’s close contacts.

No other U.S. bases in Japan reported new coronavirus patients between 6 p.m. Friday and 6 p.m. Monday.

## UK to boost navy, special ops in defense plan for new threats

*Bloomberg News*

The U.K. government plans to bolster its navy and special forces as part of an overhaul of its defense strategy, planning to be “more active” in combating threats globally.

Britain will deploy more ships and submarines, and create a special operations “Ranger Regiment” to be used in high-risk environments, the Ministry of Defense said in a statement Monday, ahead of the publication of a command paper on the United Kingdom’s defense strategy.

A focus on maritime security and counterinsurgency comes as the U.K. is also set to cut troop numbers by 10,000, a reflection of a shift in priorities due to a perceived reduced risk of a conventional land war involving Britain. Prime Minister Boris Johnson set out a 100-page blueprint for the nation’s diplomacy and defense last week, detailing an ambition to tilt toward the Indo-Pacific region, bolster Britain’s nuclear deterrent and fight terrorists.

“Across a vast global footprint, we will be

constantly operating to deter our adversaries and reassure our friends,” Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said in the statement. “From striking Daesh terrorists in Iraq, disrupting drug shipments and deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics, our armed forces already reach where others cannot.”

Wallace declined to comment on the potential 10,000 troop reduction on Sunday, saying it was right to update Parliament first.

“What I will be doing is making sure we have an armed forces that is the right size to meet the threat,” Wallace said on Sky News. “And the right size to meet the government’s ambition of having a global Britain that can uphold values and support its allies.”

The Royal Navy will also deploy a ship to prevent Russian submarines sabotaging Britain’s Internet access by damaging undersea cables, the Telegraph newspaper reported on Sunday, citing senior defense officials.

## USS Winston S. Churchill sailors opt for vaccines

*The (Newport News, Va.) Daily Press*

Coming home after nearly nine months at sea, sailors on USS Winston S. Churchill took a moment before leaving the guided missile destroyer to get a first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

While the pandemic hung over the ship—as with the rest of the world—through its mission in the Middle East, Churchill completed its work without a single sailor falling ill, said Cmdr. Timothy Stanley, the ship’s commanding officer.

That work included escorting merchant vessels through dangerous waters, intercepting weapons and even helping an Iranian dhow with food and supplies when it got into difficulties on the Arabian Sea. But awareness of the pandemic never faded.

“I’d say a majority of the crew are getting vaccinated,” Stanley said, speaking shortly after receiving his own shot. He credited strict attention to Navy guidelines about masks and social distancing.

# AstraZeneca: Vaccine did well in US study

*Associated Press*

LONDON — AstraZeneca reported Monday that its COVID-19 vaccine provided strong protection among all adults in a long-anticipated U.S. study, raising hopes that the findings could help rebuild public confidence in the beleaguered shot in other countries and moving a step closer to clearance for American use.

AstraZeneca said the vaccine was 79% effective overall at preventing symptomatic cases of COVID-19 — including in older people — and that none of the study volunteers who were vaccinated were hospitalized or developed severe disease. The company also said its experts did not identify any safety concerns related to the vaccine, including finding no increased risk of rare blood clots identified in Europe.

The findings bolster AstraZeneca's prior research in Britain and other countries, and add to real-world evidence that the shots

are offering good protection as they're used more widely. But confidence in the vaccine has been repeatedly hit because of concerns about how data was reported from some previous trials, confusion over its efficacy in older adults and a recent scare over clotting.

AstraZeneca said it will seek clearance in the United States "in the coming weeks," putting it on track to arrive just as the country is projected to have a big boost in supplies of three other vaccines — from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson — that already are in use.

A Food and Drug Administration advisory committee will publicly debate the evidence behind the shots before the agency decides whether to allow emergency use. Ruud Dobber, an AstraZeneca executive vice president, said that if the FDA OKs the vaccine, the company will deliver 30 million doses immediately — and another 20 mil-

lion within the first month.

Scientists had hoped the U.S. study would clear up some of the confusion about just how well the shots really work, particularly in older people. Previous research suggested the vaccine was effective in younger populations, but there was no solid data proving its efficacy in those over 65, often those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Last week, more than a dozen countries, mostly in Europe, temporarily suspended use of the AstraZeneca shot after reports it was linked to rare blood clots — even as international health agencies insisted the benefits of the vaccine outweighed the risks. On Thursday, the European Medicines Agency concluded after an investigation that the vaccine did not raise the overall risk of blood clots, but could not rule out that it was connected to two very rare types of clots. It recommended adding a warning about these cases to the vaccine's leaflet.

