

## Admiral counters command on China nukes

By SARAH CAMMARATA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Adm. John Aquilino, the nominee to be the next commander of American forces in the Pacific, said Tuesday that even if China were to quadruple its nuclear stockpile within the next decade, the United States would still have more warheads deployed than Beijing.

The comment from Aquilino, who is expected to be confirmed soon, contradicts how Adm. Phil Davidson, the current Indo-Pacific commander, described the size of China's nuclear arsenal to the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier in March. Davidson agreed at the hearing that the Chinese could surpass the U.S. nuclear stockpile by 2030 if they can quadruple their number of warheads.

Aquilino has served as the commander of the Pacific Fleet since May 2018. He was tapped weeks ago by President Joe Biden's administration to be the next com-

mander of all U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region.

As a follow-up from Davidson's hearing, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., asked Aquilino at his confirmation hearing Tuesday that even if China quadrupled its stockpile in 10 years, "China would still have fewer warheads than the U.S. [has] currently deployed, is that right?"

"If it were to quadruple today, that would be accurate," Aquilino responded.

At a budget hearing March 9, however, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., asked Davidson that if China were to triple or quadruple their stockpile, the adversary "could possibly have nuclear overmatch against the United States before the end of this decade."

Davidson agreed with Cotton's assessment.

The hearings this month come as the U.S. focuses on deterring China and lawmakers consider a \$4.7 billion funding request to build up the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific region.

Davidson warned at the hearing earlier this month that the U.S. needs a larger budget to protect the country from an increasingly aggressive China by investing in troops, missile detection systems and weapons in the Indo-Pacific region.

Aquilino on Tuesday largely agreed with the assessment that the U.S. must bolster its funding, including for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, to counter Chinese influence in the region and increase cooperation with Pacific allies and partners.

The Pacific Deterrence Initiative was established in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, annual legislation that sets funding for the Defense Department, and is designed to enhance budget oversight and funnel resources to key military capabilities to deter China.

Congress funded \$2.2 billion for the PDI in fiscal year 2021, which ends Sept. 30, and Aquilino said he also supports additional funding for the initiative in fiscal year 2022,

which is slated to reach \$4.6 billion.

"The Pacific Deterrence Initiative is a strong example of the effort required to compete and win," Aquilino said in his opening statement. The PDI is "kind of the poster child for what the capabilities and things look like in prioritized order," he added later. Force protection, the ability to command and control and communicate in a mission-partner environment, and the ability to train with allies and partners are all key capabilities that are supported by the initiative.

Aquilino warned China's nuclear stockpile is "increasing at a rate that is faster than anyone previously believed," but he downplayed the concern over the number of warheads that the Chinese possess.

China's warhead stockpile is "currently estimated to be in the low-200s," according to the Defense Department's most recent report on the Chinese military. The U.S. inventory of nuclear warheads is 5,800.

## NATO to focus on climate change for military strategy

*The Washington Post*

Hotter summers in Iraq are blasting soldiers sitting inside armored vehicles. Flooding is threatening the world's largest navy base. Russian submarines are prowling the melting Arctic. Now NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg wants to make global warming a major focus of the military alliance's strategy and planning, pushing environmental issues to the center as a security threat.

The new push at NATO, which was approved Tuesday by alliance foreign ministers at a gathering at the headquarters in Brussels, signals a significant shift for the organization, which has traditionally guarded against threats from Russia and other political actors around the world.

Now, NATO will also try to incorporate a different sort of danger into

its work, as climate change upends old security assumptions and creates new risks for democratic societies. Stoltenberg, a former U.N. special envoy on climate change, said he hopes leaders will use a summit later this year to pledge to make their militaries carbon-neutral by 2050.

"Climate change is a crisis multiplier," Stoltenberg said in an interview. "Climate change will lead to more extreme weather, to droughts and to flooding, force people to move, to more fierce competition about scarce resources, water, land."

For some time, militaries have incorporated thinking about climate change into their planning, mainly in terms of how it will create new security risks and threaten their physical infrastructure. But a truly broad-ranging focus on a full range of climate and security issues has been rarer, especially a push that incorpo-

rates an effort to eliminate their emissions.

The gap is partly a reflection of competing cultures. Climate change activists and experts tend not to be deeply steeped in military issues, while military officers usually focus on operational readiness above all else. That can lead to blind spots: Militaries control vast swaths of territory, for example, but lag in thinking about sustainable land management.

Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian prime minister, is in some ways an unusual person who bridges both worlds. Early in his career, he was the second-in-command at his country's environment ministry. Much of Norway lies above the Arctic Circle, and some of the glaciers that Stoltenberg visited in his youth have now largely dripped away.

"You see the melting of the ice," he

said.

His focus on climate issues has been enabled by President Joe Biden's ascent to office after four years of President Donald Trump, who had called climate change a "hoax" and threatened to pull the United States out of NATO altogether.

In the U.S., the Biden administration has elevated climate change as a national security priority, resurrecting an Obama-era focus on the impact of man-made changes to the environment.

