

Reports: N. Korea launched ballistic missiles

By **SETH ROBSON**
AND **YOO KYONG CHANG**
Stars and Stripes

North Korea has fired two ballistic missiles into the sea off its eastern coast, according to reports from U.S., South Korean and Japanese officials Thursday morning.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the launch of a single "unidentified projectile" at 7.06 a.m. and a second at 7.25 a.m. They traveled about 280 miles, reaching an altitude of about 37 miles.

It was North Korea's first launch of ballistic missiles since President Joe Biden took office. Analysts told The Associated Press they expect the North to gradually dial up its weapons displays to gain bargaining power as it angles to get back into stalled talks aimed at leveraging nuclear weapons for badly needed economic benefits.

The South Korean govern-

ment convened an urgent meeting of the country's National Security Council at 9 a.m. in response to the launches.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga described the projectiles as "ballistic missiles" in a tweet that morning. An unnamed U.S. official quoted by The New York Times also referred to them as "ballistic missiles."

"It threatens the peace and security of Japan and the region, and is a violation of U.N. resolutions," Suga wrote, referring to the U.N. Security Council ban on North Korea developing and testing ballistic missiles. "I strongly protest and strongly condemn it. The government has confirmed that it has fallen into the Sea of Japan outside Japan's exclusive economic zone."

U.S. Forces Korea has been consulting closely with South Korea and Japan and will con-

tinue to monitor the situation, spokesman Col. Lee Peters told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday afternoon.

"This activity highlights the threat that North Korea's illicit weapons program poses to its neighbors and the international community," he wrote. "The U.S. commitment to the defense of [South Korea] remains iron-clad."

The launches come less than a week after Pyongyang fired multiple short-range missiles in the wake of a visit to Seoul by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. North Korea topped a list of issues they tackled during two days of talks with their South Korean counterparts.

Last week North Korea, in its first statement geared toward the Biden administration, warned the United States not to ruffle any feathers.

"If [the U.S.] wants to sleep in peace for coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step," North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, said in a statement published March 16 in the state-run Rodong Sinmun newspaper.

Biden, speaking to reporters Tuesday at the White House, said he didn't consider last weekend's missile tests to be a provocation.

"No, according to the Defense Department it's business as usual," he said. "There's no new wrinkle in what they did."

Asked if the tests affect diplomacy, the president laughed.

The latest missile launch is most likely a reaction to Biden's downplaying of the weekend missile tests, Harry Kazianis, senior director of Korean studies at the Center for the National Interest, said in emailed comments Thursday.

Gillibrand says military needs major reform on sex assault

By **ROSE L. THAYER**
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Congress has provided the military more than \$1 billion, enacted 249 legislative provisions and chartered panels, commissions and committees to address sexual assault in the military, yet the statistics from the past 15 years show little progress, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said Wednesday during a Senate hearing.

"Not one of these steps has reduced sexual assaults within the ranks. We are right where we were when we started, nothing has changed," said Gillibrand, who is the chairwoman of the subpanel for military personnel on the Senate Armed

Services Committee.

Senators on Wednesday focused on sexual assault in the military during the hearing, which had three panels featuring survivors of sexual assault and those who advocate on their behalf and those who study the problem for the government, nonprofits or for academic research.

"Nearly every secretary of defense since Dick Cheney" has promised to do better, yet the number of assaults have remained at about 20,000 almost every year that the Defense Department has conducted prevalence surveys, Gillibrand said. "Military leadership has come before us and said that the chain of command would solve

this problem. They're not solving the problem. They have failed."

Many of the witnesses, including Quinton McNair, a retired Army veteran with more than seven years in the field of victim advocacy, offered suggestions on how the military could do a better job, including by holding perpetrators accountable.

"People who commit sexual assault are like sharks hunting. You aren't aware of them until they attack. Through accountability, we can make the water so hostile to the shark that they are afraid to hunt," he said. "Lack of accountability emboldens them."

No accountability also con-

tradicts the effort of service members and civilians working within units to support victims and prevent future assaults, McNair said.

Gillibrand introduced legislation in 2013 that would overhaul the military justice system and take the decision to prosecute certain serious crimes such as sexual assaults out of the hands of commanders and give it to independent, trained military prosecutors.

"The justice system simply is in the wrong hands," she said.

Military leaders have told Congress that removing prosecution decisions from commanders undercuts their authority and ability to maintain unit discipline.

IG: Former Navy auditor harassed female workers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A former Navy civilian auditor sexually harassed at least a dozen female employees for more than two decades as part of a pervasive pattern of misconduct and retaliation, according to a government watchdog report released Wednesday.

The report by the Defense Department's inspector general found that former Navy Auditor General Ronnie Booth engaged in "quid pro quo sexual propositions when interacting with female subordinates at the Naval Audit Service." It said he requested "sexual favors in exchange for career advancement, all under the guise of professional career 'mentoring.'" Booth also was in a "sporadic long-term sexual relationship" with one subordinate in exchange for job promotions and other professional help, the report said.