## Vaccinated pregnant women pass antibodies to baby, research shows

*The Washington Post*

Pregnant women who receive a coronavirus vaccine not only acquire protective antibodies against the virus for themselves but also may pass along immunity to their babies, emerging research shows.

Several preliminary studies suggest that women who received an mRNA vaccine (Pfizer or Moderna) during pregnancy had COVID-19 antibodies in their umbilical cord blood. Another study also detected antibodies in their breastmilk, indicating that at least some immunity could be transferred to babies both before and after birth.

Brenna Hughes, vice chair for obstetrics and quality at Duke University, said several recent preprints, which are papers that have not yet been peer-reviewed, are "the first to show what we had hoped would be true, which is that these vac-

cines could be potentially protective through antibodies passed on to the fetus."

"So worries about possible risk and harm may be proven quite the opposite. In fact, it may be proven that the vaccines actually provide protection to the developing fetus," said Hughes, who is also co-chair of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' COVID-19 task force. She was not involved in the studies.

Researchers have already seen that pregnant women who recover from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, can pass along their natural immunity to their babies. But the observation that vaccine-induced antibodies may reach a fetus through cord blood and a newborn through breastmilk is a new discovery that may have broader implications in the fight against the virus.

## Dozens of towns isolated by flooding in Australian state

*Associated Press*

CANBERRA, Australia — Hundreds of people have been rescued from floodwaters that have isolated dozens of towns in Australia's most populous state New South Wales and forced thousands to evacuate their homes as record rain continues to inundate the country's east coast.

Around 18,000 people had been evacuated from flooding in New South Wales by Monday and emergency services feared up to 54,000 people could be displaced with rain forecast to continue until Wednesday.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Parliament that 35 communities in northern New South Wales had been isolated and emergency services had conducted more than 700 flood rescues.

"We are grateful at this point that no lives have been lost so far," Morrison said. "But weakened foundations for buildings, for roads and trees, they all cre-

ate risk, as do downed power lines and rising water levels."

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said up to 38 parts of the state had been declared natural disaster areas.

"I don't know any time in our state's history where we have had these extreme weather conditions in such quick succession in the middle of a pandemic," Berejiklian told reporters. "So, they are challenging times for New South Wales."

Thousands of people have been affected with 40 flood warnings and 20 evacuation orders along the state's Mid North Coast, and in western Sydney. Houses had been submerged and destroyed while several communities had lost power.

Heavy rain will remain a serious risk on Tuesday for the Mid North Coast, where communities are facing the worst flooding conditions since 1929.



# Navajo Nation COVID-19 cases above 30K

Associated Press

The Navajo Nation has reported nine new COVID-19 cases but no new deaths, pushing the total number of cases since the pandemic past 30,000.

The latest numbers released Sunday bring the tribe's pandemic total to 30,007 confirmed cases. The number of known deaths remains 1,233.

The Navajo Nation had a soft reopening last week with 25% capacity for some businesses under certain restrictions.

Still, mask mandates and daily curfews remain.

Tribal President Jonathan Nez reiterated in a statement the importance of getting vaccinated. However, he said those who are vaccinated should not take vacations or hold large in-person gatherings with the ongoing spread of COVID-19 variants.

The Navajo reservation covers parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.

## Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson said Sunday that he believes his proposal to remove a mask mandate intended to slow the spread of the coronavirus will take place as planned at the end of the month.

On CNN's "State of the Union," Hutchinson said goals announced in February to lift the mask mandate, which include a positivity rate below 10%, or fewer than 750 hospitalizations, are being met and he believes the mask requirement will be lifted.

"I set some goals. And we're making those goals. So, I expect that (mandate) to be lifted," Hutchinson said. "Common sense is going to replace mandates. And I think that's where we are right now. You cannot go beyond the toleration of the American public" to a mandate.

Hutchinson said he believes people will continue wearing masks when social distancing is not possible or they are otherwise at risk of virus exposure.

## California

LOS ANGELES — Students in California classrooms can sit 3 feet apart instead of 6 under new guidelines adopted by the state as

school officials figure out how to reopen campuses closed for a year during the coronavirus pandemic.