Already at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has established a high-level climate change working group and said the Defense Department will incorporate climate change into military planning and war-gaming. In another shift, the Pentagon appears likely to incorporate climate change into its updated national defense strategy.

# US mulls pause in airstrikes in Afghanistan

*Los Angeles Times*

WASHINGTON — American and Taliban negotiators are discussing a pause in U.S. airstrikes and drone flights in Afghanistan in order to revive long shot peace talks aimed at settling the two-decade old war, U.S. and Afghan officials said.

A temporary bombing halt is one of several ideas Biden administration officials are discussing if Taliban militants agree to sharply reduce attacks and assassinations ahead of high-level peace talks planned for early next month in Istanbul. But the idea remains a concept on paper only, dependent on steps by the Taliban to reduce violence first, several U.S. officials said.

A halt to U.S. air operations worries the Afghan government and its military, which still relies heavily on U.S. airstrikes and aerial sur-

veillance video from drones to help hold back the Taliban. It also alarms some in the Pentagon who are skeptical that concessions to the Taliban will make the militants more likely to make peace with the Afghan government.

With talks stalled, President Joe Biden signaled this month that it would be “tough” for U.S. troops to depart by May 1, the withdrawal deadline he inherited from the Trump administration under a deal made only with the Taliban. He added, though, that if the deadline for the U.S. exit was extended, it would not be by “a lot longer.”

Biden is under pressure from many within his own party to pull out U.S. troops.

He has shown little sentimental attachment to Afghanistan in private discussions, even after U.S. troops have fought and died to stabilize the country without lasting success since 2001,

according to participants in White House deliberations.

At the same time, he is aware that a peace deal is perhaps the only chance of preventing the country from descending deeper into violence and civil war once the U.S. pulls out.

The shrinking timetable for a U.S. decision has led Zalmay Khalilzad, Biden's envoy for Afghanistan, to discuss new options for achieving a diplomatic breakthrough, including a bombing pause, in talks with Taliban officials in Qatar.

One approach under consideration is for a 48-hour halt in U.S. military air operations after the Taliban reduces attacks, a sequencing meant to demonstrate to the group's leadership that the U.S. is open to military concessions if Taliban fighters reduce their attacks, according to officials involved in the deliberations.

## US, Iraq to hold talks over American troop presence

*Associated Press*

BAGHDAD — The Biden administration is set to resume strategic talks with Iraqi officials next month on the withdrawal of remaining U.S. combat forces in the country and other matters related to the bilateral relationship.

The talks, which began in June under the Trump administration, would be the first under Biden, who assumed office in January. The discussions are meant to shape the future of the U.S.-Iraq relationship and will touch security, trade, climate and more, according to a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The official added that the U.S. intended to use the meetings to clarify that coalition forces remain in the country “at the invitation of the Iraqi government and solely for the purpose of training and advising Iraqi forces” and to ensure that the terror group Islamic State “cannot reconstitute.”

Iraqi officials confirmed they had sent a formal request to President Joe Biden's administration for a date to resume strategic talks on bilateral relations and the withdrawal of remaining U.S. combat forces, Iraqi officials said Tuesday.

Relations between the two countries have been fraught with tension, particularly fol-

lowing the U.S. airstrike in January 2020 that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis just outside the Baghdad airport.

Outraged, Iraqi lawmakers, spurred by Shiite political factions, passed a non-binding resolution to oust U.S.-led coalition forces from the country following the attack.

Relations have improved since Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi took over the helm of Iraq's government in May. But some parties, notably parliament's Iran-backed Fatah bloc, continue to call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

## DOD is asked to house migrant children at Texas bases

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has been asked to house unaccompanied migrant children at two military bases in Texas, the Pentagon's chief spokesman said Tuesday.

The Department of Health and Human Services recently submitted a request for temporary housing at Joint Base San Antonio and Fort Bliss for the children, John Kirby said during a Pentagon news briefing.

The request is still being evaluated by de-

fense officials, Kirby said. He did not know how many children HHS expects to house at the two bases. HHS asked to use a vacant dormitory at Joint Base San Antonio and some land at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Kirby said.

Questions to HHS about the request to use military bases to house children went unanswered Tuesday afternoon.

The U.S. border with Mexico has experienced rising numbers in migration, including unaccompanied children, since April due to violence, natural disasters, food inse-

curity and poverty in Central America, according to a Department of Homeland Security statement issued March 13. In fiscal year 2020, there were 33,239 unaccompanied children who border security encountered. In the first five months of fiscal year 2021, which began Oct. 1, they have found 29,729 children, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help safely shelter and move these migrant children.

# Official: Colo. shooting suspect prone to rage

*Associated Press*

BOULDER, Colo. — Law enforcement officials and former associates of a 21-year-old accused of killing 10 people at a Colorado supermarket described the suspect as someone prone to sudden rage who was suspended from high school for a sudden attack on a classmate that left the student bloodied.

Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, who is from the Denver suburb of Arvada, was booked into jail Tuesday on murder charges a day after the attack at a King Soopers grocery in Boulder. He was due to make a first court appearance Thursday.