The report said Booth's interactions with female employees created a hostile and intimidating work environment, causing a

number of the women to leave their jobs or ask for transfers. It also concluded that employees had an "unfavorable perception" of how complaints were handled, and so were discouraged from reporting his behavior.

The release of the report comes as the Defense Department continues to struggle with efforts to curtail sexual assault and harassment across the force. Soon after his confirmation, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin created an independent review commission to conduct a 90-day assessment of the problem and make recommendations for changes in prevention, the treatment of victims and the military justice system for perpetrators.

Booth resigned in September 2019, shortly after the probe into his behavior began. During his interviews, he denied sexually harassing female subordinates and said "he had an open door policy for mentoring" and there was "no difference between how he mentored men and women," the report said.

Airstrikes 'pummel' ISIS in Iraq as US preps for talks with Baghdad

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

The U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State has conducted more airstrikes in Iraq this month than it did all of last year, destroying scores of enemy positions and killing dozens of terrorists.

Coalition jets carried out over 150 strikes against ISIS fighters in the mountains south of Mosul this month, U.S. and Iraqi military officials said earlier this week. An analysis of previous coalition strike data shows fewer than 120 airstrikes were carried out against ISIS in Iraq all of last year.

Including Iraqi air force and army aviation operations, a total of 312 airstrikes have destroyed 120 enemy positions and killed 27 terrorists, Col. Wayne Marotto, a spokesman for the military coalition, said in a tweet Wednesday.

"The mission was to destroy Daesh hiding out in some tough terrain of caves and tunnels, ostensibly the last redoubt of the so-called caliphate," Marotto said in an email, using an Arabic term for ISIS.

The new data were released ahead of the latest round of talks between Baghdad and Washington about continued cooperation.

"The meetings will further clarify that coalition forces are in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government and solely for the purpose of training and advising Iraqi forces to ensure that ISIS cannot reconstitute," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at a briefing Wednesday. "We are committed, first and foremost, to Iraqi sovereignty."

The coalition strikes this month were part of Operation Ready Lion, which began March 9.

Lawmakers seek extremism data

By SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — House lawmakers on Wednesday voiced concern over an absence of centralized Defense Department data on how many extremists there are in the military as Congress looks for ways to tackle the issue after the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

Data on extremism in the military "is indeed really poor. It is hard to have a conversation about this when we don't have the data and when we don't have the Department of Defense to talk through these issues," Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on the issue.

The witness panel for the hearing did not include Defense Department officials and was made up of experts from the Southern Poverty Law Center and the legal nonprofit First Liberty Institute, as well as a professor from American University.

Slotkin said if the committee is discussing Defense Department action on extremism in the ranks, Pentagon officials should be given the "opportunity to talk about the breadth of the problem, once they've had a full chance to review it."

During the hearing, lawmakers sparred over ways to get at the problem as extremism stand-downs take place at bases around the world for all branches of the military at the direction of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Austin ordered the stand-downs in February in response to the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. Thirty-seven military veterans and active-duty service members have been charged for their involvement, so far, according to a recent analysis from CBS News.

Audrey Kurth Cronin, director of the Center for Security, Innovation and New Technology at American University, told the committee Tuesday that the most urgent problem in finding ways to address extremism is an "absence of good data."

"The 2021 Capitol insurrection leaves the impression that the number of extremists in the military is increasing. Yet, DOD officials repeatedly claim that the number is small. No one truly knows. No serious plan can be built without defining the scope of the problem," she said.

US vaccinations rise while virus deaths fall

Associated Press

More than three months into the U.S. vaccination drive, many of the numbers paint an increasingly encouraging picture, with 70% of Americans 65 and older receiving at least one dose of the vaccine and COVID-19 deaths dipping below 1,000 a day on average for the first time since November.

Also, dozens of states have thrown open vaccinations to all adults or are planning to do so in a matter of weeks. And the White House said 27 million doses of both the one-shot and two-shot vaccines will be distributed next week, more than three times the number when President Joe Biden took office two months ago.

Still, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, said Wednesday he isn't ready to declare victory.

"I'm often asked, are we turning the corner?" Fauci said at a White House briefing. "My response is really more like we are at the corner. Whether or not we're going to be turning that corner still remains to be seen."

What's giving Fauci pause, he said, is that new cases remain at a stubbornly high level,

at more than 50,000 per day. The United States on Wednesday surpassed 30 million confirmed cases, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. The number of deaths now stands at more than 545,000.

Nonetheless, the outlook in the U.S. stands in stark contrast to the deteriorating situation in places like Brazil, which reported more than 3,000 COVID-19 deaths in a single day for the first time Tuesday, and across Europe, where another wave of infections is leading to new lockdowns.

The gloom in Europe is compounded because the vaccine rollout on the Continent has been slowed by production delays and questions about the safety and effectiveness of AstraZeneca's shot.