The state recommendations announced Saturday came a day after federal health officials relaxed social distancing guidelines for schools nationwide. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises at least 3 feet of space between desks in most schools, even in towns and cities where community spread is high, so long as students and teachers wear masks and take other precautions.

Local education leaders will have the final say on distancing in California. The Los Angeles Unified School District said it would stick with the 6-foot rule, the LA Times reported Sunday.

Some districts across the state will likely embrace the revised rules. But many school systems, including Los Angeles Unified, have approved agreements with their teachers unions that stipulate a 6-foot desk separation, the Times said.

"The recent CDC guidance will not change our current reopening plans," LA Unified Superintendent Austin Beutner said Sunday. "Our challenge is convincing families that schools are safe, not finding ways to stuff more kids into classrooms."

After soaring late last year and in January, the rates of COVID-19 infection are so low in Los Angeles and across the state that LA Mayor Eric Garcetti said he's feeling hopeful for the first time in a year. As vaccinations ramp up, Los Angeles and most other California counties have started easing virus restrictions, allowing restaurants, movie theaters and gyms to reopen with limited capacity.

"Here in Los Angeles, we have a positivity rate of 1.9%, and we estimate that anywhere between half and two-thirds of our population has antibodies in it now, either because of exposure to COVID-19 and vaccination," Garcetti told CBS' "Face the Nation." "So this is a very, very optimistic moment."

Across California the positivity rate over the past seven days is 1.8%, the state Department of Pub-

lic Health said Sunday.

## Michigan

DETROIT — Michigan is set to expand vaccine eligibility starting Monday, a move that comes as public health experts voice fresh concerns about the state's rising COVID-19 infection rate.

Residents age 50 and older will be eligible for vaccines starting Monday. Ford Field in Detroit is set to open Wednesday as Michigan's first federally run mass vaccine site.

However, the state's COVID-19 cases have been increasing. Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, Michigan's chief medical executive, said the state's case rate spiked 77% over the past four weeks to 172.9 cases per million people.

"I am quite worried that we're entering another surge," Dawn Misra, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine, told the Detroit Free Press. "If you've been watching the numbers the last couple of weeks ... you could just see it all coming."

Michigan reported 3,730 new COVID-19 cases Friday, the most since Jan. 8, according to the newspaper.

## New York

NEW YORK — The first case of a COVID-19 variant known as the Brazilian variant was confirmed in New York.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that scientists at Mount Sinai Hospital identified the case, which was then verified by the state Department of Health's Wadsworth Center Laboratories.

The patient is a Brooklyn resident in their 90s who hasn't traveled recently, officials said in a news release. Health officials are doing further investigation of the patient and any potential contacts.

The Brazilian variant was first detected in the U.S. in January, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported nearly 50 confirmed cases nationwide. It has been considered potentially more severe than earlier variants and possibly more resistant to current vaccines, though some recent research has indicat-

ed it may not be as resistant to the vaccines as initially thought.

## North Carolina

DURHAM — Duke University has lifted a stay-in-place order it issued last week for all undergraduate students following a spike in COVID-19 cases that officials blamed largely on students attending fraternity rush events.

The lifting of the order Sunday morning means all in-person courses will resume their standard delivery method, whether in-person or hybrid.

Students living in university-provided housing are again allowed to move about campus, but are being asked to leave campus only for essential travel and health-related activities through March 28.

Students living off-campus in the Durham area are permitted to be on campus only to attend in-person classes and essential academic activities, participate in surveillance testing, seek medical care or pick up food orders.

The stay-in-place order was imposed March 13 after a week in which more than 180 students were in isolation after testing positive, and another 200 students were in quarantine as a result of contact tracing.

## Washington

OLYMPIA — Washington state is set to advance to Phase 3 of its COVID-19 reopening plan Monday.

All of the state's 39 counties will be allowed to relax coronavirus restrictions.

Under Phase 3, all indoor spaces — including indoor dining at restaurants, indoor fitness centers, and retail — can increase capacity from 25% to 50%. Larger events like concerts and graduation ceremonies will also be OK since up to 400 people will be allowed to gather for indoor and outdoor activities as long as physical distancing and masking are enforced.