Alissa had bought an assault weapon March 16, six days before the attack, according to an arrest affidavit. Investigators have not established a motive, said Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty.

Among the dead was Boulder police Officer Eric Talley, 51, who was the first to arrive after responding to a call about shots fired and someone carrying a

gun, said police Chief Maris Herold. Talley was the father of seven children, ages 7 to 20.

A law enforcement official briefed on the shooting said the suspect's family told investigators they believed Alissa was suffering some type of mental illness, including delusions. The official was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

When he was a high school senior in 2018, Alissa was found guilty of assaulting a fellow student in class after knocking him to the floor, then climbing on top of him and punching him in the head several times, according to a police affidavit. Alissa was suspended from school and sentenced to probation and community service.

The other dead were identified as Denny Stong, 20; Neven Stanisic, 23; Rikki Olds, 25; Tralona Bartkowiak, 49; Suzanne Fountain, 59; Teri Leiker, 51; Kevin Mahoney, 61; Lynn Murray, 62; and Jodi Waters, 65.

# Democrats vow vote on gun control measures

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Democrats said they are pushing toward a vote on expanded gun control measures as the nation reels from its second mass shooting in a week. President Joe Biden said “we have to act,” but prospects for any major changes were dim, for now, in the closely divided Congress.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer vowed Tuesday morning to bring to the Senate floor legislation passed by the House that would require background checks for most gun sales and transfers. He said the Senate “must confront a devastating truth” after a lack of congressional action on the issue for almost three decades.

“This Senate will be different,” Schumer, D-N.Y., said a day after a shooting at a crowded Boulder, Colo., supermarket, killed 10 people, including a police officer. “The Senate is going to debate and address the epidemic of gun violence in this country.”

While a Senate vote on new gun control would be the first in several years, Democrats do not have the votes to pass any significant reform. They are not even united themselves, as Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., told reporters Tuesday that he opposes the

House legislation on background checks.

The Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing Tuesday on proposals for gun control. It is unclear whether any of the bills up for consideration — most of them involving more restrictive background checks — would have made a difference in the Colorado case. A 21-year-old man charged with killing eight people in the Atlanta area last week had purchased a 9 mm handgun hours before the murders, prompting advocates to push for longer waiting periods for purchases.

Vice President Kamala Harris said Wednesday in an interview with CBS News that Biden would not exclude taking executive action on gun control measures, but “if we really want something that is going to be lasting, we need to pass legislation.”

Senate Democrats do not currently have deep enough support among Republicans to pass new gun control legislation in the 50-50 Senate, as they would need 60 votes to do so. While expanding background checks is generally popular with the American public, even with some conservatives, Congress has been unable to find a successful compromise on guns in decades, making it one of the most intractable issues in American politics.

# Trump relief bill may soon make UFO report public

*The Washington Post*

Last year's gargantuan \$2.3 trillion appropriations bill did a couple very obvious things: it provided millions of Americans badly needed coronavirus relief aid and it averted an impending government shutdown.

It also dealt with ... UFOs.

The legislation, which President Donald Trump signed into law, was a bureaucratic nesting doll that ran over 5,500 pages and contained the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, which itself carried an unusual provision in its “committee comment” section, beneath the understated heading “Advanced Aerial Threats.”

The stipulation mandates that the director

of national intelligence work with the secretary of defense on a report detailing everything the government knows about unidentified flying objects — known in agency lingo as “unidentified aerial phenomena” or “anomalous aerial vehicles.”

It must be made public, and when it is, it will be big, former intelligence director John Ratcliffe said in a recent interview.

The report must include “detailed analysis of unidentified aerial phenomena data and intelligence” gathered by the Office of Naval Intelligence, the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force and the FBI, the provision reads.

It also calls for “a detailed description of an

interagency process” which will ensure that data can be gathered and analyzed across the federal government. The report could document sightings from “all over the world,” Ratcliffe said.

When Trump approved the spending package on Dec. 27, a 180-day countdown began, giving intelligence officials until June to deliver lawmakers their write-up.

Two factors might delay the report's release, however: agencies have missed similar congressional reporting deadlines in the past; and the provision is not technically binding, as the language was included in the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the bill, not the bill itself.



# Stats show inequalities as schools reopen

Associated Press

Nearly half of the nation's elementary schools were open for full-time classroom learning as of last month. The share of students learning in-person, however, has varied greatly by region and by race, with most nonwhite students learning entirely online, a government survey shows.

For the White House, the survey results, released Wednesday, mark the starting line for President Joe Biden's pledge to have most K-8 schools open full time in his first 100 days in office. But they also show that he never had far to go to meet that goal.

Among schools that enroll fourth graders, 47% offered full-time classroom learning in February, while for schools that teach eighth graders, the figure was 46%. The data suggested that at least some students weren't opting in.

In total, about 76% of elementary and middle schools were open for in-person or hybrid learning, according to the survey, while 24% offered remote learning only. The percentage of students spending at least some time in the classroom has likely increased since February, when coronavirus rates were just coming down from a national surge.