Public health experts in the U.S. are taking every opportunity to warn that relaxing social distancing and other preventive measures could easily lead to another surge.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, sees red flags in states lifting mask mandates, air travel roaring back and spring break crowds partying out of control in Florida.

"We're getting closer to the exit ramp," Topol said. "All we're doing by having reopenings is jeopardizing our shot to get, finally, for the first time in the American pandemic, containment of the virus."

Across the country are unmistakable signs of progress.

More than 43% of Americans 65 and older — the most vulnerable age group, accounting for an outsize share of the nation's more than 540,000 coronavirus deaths — have been fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. The number of older adults showing up in emergency rooms with COVID-19 is down significantly. Vaccinations overall have ramped up to 2.5 million to 3 million shots per day.

Deaths per day in the U.S. from COVID-19 have dropped to an average of 940, down from an all-time high of over 3,400 in mid-January.

Minnesota health officials on Monday reported no new virus deaths for the first time in almost a year. And in New Orleans, the Touro Infirmary hospital was not treating a single case for the first time since March 2020.

Lawmaker urges Biden to make vaccine required for US troops

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

President Joe Biden should make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory for American troops, a House lawmaker wrote in a letter sent Wednesday to the White House.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., urged Biden to issue a waiver to allow the Pentagon to make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory for troops, about one-third of whom are declining the inoculations, according to Pentagon estimates. The Defense Department cannot mandate service members receive any of the three coronavirus vaccines being provided to the American public because the Food and Drug Administration approved them on an emergency authorization.

Only the president has the power to override that regulation, Panetta said, asking Biden to issue a waiver as soon as possible.

"Vaccinating every eligible service member will improve readiness and have an immediate and positive impact on the communities in which they serve," Panetta, a Navy veteran, wrote in the letter signed by six other House Democrats. "Requiring DOD

to obtain informed consent prior to vaccination is not only harmful to our national security, but contrary to the best interests of service members, their families, communities, and colleagues."

Reps. James McGovern, of Massachusetts; Sara Jacobs, of California; Cindy Axne, of Iowa; Marc Veasey, of Texas; Marilyn Strickland, of Washington; and Jahana Hayes, of Connecticut, also signed the letter.

Defense officials have acknowledged they have had difficulty convincing some troops to receive the shot, largely due to skepticism about the vaccines' safety and efficacy. They have said at least some of that hesitancy is due to vaccine misinformation rampant on social media. Top Pentagon officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have repeatedly implored troops to take the vaccination as soon as they are eligible, insisting the shots are safe.

Other service members have declined the shots simply because they have the power to refuse it unlike other fully FDA-authorized inoculations required by the Defense Department, defense officials have concluded.

US jobless claims fall to 684K, lowest level of pandemic

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of people seeking unemployment benefits fell sharply last week to 684,000, the fewest since the pandemic erupted a year ago and a sign that the economy is improving.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell from 781,000 the week before. It is the first time that weekly applications for jobless aid have fallen below 700,000 since mid-March of last year. Before the pandemic tore through the economy, applications had never topped that level.

Still, a total of 18.9 million people are continuing to collect jobless benefits, up from 18.2 million in the previous week. Roughly one-third of those recipients are in extended federal aid programs, which means they've been unemployed for at least six months.

Their prolonged joblessness could prove to be a long-term hindrance: Typically, many people who have been unemployed for extended periods struggle to find work even as the economy regains its health.

Biden doubles vaccine goal to 200M doses

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden opened his first formal news conference Thursday with a nod toward the improving picture on battling the coronavirus, doubling his original goal by pledging that the nation will administer 200 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of his first 100 days in office.

The administration had met Biden's initial goal of 100 million doses earlier this month — before even his 60th day in office — as the president pushes to defeat a pandemic that has killed more than 545,000 Americans and devastated the nation's economy.

But while Biden had held off on holding his first news conference so he could use it to celebrate progress against the pandemic

and passage of a giant COVID-19 relief package, he was certain to be pressed at the question-and-answer session about all sorts of other challenges that have cropped up along the way.

A pair of mass shootings, rising international tensions, early signs of intraparty divisions and increasing numbers of migrants crossing the southern border are all confronting a West Wing known for its message discipline. Biden had been the first chief executive in four decades to reach this point in his term without holding a formal news conference.

While seemingly ambitious, Biden's vaccine goal amounts to a continuation of the existing pace of vaccinations through the end of next month. The U.S. is now averaging about 2.5 million doses per day. An even

greater rate is possible. Over the next month, two of the bottlenecks to getting Americans vaccinated are set to be lifted as the U.S. supply of vaccines is on track to increase and states lift eligibility requirements to get shots.

The scene looked very different from what Americans are used to seeing for formal presidential news conferences.

The president still stood behind a podium against a backdrop of flags. But due to the pandemic, only 30 socially distanced chairs for journalists were spread out in the expansive room. The White House limited attendance due to the virus.