Counties will be evaluated every three weeks, starting on April 12. If statewide ICU capacity tops 90%, all counties will move back to the most restrictive first phase, which includes a prohibition on indoor restaurant dining.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Man refuses mask and stabs restaurant worker

**TX** LEAGUE CITY — Police in Texas were searching for a man accused of refusing to wear a mask at a Jack in the Box restaurant and then stabbing the shift manager with what was believed to be a pocketknife.

League City police said James Schulz, 53, is wanted in connection with the stabbing.

Police Chief Gary Ratliff said an arrest warrant was issued for Schulz charging him with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. His bond will be set at \$40,000.

Police said the incident started when Schulz refused to follow the restaurant's policy requiring him to wear a mask to protect against the spread of the coronavirus. Police said he then attacked the manager.

The manager had three stab wounds in the arm and upper torso, police said.

He was taken to the hospital, where he was treated and released.

## Rescuers save worker after sewer line collapse

**MS** PACHUTA — Workers in east Mississippi spent five hours rescuing a man after a trench collapsed while he was installing a sewer line.

The collapse happened as Clarke County employee Tyler Kirkman was working at the intersection of highways 11 and 18 in Pachuta, WTOK-TV reported.

During the five-hour rescue, Clarke County emergency management director Eddie Ivy got into the hole with Kirkman to help set him free. Kirkman said

that provided him assurance that everything would be OK. His legs were angled in opposite directions.

Kirkman said he thanks everyone who was at the scene and those who prayed and checked on him.

He said he was happy to be reunited with his daughter and mother, and he plans to be back at work.

## Fire destroys reptile house at petting zoo

**MO** VALLEY MINES — A fire destroyed a reptile house at an eastern Missouri petting zoo, killing all 11 animals inside.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that the fire was reported at the Critter Lane Petting Zoo in Valley Mines.

Big River Fire Department Assistant Chief Allen Stegall said that the structure was almost completely gone when crews arrived. He said the neighboring bird house also suffered some smoke and water damage, but none of the animals inside it were injured as far as he knew.

Stegall said the cause of the fire is still unknown.

## Authorities plan 4 spring fires to restore park

**IN** CHESTERTON — Authorities plan four prescribed fires at Indiana Dunes National Park this spring, totaling more than 900 acres. They said prescribed fires are used to restore the park.

Exact dates have not been announced yet. Humidity and wind speed and direction must be ideal to complete each planned fire, the National Park Service said in a statement.

The National Park Service said one of the fires is planned for about 300 acres of prairie and woodland in the east half of the park. The three other fires are planned in the west end of the park.

The northwest Indiana park includes 15 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline and 15,000 acres of beaches, woods, prairies and marshes.

## Vet held on charges of child porn, bestiality

**FL** MIAMI — A South Florida veterinarian is facing charges of possessing child pornography and sexually abusing a dog, authorities said.

Prentiss Madden, 40, was arrested by federal agents and ordered held pending a bond hearing, court records show.

Madden was medical director of Caring Hands Animal Hospital in Miami until he was fired two weeks ago, when colleagues learned he was under investigation for "these heinous and unthinkable crimes," the hospital said in a statement.

Madden's charges fall under a federal law outlawing animal abuse, which was initially created in response to a genre of cruelty in which people record the harming of animals for the sexual gratification of viewers, the Miami Herald reported.

## Necropsy performed on whale found on island

**AK** SITKA — A necropsy was conducted on a humpback whale carcass found washed up on an island west of Sitka, officials said.

Julie Fair, a spokesperson with NOAA Fisheries in Juneau, said in an email to The Associated Press that her agency re-

ceived reports of a beached whale. She said the U.S. Coast Guard helped provide transportation for members of the special team authorized to conduct the necropsy.

Jan Straley, a University of Alaska Southeast biology professor authorized to respond to stranded marine mammals, told the Daily Sitka Sentinel the necropsy involved taking samples from the carcass and photographs that could help determine how the whale died.

The team included University of Alaska Southeast faculty members and marine scientists, a local high school biology teacher, two volunteers and a member of the NOAA office of law enforcement designated as a "bear guard," the newspaper reported.

## Police can now impound street racing vehicles

**AZ** PHOENIX — Drivers who are caught street racing or driving recklessly in Phoenix could now have their car impounded for 30 days under a new city ordinance.

The Phoenix City Council unanimously approved the ordinance allowing police to tow and impound vehicles involved in illegal street racing or reckless driving for up to 30 days, KPHO-TV reported.