"The data collected by the survey are essential for beginning to measure and understand the pandemic's impact on American students," said Mark Schneider, director of the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Education Department.

In January, the survey found 38% of fourth graders enrolled in full-time, in-person learning, compared to 28% of eighth graders. Larger shares of students were entirely remote, with 43% of fourth graders and 48% of eighth graders learning away from school. It was not clear what share of students were learning online by choice

and how many were in schools without in-person options.

There were stark differences based on where students live, reflecting the regional battles that have played out as cities debate how and when to reopen schools. Across all regions, students in rural areas and towns were far more likely to be back in the classroom full time compared to students in cities and suburbs.

In a further illustration of the pandemic's uneven impact, the survey found striking differences based on students' race. Among fourth graders, almost half of white students were learning fully in-person, with just over a quarter learning online. Among Black and Hispanic students, by contrast, nearly 60% were learning entirely remotely. The difference was even wider among students of Asian descent, with 68% remote and just 15% attending fully in-person.

## Georgia

ATLANTA — All Georgians 16 and older will be eligible for COVID-19 vaccination beginning Thursday.

Gov. Brian Kemp made the announcement Tuesday, saying supplies of the vaccine continue to rise and that he's confident that enough older adults have been vaccinated to open up inoculation to the broadest possible population.

Figures from the Georgia Department of Public Health show the state has administered 3.2 million doses overall, with nearly 2.1 million people getting at least one dose.

The number of doses being administered has shown a clear upward trend in recent weeks, with a peak of more than 85,000 doses given on March 15, the first day that Kemp expanded eligibility to current levels.

## Arizona

WINDOW ROCK — The Navajo Nation on Tuesday report-

ed three new COVID-19 cases but no additional deaths.

It was the third consecutive day that the tribe has not recorded a coronavirus-related death.

The death toll remains at 1,233 since the pandemic began, with the number of confirmed cases at 30,010 on the vast reservation that covers parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.

The Navajo Nation had a soft reopening last week with 25% capacity for some businesses under certain restrictions. Mask mandates and daily curfews remain in place.

## Kansas

TOPEKA — Officials in Kansas' second-most populous county are considering dropping a mask mandate, citing changes in laws to manage the coronavirus pandemic and other emergencies awaiting Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly's signature.

Sedgwick County commissioners said the bill that the GOP-controlled Legislature approved last week essentially keeps them from restricting businesses for the rest of the pandemic, The Wichita Eagle reported. They cited provisions that could open the county to lawsuits and said they would probably consider rescinding their mask mandate this week.

Republican lawmakers were also trying to push a handful of the state's 286 school districts that don't have in-person classes into fully reopening. The House on Tuesday approved a bill that would require all districts to offer full-time in-person classes to all students by March 31.

## Maryland

ANNAPOLIS — Maryland will double its mass vaccination sites to a dozen next month, Gov. Larry Hogan announced as the state began Phase 2A of eligibility for the

COVID-19 vaccine on Tuesday for residents 60 and older.

Hogan discussed a call earlier in the day with White House officials, who told governors to expect a significant increase in vaccine supply starting next week and "continuing each week for several months."

Hogan described the call with the White House as "a very hopeful call," with an expectation of "really big numbers" of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, as well as continual increases with the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

On Monday, Acting Maryland Health Secretary Dennis Schrader said the state could get between 300,000 and 400,000 doses a week by next week or the week after.

## Ohio

COLUMBUS — Republican Gov. Mike DeWine on Tuesday vetoed a GOP-backed bill that would limit Ohio governors' ability to issue orders during a public health emergency, a move promising a showdown with members of his party who have vowed to override him.

DeWine made good on his earlier promise to veto the latest iteration of the proposal, marking the second time in four months the longtime officeholder has shut down attempts by his fellow Republicans to limit his powers during the coronavirus pandemic.

The executive action came one day after DeWine sent a letter to Rep. Scott Wiggam, of Wooster, pleading with him and majority Republicans to reach a compromise on the proposal.

The bill "jeopardizes the safety of every Ohioan," DeWine said in Tuesday's veto message. He added that the legislation "strikes at the heart of local health departments' ability to move quickly to protect the public from the most serious emergencies Ohio could face."

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### \$1M lottery ticket recovered in parking lot

**TN** SPARTA — A Tennessee man was able to turn his luck around after finding his missing \$1 million winning lottery ticket in a parking lot — remaining where he dropped it even on a blustery afternoon.

Sparta resident Nick Slatten learned on March 11 that he won a drawing with all matching numbers on a ticket worth \$1,178,746, the Tennessee Education Lottery said in a statement.

Slatten rushed to his fiancée's workplace to share the news, then continued running errands.

Within an hour, Slatten went from ecstatic to panicked when he realized he didn't have the ticket anymore.

He was able to retrieve the ticket — which somehow didn't get blown away — in a parking lot at one of the stops he made and claim his prize.

### Railcar with molasses explodes, leaves mess

**MN** CANNON FALLS — A railcar carrying molasses exploded in Cannon Falls, leaving a sticky mess, but causing no injuries, according to police.