Pressure had mounted on Biden to hold a formal session, which allows reporters to have an extended back-and-forth with the president on the issues of the day.

DOD OKs request for housing migrant kids at bases

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Joint Base San Antonio and Fort Bliss in Texas will soon house migrant children who were detained crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

“[The Department of Defense] will provide [Department of Health and Human Services] officials access to these locations immediately to begin initial actions to prepare for receiving unaccompanied migrant children as soon as preparations are complete,” John Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said in a statement.

The approval comes a day after the Pentagon announced the two bases had been requested by the Department of Health and Human Services to temporarily house the

children. The U.S. border with Mexico has experienced rising numbers in migration, including unaccompanied children, since April due to violence, natural disasters, food insecurity, and poverty in Central America, according to a Department of Homeland Security statement issued March 13.

Children who are found by U.S. Border Patrol agents must be transferred to HHS within 72 hours, but more than 3,000 children have been held for longer and in unfit facilities, according to recent news reports.

Kirby told reporters earlier Wednesday at the Pentagon that the HHS request for support at the bases would last until the end of the year. He would not say how many children HHS expects to house at each location.

Children sent to Joint Base San Antonio will stay in a vacant dormitory. Land at Fort Bliss will be used to build temporary housing facilities. The support is “on a fully reimbursable basis” and will “not negatively affect” military operations or readiness, according to the statement.

While this would not be the first time that unaccompanied children have been housed at military installations, the coronavirus pandemic does add to health concerns among the children and base community, Kirby said.

The children will be under the care of HHS, including their supervision and meals, when they are at the bases. The Defense Department could help with contracting support to help expedite the process, Kirby said.

VA is required to offer vaccines to 24M more people

By NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs must offer coronavirus vaccines to 24 million more people after President Joe Biden signed a bill into law Wednesday requiring the agency to vaccinate all veterans and spouses.

Biden signed the Saves Lives Act, which passed through Congress unanimously. The bill removes legal barriers that prevented the VA from vaccinating veterans

who aren't enrolled in the department, as well as their spouses and caregivers.

The action expands the population that the VA is responsible for vaccinating from about 9 million to 33 million, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. The department will need a greater supply of vaccines to reach the larger population, he said, equating to an increase of about 400,000 doses each week.

In addition to all veterans, spouses and caregivers, the new law also tasks the VA

with vaccinating overseas veterans who rely on the Foreign Medical Program, as well as recipients of the VA's CHAMPVA program. The CHAMPVA program serves spouses and children of veterans who are permanently and totally disabled due to a service-related disability.

Under the new law, “veteran” means any person who served in the armed forces and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

3 fishermen rescued
after ice drifts away

VT NORTH HERO — Firefighters on Tuesday rescued three men trapped on ice that drifted out on Lake Champlain.

The North Hero Volunteer Fire Department said the three men were fishing when the ice they were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported.

Firefighters from Vermont and Quebec responded. They used an airboat to get to the men and bring them back to shore, the news station reported.

Man's conviction follows
attempt to eat evidence

NC RALEIGH — A Mexican national has been convicted on child pornography charges after authorities say he tried to swallow memory cards containing pornographic images when he was detained following a traffic stop.

Federal prosecutors say David Sierra Orozco, 31, was convicted Tuesday of possessing child pornography after a two-day jury trial in Raleigh.

Deputies in Harnett County stopped Orozco in July 2017 after they say he was driving his Lexus erratically. During the traffic stop, deputies noticed a hidden compartment in the car and found more than \$100,000 in cash.

Orozco was taken to the county jail on a charge of driving without a license. While being searched, officers found a folded \$100 bill. When they unfolded it, memory cards fell to the

floor.

At a preliminary hearing, an agent testified that Orozco grabbed the memory cards and tried to eat them. He swallowed one and chewed another that deputies were able to retrieve, the agent said. Three other cards were unscathed, and they contained multiple images and videos of child pornography.

He faces up to 20 years in prison when sentenced in June.

Kitchen worker arrested
after jail contraband probe

KS WICHITA — A contract kitchen worker has been arrested on suspicion of bringing contraband into the Sedgwick County jail, authorities said Tuesday.

The Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office said in a news release that it received information concerning the worker on Monday. Its investigation determined that probable cause existed to arrest Natalie Willis, 42, for one count each of possession of hallucinogenic drugs, trafficking contraband and possession of a controlled substance.

Contract employees go through a background check before they are allowed to work inside the detention facility.

Man charged with wielding
chainsaw at motels

NC RALEIGH — A white man arrested after police say he menaced Black guests with a chainsaw at a North Carolina hotel over the weekend was arrested in California last year on charges of carrying a loaded gun on the beach.