Drivers must now pay for the tow, storage and administrative fees before the vehicle will be released.

City officials and authorities in Phoenix have seen an increase in street racing in the last two years, and created the Street Racing Task Force to combat complaints over reckless driving. Members of the task force have said races could attract groups up to 500 people.

— From wire reports

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# Mid-majors make mark on March Madness

Associated Press

In any other college basketball season, four upsets in the eight second-round games played at the NCAA Tournament would be a sign that something big is brewing.

Were those the opening shots in the long-rumored mid-major revolution? Have enough talented kids and smart coaches finally taken up residence at programs outside the Big Six to nudge the balance of power?

Hard to say. Because this one isn't like any other season.

Just two of the teams that won Sunday qualify as mid-majors: eighth-seeded Loyola of Chicago, which manhandled No. 1 seed Illinois from the get-go and won 71-58; and 15th-seeded Oral Roberts, which used a late run to squeeze past Florida 81-78. The other two upsets were No. 15 Oregon State fending off third-seeded Oklahoma State 80-70, and No. 11 Syracuse smothering third-seeded West Virginia just enough to win 75-72.

But it felt like the little guys' day. After becoming only the second No. 15 seed to make the Sweet 16, ORU coach Paul Mills updated his numbers-don't-mean-anything post-game speech from the upset over Ohio State.

"We," Mills said bravely, since his Golden Eagles will face No. 3 Arkansas in the next round, "are not capitulating to anybody

here."

Meanwhile, four more of the 16 teams in action Monday can call themselves mid-majors, including overall top seed Gonzaga, and two more, Creighton and Ohio, who are playing each other. If Abilene Christian somehow manages to pull the rug out from under UCLA, that's three more mid-majors for a total of five in the Sweet 16. Which would indeed be something big.

But it's possible, too, that something a bit more subtle is going on.

Because of the pandemic, teams had to navigate a stop-and-start regular season, then slapdash conference tournaments and then get seeded by an NCAA selection committee that, lacking the usual comparisons, might as well have been throwing darts.

Mid-majors are used to being treated as an afterthought. In normal seasons, they don't have the budget to smooth out all the rough spots, and because they're always farther back in the recruiting line, their players stick around because precious few are good enough to turn pro early. Nearly every time they venture out the conference, they do so as underdogs.

In normal seasons, those disadvantages are a chip on their shoulders. This time around, qualities like resilience and cohesion are turning what might have been moral victories into actual W's.

"Nobody was really doing anything out of body or out of mind," said Loyola center Cameron Krutwig, who had 19 points and 12 rebounds in the win over Illinois.

Krutwig looks like a bigger version of Dick Butkus, but moves just like Justin Timberlake and doesn't rattle easily. "We just stuck to the game plan," he added matter-of-factly.

For all that, plenty of the usual Big Six conference suspects are hanging around and a few are flexing.

No. 1 seed Baylor toyed with Wisconsin 76-63 and No. 5 Villanova methodically broke down North Texas 84-61. No. 2 Houston and No. 3 Arkansas both got close shaves, but outlasted Rutgers and Texas Tech, respectively.

Syracuse was handed an 11 seed, and while it was only mildly surprising that the Orangemen slipped by No. 3 West Virginia to advance, the twist-of-fate this time around is that Buddy Boeheim, son of Hall of Fame coach Jim, is driving the bus.

He scored 22 of his 25 points after half-time and helped put the game away with three late free throws. Then he revealed what his father said during what looked like a heartfelt moment just after the buzzer sounded.

"He said, 'Yeah, you missed that last free throw,'" Buddy laughed.

## Eighth-seeded Loyola Chicago stuns No. 1 Illini

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — If the pre-game prayer sounded more like a scouting report, it was. And if Sister Jean didn't have any plans for next weekend, well, she does now.

Loyola Chicago carried out its 101-year-old superfan's plans to a T on Sunday, moving to the Sweet 16 with a 71-58 win over Illinois, the first No. 1 seed bounced from this year's NCAA Tournament.

Cameron Krutwig delivered a 19-point, 12-rebound masterpiece and the quick-handed, eighth-seeded Ramblers (26-4) led wire to wire.

The Ramblers next play Oregon State, which topped Oklahoma State 80-70 later Sunday.

"We just executed, played our game and controlled the game from the start," Krutwig said. "Nobody was really doing anything out of body or out of mind. We just stuck to the game plan."

Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, the venerable team chaplain who headlined the team's 2018 run to the Final Four, received both COVID-19 vaccination shots so she could travel to Indianapolis.

"As we play the Fighting Illini, we ask for special help to overcome this team and get a great win," she said. "We hope to score early and make our opponents nervous. We have a great opportunity to convert rebounds as this team makes about 50% of layups and 30% of its three points. Our defense can take care of that."

## Oral Roberts just second No. 15 to reach Sweet 16

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Dunk City, say hello to Max Abmas and soaring Oral Roberts.

The fraternity of No. 15 seeds to reach the second week of the NCAA Tournament has its second member.

"It's really just mind blowing," forward Kevin Obanor said. "We're grateful. Just happy that we got the win."

Abmas and Obanor led the way as Oral Roberts pulled off another surprise Sunday night, reaching the round of 16 with an 81-78 victory over Florida.

The Golden Eagles erased an 11-point deficit on the way to their seventh straight victory. Next up for the Summit League Tournament champions, who

eliminated No. 2 seed Ohio State in the first round, is a matchup with No. 3 seed Arkansas next weekend.

"As I told the guys, we're not going to let somebody put a number in front of our name and tell us that that's our worth, or that's our value," Oral Roberts coach Paul Mills said. "We're not capitulating to anybody here."

Obanor scored 28 points and Abmas (pronounced ACE-mus), the regular-season national leading scorer, finished with 26 as the Golden Eagles (18-10) closed the game on a 25-11 run.

Oral Roberts joins Florida Gulf Coast — those guys from "Dunk City" — as the only No. 15 seeds to reach the round of 16 in tournament history.



# Lightning top Panthers in key matchup

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Tyler Johnson broke a tie on a power play midway through the third period to help the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the Florida Panthers 5-3 on Sunday.

Yanni Gourde and Brayden Point each had a goal and an assist, Alex Killorn and Mathieu Joseph also scored, and Curtis McElhinney stopped 29 shots to improve to 3-3-1. The Lightning opened a four-point lead over the Panthers in the Central Division standings.

Gustav Forsling, Patric Hornqvist and Carter Verhaeghe scored for Florida, which lost in regulation for the third time in 14 road games.

Sergei Bobrovsky finished with 19 saves for the Panthers.

After Florida rallied twice to tie it, Johnson put Tampa Bay in front for good at 10:56 of the third period, driving to the net to tap in a pass from Yanni Gourde. The Lightning then had to kill off a Panthers power-play chance with 4:27 left before Point scored into an empty net with 14.3 seconds left.

“We kept inching away and they kept coming back so there was no time to hang your heads,” Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said. “So the boys just kept coming and in the end our special teams got through, killed off a couple big PPs and scored one ourselves and then (McElhinney) came through for us, so it was a team effort.”

The Panthers opened the scoring on Verhaeghe’s 12th of the season at 3:28 of the first period but the Lightning answered on the next shift as Gourde found a rebound from Barclay Goodrow’s initial chance 32 seconds later.

The two teams exchanged goals in the second, Killorn at 11:23 and Forsling on the power play at 18:24. Joseph put Tampa Bay in front at 5:22 of the third, but Hornqvist answered with a power-play goal at 6:25 before Johnson regained the lead for the Lightning.

**Devils 2, Penguins 1 (OT):** Jesper Bratt scored on a wraparound at 2:50 of overtime to lift visiting New Jersey past Pittsburgh.

Bratt took a pass from Pavel Zacha and

quickly circled the net, tucking a shot between the post and goalie Tristan Jarry’s skate for his first career overtime goal.

The Devils won two of three games in the series.

Sidney Crosby scored for the Penguins and Jarry made 33 saves.

**Kings 3, Golden Knights 1:** Sean Walker and Dustin Brown scored 51 seconds apart in the second period and host Los Angeles ended Vegas’ winning streak at five.

Cal Petersen made 41 saves and fell just short of his second career shutout.

Tomas Nosek scored for the first-place Golden Knights to end Petersen’s shutout bid with 3:27 to play, but Jeff Carter scored a breakaway goal 55 seconds later to seal it.

**Predators 4, Stars 3 (SO):** Calle Jarnkrok scored in the fifth round of the shootout and Nashville finished a franchise-record eight-game trip the same way it started it, with a shootout victory at Dallas.