According to authorities, the explosion happened at the Progressive Rail facility in Cannon Falls, which is about 45 miles south of the Twin Cities.

The railcar's molasses contents were sprayed in the surrounding area. Although there were no injuries, police said the explosion caused significant structural damage to a building.

Police did not say what might

have caused the explosion or how much molasses was lost.

### Gunfire detection system leads police to weapons

**MI** DETROIT — Police seized two shotguns, a rifle, at least one handgun, body armor and more than 200 rounds of ammunition from a home after a detection system picked up the sounds of gunfire in an eastside Detroit neighborhood.

Officers responded to the area within five minutes of notification from the ShotSpotter system and saw two men with handguns run into the home, the Detroit Police Department said in a release.

A 26-year-old man was ticketed for firing a gun within city limits and possessing a firearm while intoxicated. His handgun and concealed pistol license were seized by officers. A 51-year-old man was arrested on charges of being a felon in possession of a firearm.

The other weapons were found inside the home.

### Shark bites 9-year-old boy as he body surfed

**FL** MIAMI BEACH — A 9-year-old Minnesota boy was bitten by a shark as he body surfed in Miami Beach recently, his parents said.

Kristine Weiskopf told WPLG she and her son, Jay, were in the water for only a few minutes when the shark bit the boy.

"I was holding his hand the whole time and he was kind of body surfing a little bit and he had fallen on his stomach," she said.

When she pulled him up, she

said she saw a chunk of skin missing from his shoulder.

"He just said, 'Ow,' and I looked down and there was about a 4-foot gray shark just kinda swimming away, so I just scooped him up and ran him up the beach," she said.

A Miami Beach Fire Rescue crew took the child to the hospital where surgeons closed the wound, his mother said.

### Vandals damage bronze door of a lighthouse

**NC** BUXTON — Authorities in North Carolina said that vandals carved letters and other shapes into the original bronze door of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse on the Outer Banks.

The Charlotte Observer reported that investigators don't know exactly when the door was vandalized. The incident remains under investigation.

The lighthouse was completed in 1870 and is said to be the tallest brick lighthouse in the United States.

### Officer shot during the retrieval of runaway cow

**VA** HARRISONBURG — A police officer was accidentally shot after he and others tried to corral a cow that had escaped from a livestock auction and was wandering city streets.

Harrisonburg police told news outlets the officer was shot in the lower body. Police said he was in stable condition at UVA Medical Center in Charlottesville.

Police were investigating whether the officer was shot by a colleague or someone else involved in the retrieval effort.

Officers said they intervened after the escaped cow was injured during an attempt by ranchers to corral it. The cow charged at officers and someone fired a gun, injuring one of them, police said. The cow was euthanized after its capture.

### Crews rescue hawk from driving range net

**SC** MYRTLE BEACH — Fire crews in South Carolina rescued a red tail hawk that was caught in netting at a driving range.

The Myrtle Beach Fire Department said the hawk was 40 feet up at Top Golf.

Crews got it out and put it in a box until the morning because hawks do not usually fly at night. The department said it was handed over to avian experts.

### Century-old bakery closes due to pandemic

**WA** SEATTLE — Seattle's century-old landmark Remo Borracchini's Bakery is closing, another business ravaged by the pandemic.

The family bakery in south Seattle was known for its birthday and wedding cakes and announced on Facebook that it is closing for good after 100 years in business.

The local icon said it was "in the party business," which has been devastated by the yearlong stay-at-home orders. Within three hours, there were nearly 1,000 comments on the announcement.

The bakery was featured in the children's book "A Ticket to the Pennant: A Tale of Baseball in Seattle," by Mark Holtzen, which was set in 1955 in Seattle.

— From wire reports

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# Freshmen Bueckers, Clark turning heads

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Paige Bueckers and Caitlin Clark seem to be playing a personal game of horse on the national stage. After one delivers a highlight-filled performance, the other has a top-this moment.

The captivating basketball exploits by the heralded freshmen have created a buzz around the NCAA Women's Tournament, including one of the event's most anticipated matchups: Bueckers and Clark will play their first college game against each other in the Sweet 16 this weekend.

"This was the potential matchup that raised eyebrows when the brackets came out," ESPN analyst Rebecca Lobo said. "Fans have been having the debate all season long: who is the best freshman in the country. This game won't decide that, but it will be highly entertaining for all basketball fans. We need Iowa and

UConn to play each other the next three years!"

"It's awesome, just for us to both be on the big stage," said Bueckers, who had 24 points in UConn's opening-round win — the most ever by a Huskies player in an NCAA debut. "We haven't really talked about it. I know my mentality is just focusing on one day at a time."

The only downside to this weekend's matchup is that it comes in the Sweet 16 and not the championship game, depriving fans of more top-this moments over the next couple of weeks in the Elite Eight and Final Four.

Clark led the nation in scoring and was second in assists for Iowa, while Bueckers helped UConn to the No. 1 ranking in the poll and became just the third freshman to earn first-team All-America honors.