Jacob Vanderburg, 27, was

arrested Sunday morning by Raleigh police on nine charges, including kidnapping and assault. WRAL-TV reported Vanderburg is accused of waving a chainsaw at three people at a Red Roof Inn, a Super 8 and a Claremont Inn in Raleigh. Chainsaw marks were left on at least one of the guest rooms.

Police in nearby Garner say Vanderburg also rammed his vehicle into a home-improvement store Saturday night and stole another chainsaw.

In July 2020, WRAL reported Vanderburg was arrested in Santa Monica, Calif., for carrying a loaded gun on a beach. Witnesses to that incident told police Vanderburg said he was upset with liberals and Black Lives Matter protests.

\$150K for teen arrested
by classmate's dad

HI HONOLULU — The Honolulu City Council has approved a \$150,000 settlement in a lawsuit that accused a police officer of improperly arresting a boy who had a personal dispute with his son.

The family's federal lawsuit alleged that Officer Kirk Uemura had the teen arrested because the teen and the officer's son were at odds and had fought after school in 2018. The American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii and attorney Eric Seitz represented the family and announced the settlement Tuesday. Their lawsuit said Uemura was "motivated solely by a personal vengeance" in abusing his police power.

In a statement, the Honolulu Department of Corporation Counsel called the settlement a

"reasonable resolution of the litigation" and said that the city's "position in this case was that HPD's current policies and standards of conduct were sufficient in providing direction to officers and addressing conflicts of interest in this particular situation."

After the lawsuit was filed in October, police spokeswoman Michelle Yu said Uemura and his supervisor were disciplined, but she was unable to provide details. On Tuesday, Yu said Uemura is on full duty and that "disciplinary action is pending."

Drag strip closes its
gates after 63 years

IN OSCEOLA — A northern Indiana drag strip has closed its gates after more than six decades of playing host to drag races.

The Osceola Dragway announced last Friday in a Facebook post that it will not be opening for the 2021 season and that "after 63 years, our gates will be permanently closed." Track officials wrote that the decision to close the site "was not an easy one" but said the coronavirus pandemic had affected ongoing efforts that began in 2016 to sell the property, which is located a few miles west of Elkhart.

The International Hot Rod Association-sanctioned track had opened for a pandemic-shortened season in 2020, The Elkhart Truth reported.

The track was founded in 1957 and features a quarter-mile drag strip with adjacent bleachers.

— From wire reports

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Gonzaga's Timme having terrific tourney

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — He was already enjoying a terrific season, and now Drew Timme is one of the stars of March after two games of the NCAA Tournament.

His game? It's pretty good, as evidenced by what he did in Gonzaga's second-round victory over Oklahoma, helping keep the top-seeded Bulldogs unblemished in their quest for perfection.

His mustache? It might be even better than his game, even if his mom isn't a huge fan of his latest facial hair experiment.

"After this game, I think she'll be OK if I keep it," Timme told CBS after beating the Sooners.

On a team filled with stars, all carrying the expectations of trying to complete the first undefeated championship season in 45 years, Timme could be the key for Gonzaga in making that happen.

He's the big guy for the Bulldogs. The one who has to be respected by opponents, but also the player who can sometimes be left to feast at the offensive end because of all the other problems the Zags create.

Corey Kispert was deservedly

a first-team AP All-American selection for Gonzaga. Jalen Suggs is likely to be the highest NBA Draft pick of the current crop of Zags.

But the Bulldogs don't sit at 28-0, riding a 32-game winning streak, if it's not for the inside presence Timme provides.

"We've talked a lot about kind of feeding off each other and make sure we get each other going on the floor," Kispert said. "Drew's put in the time and he's an ultra, ultra talented player."

It was on display against Oklahoma on Monday. With Kispert slowed early due to foul trouble, Timme responded with a career-best game of 30 points and 13 rebounds against the Sooners.

At times, Timme outwitted Oklahoma's post defenders. In other moments, he was simply tougher, scoring through contact or being first to a loose ball.

The tournament is a pretty good time to have one of the best games of your career.

"It's great. Obviously, it's a childhood dream," Timme said. "This feeling is only going to last the rest of the night and then we've got to prepare and a lot of work to do. We've got a lot of things we can work on."

Timme averaged 18 points and seven rebounds while shooting an absurd 65% from the field during the regular season. And his performances didn't go unnoticed — he was a second-team All-American selection. But with Kispert rewriting parts of the Gonzaga record book and the talk of whether Suggs could be in line for the No. 1 overall pick in the NBA Draft, it was easy for discussion about Timme to get shuffled back.

That would be unfair to what he's provided his team. In six games against teams from Power Five conferences this season — Kansas, Auburn, West Virginia, Iowa, Virginia, Oklahoma — Timme is averaging 24 points and 8.2 rebounds. Of that group, only Auburn did not make the tournament field.

And this is not a Gonzaga team with great interior depth aside from Timme and backup Anton Watson. Even without the guard-oriented lineup, the Bulldogs still averaged 50.5 points per game in the paint during the regular season, the most in the past 15 years. That was largely due to Timme.