Eeli Tolvanen had the tying goal with six minutes remaining in regulation and two assists for his first career three-point game.

## Blaney bides time, passes Larson for win in Atlanta

Associated Press

HAMPTON, Ga. — Ryan Blaney knew he had to let Kyle Larson go.

Patience was the key, especially on a day when Larson looked unbeatable.

In the end, Larson faded on an battered set of tires, and Blaney raced by him for an improbable victory Sunday.

“I was not going to be able to stick with him,” Blaney said. “I’ve got to save my tires ... and see what happens.”

Blaney became the sixth driver to win in six races to start NASCAR’s Cup season, surging to the front with nine laps to go after Larson easily won the first two stages and led 269 of 325 laps on the 1.54-mile trioval.

Larson’s tires didn’t stand up to the punishing track after making his final pit stop with 56 laps to go.

Blaney stayed close enough to make his move, hugging the out-

side wall through the fourth turn and cutting to the inside to pass Larson as they crossed the line in front of the main grandstands.

Blaney pulled away to win by 2.083 seconds in his No. 12 Team Penske Ford, having gone just as long as Larson on the final set of tires but getting much more out of them.

“It’s cool to win at a place where you’ve got to finesse it a little bit and think about it,” Blaney said after his fifth career victory.

He led just 25 laps, but was out front for the one that mattered.

When it was over, Blaney strolled over to the stands and grabbed the checkered flag, which he handed to a young fan wearing the driver’s T-shirt.

It was a bitter loss for Larson, who missed a chance to become 2021’s first two-time winner after a victory at Las Vegas two weeks ago.

Still, he is off to a strong start in his new job at Hendrick Motorsports, less than a year after blurting out a racial slur on the livestream of a late-night video racing game, which cost him his job at Chip Ganassi Racing.

“I hate to lead a lot of laps and lose,” Larson said. “The car was stupid fast for a long time there.”

The Cup series returned to the track where the racing world came to a halt a year ago. Atlanta was the first NASCAR Cup race to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

This time, the race went off as scheduled before a socially distanced crowd of about 20,000 — far below capacity because of the lingering COVID-19 outbreak, but a welcome change from last June when no fans were allowed for Atlanta’s makeup race.

The Cup series will be back July 11, the first time since 2010

that Atlanta has hosted two races in a season.

### Who’s hot

Pole-sitter Denny Hamlin continues to lead the season standings after another strong run. He was fourth behind Blaney, Larson and Alex Bowman.

Hamlin has finished in the top five in every race but Homestead, where he was 11th.

Still, he’s clearly perturbed about failing to take the top spot.

“We’re just not fast enough,” Hamlin said. “We need more speed.”

### Who’s not

Stewart-Haas Racing is off to a tough start in 2021.

Kevin Harvick, who had won two of the last three races in Atlanta, was never in a mix after having to make an extra pit stop early on to change a flat that resulted from a broken tire stem.

He did battle back for a 10th-place finish.

# Suns' Paul passes 10,000 assists in win

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Chris Paul says he knows the secret for why he's still a dominant NBA point guard at an age when most of his peers are getting into coaching or figuring out their next steps in life.

"I told the guys in the locker room I've got the easy job," Paul said grinning. "I just pass it to them."

The 35-year-old Paul continued adding to the résumé of his Hall of Fame-worthy career on Sunday night, passing 10,000 assists in the Phoenix Suns' 111-94 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers.

The 11-time All-Star hit 10,000 in spectacular fashion, throwing a perfect alley-oop pass to Deandre Ayton, who was streaking down the lane and finished with a powerful two-handed jam. Paul finished with a tri-

ple-double on Sunday, contributing 11 points, 13 assists and 10 rebounds.

Paul is just the sixth player in NBA history to reach the 10,000-assist milestone along with John Stockton, Jason Kidd, Steve Nash, Mark Jackson and Magic Johnson. At his current rate, Paul will pass Johnson this season and might catch Jackson and Nash.

"I just enjoy watching him get these achievements along the way," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "It's amazing. I remember when he was in college at Wake Forest and no one could see this on the horizon. It comes down to a lot of hard work, sacrifice, an unreal family that he comes from and a dedication to the game."

Williams and Paul have a unique relationship, operating almost as equals instead of the

usual coach-player dynamic. The two have known each other for years and Williams was Paul's coach in New Orleans a decade ago. Now they're reunited and Williams is proud to call Paul a friend.