"I love her game," Bueckers said of Clark. "We're really big

fans of each other and I'm excited to play that game."

Everyone seems to be falling in love with the games of both players.

Including Brooklyn Nets All-Star and NBA champion Kevin Durant.

Clark outscored Kentucky in the first half of Iowa's second-round win on Tuesday with 24 of her 35 points. In a response to a comment about Clark's game against the Wildcats, Durant posted on his Instagram account that "She belongs in the league right now."

That won't happen anytime soon for these two college standouts. Unlike the NBA, when players can turn pro after their freshman year, these young stars won't be eligible to enter the WNBA Draft for a few years because of league rules.

Not that either Bueckers or Clark are thinking about any-

thing past this weekend.

"Going up against her would obviously be a great opportunity," Clark said after the win against Kentucky. "Obviously a good friend of mine, a tremendous player. We would both say, we're not going to win it alone, no matter who wins that game."

The talented teenagers know each other well and don't consider one another rivals. They started playing against each other in middle school in AAU tournaments and played together on USA Basketball's Under-19 team in 2019.

"We played together and competed at the USA basketball trials and then obviously just seeing each other at tournaments a whole lot," Bueckers said. "Minnesota and Iowa are really not that far apart so we saw each other at different AAU tournaments, so we kind of just built our relationship from there."

## Michigan women nab their first Sweet 16 berth

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Leigha Brown scored 23 points and Naz Hillmon added 19 to lead No. 6 seed Michigan to a 70-55 win over third-seeded Tennessee on Tuesday in the women's NCAA Tournament.

The Wolverines had been 0-5 in the second round before pulling off the victory over the Lady Vols.

Leading 18-16 with eight minutes left in the first half, Michigan (16-5) held Tennessee to just one field goal the rest of the second quarter and built a 28-19 halftime lead.

The Lady Vols (17-8) trailed by 15 heading into the fourth quarter and didn't get closer than nine.

Hillmon, the Big Ten Player of the Year, also had 15 rebounds.

A trip to the Sweet 16, where the Wolverines will face Baylor

in the River Walk Region, was just another first this year. The team started 10-0 for the first time in school history. Michigan was also in the rankings all season for the first time, as well as having Hillmon be the first player to earn All-America honors as a second-teamer.

Rennia Davis scored 12 points to lead Tennessee, which was playing Michigan for the first time.

**Baylor 90, Virginia Tech 48:** Moon Ursin and DiJonai Carrington both had 21 points as the reigning women's national champion Lady Bears advanced to their 12th consecutive NCAA Sweet 16, beating the Ho-kies.

Queen Egbo had 12 points and 13 rebounds, along with seven blocked shots for Baylor (27-2). DiDi Richards had nine assists.

### Mercado Region

**North Carolina State 79,**

**South Florida 67:** Jakia Brown-Turner scored 19 points and the top-seeded Wolfpack shrugged off a challenge from the eighth-seeded Bulls with a big third quarter, advancing to the Sweet 16.

Jada Boyd added 18 points and 10 rebounds for N.C. State (22-2), which reached its third straight regional semifinal and 14th overall. The Wolfpack will face fourth-seeded Indiana or 12th-seeded Belmont.

### Hemisfair Region

**South Carolina 59, Oregon State 42:** Aliyah Boston scored 19 points and the top-seeded Gamecocks dominated after a close first quarter to beat the eighth-seeded Beavers, advancing to their seventh straight Sweet 16.

South Carolina (24-4) led by a point after one quarter but had built a 12-point lead by halftime and was up 53-29 by the start of

the fourth.

**Georgia Tech 73, West Virginia 56:** Lotta-Maj Lahtinen scored 22 points, Lorela Cubaj had 21 points and 12 rebounds, and the fifth-seeded Yellow Jackets used a big third quarter to beat the fourth-seeded Mountaineers.

Georgia Tech needed a second-half rally in the opening round against Stephen F. Austin — the fourth-largest comeback in tournament history — but had this game well in control.

### Alamo Region

**Stanford 73, Oklahoma State 62:** Haley Jones scored 17 points and the Cardinal unleashed another barrage of three-pointers as the overall top-seeded team in the NCAA Tournament booked yet another trip to the Sweet 16.

Stanford made 13 three-pointers after making 15 in its first-round win.



# Watson's lawyer: Suits follow blackmail

Associated Press

HOUSTON — An attorney for Houston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson, who's accused of sexual assault and harassment in lawsuits filed by 16 women, on Tuesday questioned the allegations against the NFL player, claiming they were made following a failed attempt to blackmail his client for \$30,000.

The women, in lawsuits filed in state court in Houston, accuse Watson of exposing himself, touching them with his penis or kissing them against their will while he got a massage. All of the women who have sued Watson are either licensed massage therapists or worked in a spa or similar business.

Rusty Hardin, Watson's attorney, alleged in a statement that his legal team has "strong evidence" an accusation made by a woman they believe filed one of the lawsuits is false.

In her lawsuit, the woman alleged Watson forced her to perform oral sex during a massage

in December and that she "blacked out for a few minutes from the fear" of her encounter with Watson, which left her "terrified."