The Bulldogs had 38 points in the paint against Norfolk State and another 34 against Oklaho-

ma.

Watson has played well in both games, including 17 points against Norfolk State, and played 18 solid minutes off the bench against Oklahoma. He could be an important complementary piece for the Bulldogs the rest of the tournament.

Gonzaga's lack of depth on the front line may not matter in the round of 16 against Creighton. The Bluejays don't have a player in their primary eight-man rotation taller than 6-foot-7.

And while Creighton will certainly be a challenge for the Bulldogs, it's hard not to look ahead and what what might loom in the regional final and a potential matchup against Southern California should both the Trojans and Zags advance.

The Trojans are led by 7-footer Evan Mobley, the Pac-12 player of the year, and his 6-foot-10 brother Isaiah. It would be another formidable frontline for Timme and the Bulldogs to face.

"There are a lot of good teams out there and when you play them on the biggest stage and it's just one game, it's not a seven-game series, anything can happen," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said.

More madness seems likely in Sweet 16

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Your bracket is shot. We know it. Ours is, too.

A year after the NCAA Tournament was canceled, the madness returned with an opening weekend full of upsets.

No. 1 seed Illinois, gone. So is Ohio State. High seeds Texas and Virginia also are out, replaced by upstarts and mid-major noise-makers.

And we have Sister Jean, the 101-year-old nun who serves as team chaplain for Loyola Chicago. So good to have her back.

It was a wild opening ride to be sure and the tournament is all but guaranteed to have a few

more unexpected twists and turns.

Here's what to look for:

The regulars

Gonzaga — The Zags are the only team to reach the Sweet 16 in six consecutive seasons. They're also four wins from completing perfection, trying to become the first undefeated champ since Indiana 45 years ago.

Baylor — The big, bad ball-hawking Bears appear to have found the form they had before a second COVID-19 pause.

Michigan — The Wolverines have looked like a No. 1 seed, even without Isaiah Livers.

Alabama — The Tide's maul-

ing of Maryland in the second round shows just how potent this team can be.

Houston — The Cougars sport that same swagger as the Phi Slama Jama teams back in the '80s.

The upstarts

Loyola Chicago — Sister Jean and the lovable Ramblers are back in the Sweet 16 for the first time since that 2018 Final Four run. Seeing her on the sideline warms the heart. The Ramblers have some heart of their own.

Oral Roberts — The Golden Eagles aren't Dunk City, but they are the first No. 15 seed to reach the Sweet 16 since Florida Gulf Coast became the first eight

years ago.

Oregon State — The Beavers were picked to finish 12th in a conference with 12 teams. After two wins as a No. 12 seed, you'd be wise not to pick against these underdogs.

UCLA — Hard to call the all-time leader in national championships an upstart, but the Bruins barely got into the bracket. With three wins and a trip to the Sweet 16, they proved they belong.

Arkansas — The Muss Bus has the Razorbacks chugging into their first Sweet 16 appearance since 1996. Quite a job by coach Eric Musselman in two years.

Lower salary cap means more cuts in NFL

Associated Press

If it seemed as if NFL teams have been shedding contracts nearly as fast as signing them in recent weeks that's because it's almost true.

With a shrinking salary cap in a sport with few contracts that are fully guaranteed, teams have spent the weeks leading up to free agency and the first few days of the new league year getting out of deals signed in recent years when there was more money available to spend.

Whether it was Kansas City getting rid of banged-up and expensive starting offensive tackles Mitchell Schwartz and Eric Fisher, the Raiders cutting ties with Lamarcus Joyner and Tyrell Williams after building their free-agent class around

them, or Tennessee shedding starting defensive backs Adoree Jackson, Malcolm Butler and Kenny Vaccaro, veterans around the league have been sent to the chopping block.

In all, according to transactions data from SportRadar and contract information from Spotrac and Over The Cap, teams have released players with a combined total of approximately \$600 million left on the deals they originally signed between the Super Bowl and the end of the first week of the league year. That figure excludes players who were on rookie or minimum-level deals.

The cuts have come after the salary cap was reduced from \$198.2 million in 2020 to \$182.5 million in 2021 in response to

the reduced revenues resulting from mostly empty stadiums last year because of the coronavirus.

The bloodletting could have been even more severe had the league and the NFLPA not agreed to spread those losses over multiple years.

"I think the unprecedented part being, for the first time in modern era, the cap decreases instead of increases," Rams general manager Les Snead said. "But again, I think many people on this planet, not just us in NFL football, have had to make sacrifices, some probably harder than others over the past year."

Cutting high-salaried players is nothing new in the NFL, where most free-agent con-

tracts have teams often committing to paying lucrative signing bonuses and guaranteed money in the first couple of years of a deal and then deciding whether to keep the player or get rid of him to create salary cap room.

But the rate of it increased substantially this season because of the lowered cap with the total amount of contracts cut in the same time period equaling about \$445 million in 2020 and \$227 million in 2019.