"Chris is somebody I'll ask for advice," Williams said. "He's somebody that I can tell the truth to and he can tell me the truth. You'd have to ask him, but I value our relationship now because we're both older."

Later Williams added: "When we're done with this I'm going to be checking up on his kids when they're getting 10,000 assists when they're in the league. I think it's a cool thing to have players you're close to, but also that you can coach and push."

Paul's longevity in the league is something that Phoenix's young star Devin Booker has watched closely. Now team-

mates, the 24-year-old said it's been a privilege to get an up close look at Paul's relentless routine of eating right and taking care of his body.

"All the nicknames he gets, he fully deserves," Booker said. "The Point God, everything. ... You see no slippage."

Paul's in his 16th season in the league but he's still playing at an elite level. He made his 11th All-Star team earlier this year and is averaging about 16 points and nine assists per game.

Now he's on a Phoenix team that has a 28-13 record and looks ready to jump into the Western Conference elite. His buddies from his draft class might be coaching these days, but Paul still enjoys his "easy job" of dishing perfect passes.

"I ain't done," Paul said. "I'm going to keep hoopin.'"

## Thunder give Rockets team-record 20th-straight loss

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The Houston Rockets lost their team-record 20th straight game, falling 114-112 to the Oklahoma City Thunder on Sunday when John Wall missed two shots in the final 10 seconds.

The skid is tied for the ninth-worst in NBA history and the longest since Philadelphia's record-setting 28-game losing streak across the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Houston took a 110-109 lead with less than three minutes remaining. After the Rockets went ahead, Lu Dort blocked Wall's layup from behind to protect a 113-112 edge. Wall then missed a deep three at the buzzer.

Dort scored 23 points and Isaiah Roby had 18 for Oklahoma City.

Christian Wood had 27 points, eight rebounds and two blocks for Houston, Wall had 24 points and seven assists, and Victor Oladipo had 23 points.

**Nets 113, Wizards 106:** Kyrie Irving scored 28 points and James Harden had 26 to lead Brooklyn past visiting Washington.

Blake Griffin dunked for the first time since December 2019 in his Nets debut and Nicolas Claxton added 16 points, including

two three-point plays down the stretch.

Russell Westbrook had 29 points, 13 rebounds and 13 assists for the Wizards.

**Mavericks 132, Trail Blazers 92:** Luka Doncic scored 37 points in three quarters, leading to an easy victory at Portland for Dallas. Doncic made his first eight three-point shots and finished 8-for-9. Overall, he shot 13-for-19 from the field and added seven rebounds and four assists.

Damian Lillard led the Blazers with 19 points.

**Celtics 112, Magic 96:** Jaylen Brown hit a career-high 10 three-pointers and scored 34 points, Jayson Tatum added 23 and Boston beat visiting Orlando to snap a three-game losing streak.

The Celtics made 23 three-pointers, one short of the franchise record. Brown was 10-for-18 from the distance.

Nikola Vucevic had 22 points and 13 rebounds for the Magic.

**Cavaliers 116, Raptors 105:** Collin Sexton scored 23 of his 36 points in the second half, Jarrett Allen had 17 points and 15 rebounds and Cleveland handed visiting Toronto its eighth straight loss.

Dean Wade scored 16 points, and Darius

Garland had 15 points and six assists for the Cavaliers, who had dropped five of six.

**76ers 101, Knicks 100 (OT):** Tobias Harris made two free throws with 5.3 seconds left in overtime and visiting Philadelphia ran its winning streak against New York to 15 games.

The 76ers improved to 30-13 with their eighth win in its last 10 games.

**Pelicans 113, Nuggets 108:** Brandon Ingram and Zion Williamson each scored 30 points and New Orleans overcame another triple-double by Nikola Jokic to win at Denver.

Nickeil Alexander-Walker added 20 points for the Pelicans.

**Pacers 109, Heat 106 (OT):** Justin Holiday scored 15 points and hit consecutive three-pointers in overtime to lead Indiana past host Miami for a series sweep.

Myles Turner had with 16 points and five blocks, Doug McDermott scored 15 points and Domantas Sabonis had 17 points and 11 rebounds for the Pacers.

**Bulls 100, Pistons 86:** Lauri Markkanen had 16 points and eight rebounds and Chicago used a strong defensive performance to win at Detroit.