Hardin alleges that in January, the woman demanded \$30,000 in exchange for her "indefinite silence" for a consensual encounter she had with Watson.

## Snyder plans to buy out team's other owners

Dan Snyder is buying out the Washington Football Team's minority owners and will become the sole owner of the club.

An NFL spokesman on Wednesday confirmed that Snyder's application for a debt waiver of \$450 million was approved by the finance committee and that the deal is pending approval from team owners. Three-quarters, or 24 of 32 teams, need to sign off during a vote at the annual league meeting next week to make it official.

Multiple messages seeking comment that were left for the

team and a public relations firm representing Snyder were not immediately returned.

Fred Smith, Dwight Schar and Bob Rothman currently own 40.5% of Washington Football Inc. They have been mired in a court dispute with Snyder over their shares of the team.

This effectively settles that matter and puts Snyder completely in charge of the team, which Forbes valued at \$3.5 billion.

## Eagles sign veteran quarterback Flacco

The Philadelphia Eagles have signed veteran quarterback Joe Flacco.

Flacco's agent, Joe Linta, made the announcement on Twitter on Tuesday.

Flacco, the 2012 Super Bowl MVP, started four games for the Jets last season and eight games for the Broncos in 2019. He spent his first 11 seasons with Baltimore, leading the Ravens to six playoff appearances and one Super Bowl title.

## Dolphins re-sign linebacker Roberts

Linebacker Elandon Roberts re-signed with the Miami Dolphins after testing the free agent market.

The Dolphins announced the move Wednesday. Roberts, 26, started 11 games in his first season with Miami last year before he was sidelined by a serious knee injury. He totaled 61 tackles and 1 1/2 sacks.

## Bills sign former Panthers DE Obada

The Buffalo Bills agreed to terms Wednesday with Nigerian-born defensive end Efe Obada on a one-year contract.

The 28-year-old joins the Bills after spending his first three NFL seasons with the Carolina Panthers. He is listed at 6-foot-6 and 265 pounds and is coming off a year in which he had a career-best 5 1/2 sacks in 16 games, including one start.

Overall, Obada has 7 1/2 sacks in 42 games with the Panthers.

# NCAA's Emmert plans to meet with protesting players

Associated Press

The National College Players Association said Tuesday that NCAA President Mark Emmert has informed a group of basketball players who started a social media campaign to protest inequities in college sports that he will meet with them after March Madness.

NCPA executive director Ramogi Huma said in a statement he received a letter from Emmert in response to the advocacy group's request for a meeting between the head of the NCAA and three players who led the #NotNCAAProperty protest that started last week.

Through the NCPA, the players had requested to meet with Emmert and one of the NCAA's top lobbyists on Tuesday morn-

ing.

NCAA spokeswoman Stacey Osburn said the association had no comment Tuesday.

Michigan's Isaiah Livers, Rutgers' Geo Baker and Iowa's Jordan Bohannon are pushing for the NCAA to change its rules restricting athletes from earning money for personal sponsorship deals, online endorsements and appearances.

The players responded with a letter back to Emmert, saying they were disappointed he wanted to "delay this important conversation for at least two weeks."

"From our perspective, it's difficult to imagine any higher priority you may have at this time than addressing concerns that are at the core of state and

federal college athletes' rights legislation, an upcoming U.S. Supreme Court ruling on college athletes' economic freedoms, and the NCAA's ongoing discriminatory treatment of female basketball players in its tournament," the players wrote in a letter released by the NCPA. "Can you please explain what you will be doing over the next two weeks that is more important than addressing these matters?"

The players also requested that the meeting include other men's and women's players, and Huma.

"We look forward to receiving confirmation that you will meet with the group we have described, and that you will demonstrate on behalf of your organization and membership that

these issues are in fact a priority by meeting with us by Friday of this week," the players wrote.

The NCAA has committed to changing its rules regarding name, image and likeness (NIL) rights, but the process has bogged down amid warnings from the Justice Department about possible antitrust violations in the association's proposal.

An NCAA case involving an antitrust ruling is scheduled to be heard by the Supreme Court next week.

The NCAA has asked for help from federal lawmakers in the form of a national NIL law that would preempt dozens of state laws under consideration that would create different rules for competing schools.

# Ingram, Zion lead Pelicans' romp

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Brandon Ingram scored a season-high 36 points, Zion Williamson had 27 points and nine rebounds, and the New Orleans Pelicans defeated the Los Angeles Lakers 128-111 on Tuesday night.

The 20-year-old Williamson became the first NBA player younger than 21 to score at least 20 points in 21 straight games, and he did so with his usual crowd-pleasing array of alley-oop dunks and quick, powerful drives to the hoop.

Second-year guard Nickeil Alexander-Walker scored 18 and rookie guard Kira Lewis Jr. set a new high with 16 points in a reserve role. New Orleans center Jaxson Hayes scored 15 points in 19 minutes, hitting four times inside and making all seven of his free throws.