One of the teams in a cutting mode was the Raiders. Coach Jon Gruden bragged in 2019 about the free-agent haul he brought in after trading away stars Khalil Mack and Amari Cooper instead of giving them big extensions.

Maryland women rout Alabama to earn berth in Sweet 16

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Maryland and its offensive juggernaut are rolling fast and easy into the Sweet 16, getting 19 points from Angel Reese and overwhelming Alabama 100-64 on Wednesday.

The second-seeded Terrapins (27-2) came into the women's NCAA Tournament with the nation's highest-scoring offense and have yet to take their foot off the gas. The Terps are averaging 99 points in their two tournament wins after scoring 91.3 per game in the regular season.

Maryland hit the 100-point mark for the seventh time this season. The Terps also played aggressive, suffocating defense against the seventh-seeded Crimson Tide.

Maryland advanced to play No. 6 Texas in the Hemisfair Region.

Jasmine Walker led Alabama (17-10) with 23 points.

Texas 71, UCLA 62: Celeste Taylor scored 24 points and Kyra Lambert added 17, leading the Longhorns to the victory.

The start of the game was delayed about 25 minutes because Iowa State and Texas A&M went into overtime on the court on the other side of the Alamo dome.

Alamo

Missouri State 64, Wright State 39: Elle Ruffridge had a career-high 20 points with five three-pointers, Jasmine Franklin had a double-double and the fifth-seeded Lady Bears are going to their second consecutive Sweet 16 after knocking off Wright State.

Missouri State (23-2) pulled away in the second half when Ruffridge had 17 of her points. Franklin had 11 points and 11 rebounds.

Oregon 57, Georgia 50: Sedona Prince scored 22 points, Nyara Sabally took over late and the sixth-seeded Ducks beat the No. 3 Bulldogs to advance to its fourth straight Sweet 16.

Sabally scored six straight points — including a putback of her own missed shot — to break open a tie game and give Oregon

a 54-48 lead with less than a minute to go. She finished with 15 points.

Louisville 62, Northwestern 53: Kianna Smith scored 16 points and the No. 2 seed Cardinals advanced to the Sweet 16 by rallying from an early 18-point deficit to beat the seventh-seeded Wildcats.

Louisville (25-3) got off to another rough start, trailing 25-7 late in the first quarter. The Cardinals slowly started to chip away on offense and played stellar defense. The deficit was 40-28 midway through the third quarter before Louisville scored 17 straight points.

Northwestern (16-9) closed to 53-50 on Jordan Hamilton's three-pointer with 3:26 left. They had a chance to move closer, but Veronica Burton missed two free throws 30 seconds later.

Mercado

Indiana 70, Belmont 48: Grace Berger scored 17 points and Indiana used another suffo-

cating defensive effort to beat the Bruins, sending the fourth-seeded Hoosiers to the program's first Sweet 16.

Belmont was the first Ohio Valley Conference team to win a tournament game since 1990, but its chances of becoming the fifth No. 12 seed to advance to the regional semifinals were smothered by Indiana's defense and the Bruins' own dismal three-point shooting through the first three quarters.

Arizona 52, BYU 46: Aari McDonald had 17 points with 11 rebounds and the Wildcats outlasted the Cougars, advancing to the Sweet 16 for the first time since coach Adia Barnes was a player in 1998.

The third-seeded Wildcats (18-5) finally went ahead to stay on a three-pointer by Sam Thomas with 3:47 left.

Texas A&M 84, Iowa State 82 (OT): Jordan Nixon banked in a short jump shot at the buzzer in overtime, giving her a career-high 35 points and lifting the No. 2 Aggies past the seventh-seeded Cyclones.

Middleton powers Bucks to victory over Celtics

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Khris Middleton had 27 points and 13 rebounds and the Milwaukee Bucks held off the Boston Celtics 121-119 on Wednesday for their eighth consecutive victory.

Milwaukee led by 25, but only secured the win when Boston's Daniel Theis missed a wide-open corner three-point attempt in the final seconds. The Bucks have won 13 of their last 14 games — a stretch that started after a five-game skid.

After trailing 90-65 midway through the third quarter, the Celtics cut the margin to two on Jaylen Brown's three-pointer with 1:32 left. Theis then drew an offensive foul on Giannis Antetokounmpo, and Boston had multiple opportunities to tie the game or go in front the rest of the way.

Marcus Smart missed a three-pointer with just over a minute left. Donte DiVincenzo blocked a shot attempt from Kemba Walker with about 35 seconds remaining. Brook Lopez blocked a Smart shot attempt from around the basket with 2 seconds left.

Jazz 118, Nets 88: Donovan Mitchell scored 27 points and NBA-leading Utah routed short-handed Brooklyn.

Bojan Bogdanovic broke out of a 3-for-25 3-point shooting slump to make 4 of 6 and score 18 points for the Jazz. They have won four of five.