The Lakers, struggling without stars LeBron James and Anthony Davis, lost their third straight. Montrezl Harrell had a team-high 18 points, while Kyle Kuzma and Markieff Morris each scored 16. Kuzma also grabbed 10 rebounds and had seven assists.

**Suns 110, Heat 100:** Devin Booker scored 23 points and Phoenix stretched its road winning streak to seven games by

beating slumping Miami.

Deandre Ayton scored 17 points and grabbed 16 rebounds for the Suns. Former Heat forward Jae Crowder had 13 for Phoenix and Mikal Bridges scored 12.

Kendrick Nunn led the Heat with 25 points, while Bam Adebayo scored 16 and Jimmy Butler added 14. Miami has dropped four consecutive games.

**Nets 116, Trail Blazers 112:** James Harden had 25 points and 17 assists to lead Brooklyn to a win at Portland.

Jeff Green finished with 20 points, 15 in the first half and a pair of free throws to close it out with 4.8 seconds left. Nicolas Claxton had 16 points and nine rebounds off the bench for the Nets, who played without Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving.

Enes Kanter had 19 points, 19 rebounds and six assists, while Damian Lillard had 22 points and nine assists for the Trail Blazers. Lillard and backcourt partner CJ McCollum had a tough night against the Nets, going a combined 10-for-35 (28%) from the field.

**76ers 108, Warriors 98:** Tobias Harris hit a go-ahead jumper with 3:44 to play, scored another basket on the next possession and finished with 25 points and 13 re-

bounds to help Philadelphia win at Golden State.

Harris also converted a free throw on Draymond Green's technical foul with 2:47 remaining.

Ben Simmons added 22 points and eight rebounds for the Sixers, who pulled off their second consecutive road win after a 101-100 victory at New York on Sunday. Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia improved to 31-13 with its ninth victory in 10 games.

**Nuggets 110, Magic 99:** Nikola Jokic had 28 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for his 12th triple-double of the season, and visiting Denver built a big lead before holding off Orlando.

The Nuggets had a 24-point advantage early in the second half that was trimmed to five. But Denver won its sixth consecutive road game to tie a franchise record set twice previously, most recently in 2018.

**Knicks 131, Wizards 113:** Julius Randle scored 37 points to spark New York to a rout of visiting Washington.

The All-Star was one of six players to finish in double figures for the Knicks, who evened their record at 22-22. RJ Barrett scored 21, and Alec Burks added 20.

## Blackhawks defeat Panthers to end 4-game slump

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Kevin Lankinen has been working with Chicago goaltending coach Jimmy Waite on finding the puck in traffic and being more patient.

He put that practice to good use Tuesday night.

Lankinen made 33 saves, Patrick Kane had two assists and the Blackhawks stopped a four-game slide by holding off the Florida Panthers for a 3-2 win.

"That brings a lot of confidence when you practice something and it develops in your game and you feel really good out there," Lankinen said. "It was good. It was a good night."

Dominik Kubalik, Pius Suter and Carl Soderberg scored for Chicago in the opener of a six-game homestand. It was the Blackhawks' first victory against the Panthers in five

games this season.

When the final seconds ticked off, Lankinen raised his arms excitedly before celebrating with the rest of the team. Chicago had dropped six of seven overall.

"Obviously we'd like to kill the game a little bit more, but nice to hang on against a team that's pretty good at coming back in games," Kane said.

Anton Stralman and Alex Wennberg scored for Florida, which lost for the third time in four games. Chris Driedger made 29 stops.

The Panthers played without captain Aleksander Barkov, who was scratched because of a lower-body injury. Coach Joel Quenneville said he wasn't sure exactly when he got hurt, and the team will know more about the situation on Wednesday.

**Predators 2, Red Wings 0:**

Juuse Saros made 31 saves for his first shutout of the season and Nashville beat visiting Detroit.

Mikael Granlund and Mathieu Olivier scored for the Predators, who have won four of their last five.

Thomas Greiss finished with 32 saves for Detroit.

**Devils 4, Flyers 3:** Michael LeBlond, Kyle Palmieri, Yegor Sharangovich and Travis Zajac scored and New Jersey won at Philadelphia.

The Devils have won four of five games. The Flyers dropped their third straight.

**Lightning 2, Stars 1:** Steven Stamkos and Yanni Gourde scored in the second period and Andrei Vasilevskiy recorded his franchise-record 12th straight win as Tampa Bay won

at Dallas to extend its dominance in the season series between last year's Stanley Cup finalists.

Vasilevskiy made 16 saves as the NHL-leading Lightning won their fifth straight overall and improved to 4-0-0 this season against the Stars. Tampa Bay beat Dallas in six games in the fall.

**Coyotes 5, Avalanche 4 (SO):** Phil Kessel and Lawson Crouse rallied their team with goals in the third period, Christian Dvorak got the shootout clincher and host Arizona ended Colorado's seven-game winning streak.

Defensemen Jakob Chychrun and Alex Goligoski also scored for the Coyotes, while Gabriel Landeskog, Mikko Rantanen, MacKinnon and Valeri Nichushkin scored for the Avs.