Magic 112, Suns 111: Evan Fournier scored the last of his 21 points on a driving layup over center Deandre Ayton with 6.4 seconds left and host Orlando beat Phoenix.

Suns star Devin Booker made two free throws with 19.4 seconds left to give Phoenix a one-point lead, but missed a reverse layup attempt just before the horn. The loss ended the Suns' road winning streak at seven, their longest since 2006-07.

Clippers 134, Spurs 101: Former San Antonio star Kawhi Leonard had 25 points against his old team and visiting Los Angeles never trailed.

Spurs fans still have not forgiven Leonard for his trade demand and subsequent departure to Toronto following his injury-riddled 2018 season. He was booed during pregame introductions and each time he touched the ball.

Raptors 135, Nuggets 111: Pascal Siakam scored 27 points and Toronto routed

visiting Denver to end a nine-game losing streak.

Toronto built a 24-point lead in the first half and shot 50% (24 of 48) on three-pointers overall to win for the first time since Feb. 26.

Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray scored 20 points apiece for Denver.

Pacers 116, Pistons 111: Caris LeVert scored 28 points and Indiana beat Detroit to snap a six-game home losing streak.

LeVert surpassed 20 points in seven starts with the Pacers since being acquired in a three-team trade.

Jerami Grant led East-worst Detroit with 29 points.

Kings 110, Hawks 108: De'Aaron Fox scored 37 points, Tyrese Haliburton made two free throws with 36.6 seconds remaining and Sacramento beat visiting Atlanta.

Haliburton had 17 points and seven assists, Buddy Hield scored 14 points, and Richaun Holmes had 16 points and eight rebounds.

Clint Capella had 25 points and 17 rebounds for the Hawks. They have lost back-to-back games after winning their first eight under interim coach Nate McMillan.

Cavaliers 103, Bulls 94: Darius Garland had 22 points and nine assists, Jarrett Allen added 19 points and nine rebounds, and Cleveland won at Chicago without scoring leader Collin Sexton.

Sexton sat out after he experienced right hamstring soreness in the morning shoot-around. Coach J.B. Bickerstaff said the injury wasn't serious.

Hornets 122, Rockets 97: Terry Rozier scored 25 points, Devonte' Graham added 21 and Charlotte won at Houston.

The Rockets quickly returned to the loss column after snapping a 20-game losing streak Monday night. It was the NBA's longest skid since Philadelphia's record-setting 28-game rut across the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Charlotte won in Houston for the first time since Dec. 22, 2004.

Grizzlies 116, Thunder 107: Dillon Brooks matched a season high with 25 points and Memphis won at Oklahoma City.

Mavericks 128, Timberwolves 108: Kristaps Porzingis had 29 points to help visiting Dallas rout Minnesota.

Penguins hand Sabres their 15th consecutive loss

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Sidney Crosby scored his 13th goal of the season, Tristan Jarry stopped 26 shots and the Pittsburgh Penguins pushed Buffalo's winless streak to 15 games with a 5-2 victory Wednesday night.

Evan Rodrigues, Kris Letang, John Marino and Zach Aston-Reese scored also for the Penguins. The teams completed the two-game set Thursday night.

Sabres goalie Dustin Tokarski, making his first NHL start in more than five years with Carter Hutton out due to a lower-body injury, made 7 saves and kept Buffalo in it until late in the second period, when Marino and Aston-Reese scored just over 2 minutes apart.

"We're a close group, a very resilient group," Marino said. "We've had a lot of come-from-behind wins, a lot of bounce-back wins (like tonight). It says a lot about the guys in the room."

Wild 3, Ducks 2: Jared Spurgeon had two goals, Nico Sturm broke a tie and host Minnesota beat Anaheim to sweep the two-game set.

Cam Talbot made 28 saves to help the Wild extend a franchise record with their 10th straight home win. Ryan Suter had two assists for Minnesota, becoming the fifth active NHL defenseman to reach 600 career points.

Senators 3, Flames 1: Rookie Filip Gustavsson made 28 saves, Chris Tierney broke a third-period tie and host Ottawa beat Calgary.

Gustavsson beat the Flames 2-1 on Monday night in his first NHL start. Last in the all-Canadian North Division at 12-20-3, the Senators have earned a least a point in five straight games (3-0-2), and are 5-2 against Calgary this season.

Sharks 4, Kings 2: Martin Jones made 42 saves for host San Jose to stymie Los Angeles for a second straight game.

Jones followed up a 41-save performance in a 2-1 win Monday with another sharp effort to become the first Sharks goalie with at least 40 saves in consecutive games since Arturs Irbe in 1993, according to SportRadar.

Jets 5, Canucks 1: Andrew Copp scored four goals to carry Winnipeg past host Vancouver.

Copp had a pair of power-play goals in the second period and two more goals in the third to give the Jets (20-11-2) their second straight win over the Canucks.