

## House panel explores diversity in SOCOM

By SARAH CAMMARATA

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — As the U.S. military reckons with how to improve its approach to diversity and inclusion, a panel of former military leaders and government officials on Friday shared ways to tackle the problem in a small but strategically important force: special operations.

“Special Operations Forces are a unique, valuable and a scarce asset for the nation’s security. It is vital given their small numbers to think carefully about their development and employment,” said Linda Robinson, a senior international and defense researcher at the Rand Corp.

Her comments came during a House Armed Services Committee subpanel hearing on the culture and climate of U.S. special operations.

“Systemic issues require urgent attention. Primary among them, the need to expand diversity and inclusion,” Robinson said.

Special Operations Command released its first plan to address diversity and inclu-

sion earlier this month after not acknowledging the problem for decades.

A Rand Corp. study published more than two decades ago on special operations found minorities are underrepresented in the force, especially Black people. Minority groups face “structural barriers,” such as requirements to join that are more likely to eliminate them as candidates.

But the new special operations plan maps out how leaders can identify “diversity gaps” and develop policies that remove barriers to serving in the force.

“Our system creates barriers to accessing a broad range of talent, skills, and perspectives, which we genuinely need on our team. These long-standing issues require change in our organizational norms, attitudes and behaviors,” Army Gen. Richard Clarke, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, and senior enlisted leader Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Gregory Smith wrote in a memo to the force.

Much of the House hearing on Friday focused on how to attract more diverse candidates to the 70,000-member force that is pri-

marily made up of white male soldiers.

One area in the special operations report targets “promoting SOF career fields to underrepresented demographics” to boost awareness of career opportunities within the force.

Retired Lt. Col. Kate Germano told lawmakers that the Defense Department must first invest in independent military and special operations research to identify how diversity contributes to a more lethal and capable force.

The military has relied solely on case studies from the private sector to provide proof about why diversity is critical to the military, she said.

“Without military specific case studies laying out the operational advantages women and other minorities bring to the fight, it will be difficult to reduce skepticism ... that becoming more diverse, equitable and inclusive force is not only fair, but essential to our ability to win future battles,” said Germano, known for writing about systemic gender bias against women in Marine Corps recruiting and training policies.

## Death toll tops 100 in widespread protests in Myanmar

*Associated Press*

YANGON, Myanmar — As Myanmar’s military celebrated the annual Armed Forces Day holiday with a parade Saturday in the country’s capital, soldiers and police elsewhere reportedly killed dozens of people as they suppressed protests in the deadliest bloodletting since last month’s coup.

The online news site Myanmar Now reported late Saturday that the death toll had reached 114. A count issued by an independent researcher in Yangon who has been compiling near-real time death tolls put the total at 107, spread over more than two dozen cities and towns.

Both numbers are higher than all estimates for the previous high on March 14, which ranged in counts from 74 to 90.

Figures collected by the researcher, who asked not to be named for his security, have generally tallied with the counts issued at

the end of each day by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, which documents deaths and arrests and is widely seen as a definitive source. The Associated Press is unable to independently confirm the death tolls.

The killings quickly drew international condemnation, with multiple diplomatic missions to Myanmar releasing statements that mentioned the killing of civilians Saturday, including children.

“This 76th Myanmar armed forces day will stay engraved as a day of terror and dishonour,” the European Union’s delegation to Myanmar said on Twitter. “The killing of unarmed civilians, including children, are indefensible acts.”

U.S. Ambassador Thomas Vajda in a statement said “security forces are murdering unarmed civilians.”

“These are not the actions of a profession-

al military or police force,” he wrote. “Myanmar’s people have spoken clearly: they do not want to live under military rule.”

The death toll in Myanmar has been steadily rising as authorities grow more forceful with their suppression of opposition to the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule.

Junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing did not directly refer to the protest movement when he gave his nationally televised Armed Forces Day speech before thousands of soldiers. He referred only to “terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and social security,” and called it unacceptable.

The U.S. Embassy said shots were fired Saturday at its cultural center in Yangon, though no one was injured.

# US invites Russia, China to climate talk

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is including rivals Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China among the invitees to the first big climate talks of his administration, an event the U.S. hopes will help shape, speed up and deepen global efforts to cut climate-wrecking fossil fuel pollution, administration officials told The Associated Press.

The president is seeking to revive a U.S.-convened forum of the world's major economies on climate that George W. Bush and Barack Obama both used and Donald Trump let languish. Leaders of some of the world's top climate-change sufferers, dogooders and backsliders round out the rest of the 40 invitations being delivered Friday. It will be held virtually April 22 and 23.

Hosting the summit will fulfill a campaign pledge and executive order by Biden, and the administration is timing the event to coincide with its own upcoming announcement of what will be a much tougher U.S. target for revamping the U.S. economy to sharply cut emissions from coal, natural gas

and oil.

The session — and whether it's all talk, or some progress — will test Biden's pledge to make climate change a priority among competing political, economic, policy and pandemic problems. It also will pose a very public — and potentially embarrassing or empowering — test of whether U.S. leaders, and Biden in particular, can still drive global decision-making after the Trump administration withdrew globally and shook up long-standing alliances.

The Biden administration intentionally looked beyond its international partners for the summit, reaching out to key leaders for what it said would sometimes be tough talks on climate matters, an administration official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. plans for the event.

Trump mocked the science underlying urgent warnings on global warming and the resulting worsening of droughts, floods, hurricanes and other natural disasters. He pulled the United States out of the 2015 U.N. Paris climate accords as one of his first actions.

That makes next month's summit the first major international climate discussion by a U.S. leader in more than four years, although leaders in Europe and elsewhere have kept up talks.

The Biden administration hopes the stage provided by next month's Earth Day climate summit — planned to be all virtual because of COVID-19 and publicly viewable on live-stream, including breakout conversations — will encourage other international leaders to use it as a platform to announce their own countries' tougher emission targets or other commitments, ahead of November's U.N. global climate talks in Glasgow.

The administration hopes more broadly the session will demonstrate a commitment to cutting emissions at home and encouraging the same abroad, the official said. That includes encouraging governments to get moving on specific, politically-bearable ways to retool their transportation and power sectors and overall economies now to meet those tougher future targets, something the Biden administration is just embarking on.

## Dems use Ga. law as case for voting overhaul

*Associated Press*

Democrats have seized on new voting restrictions in Georgia to focus attention on the fight to overhaul federal election laws, setting up a slow-building standoff that carries echoes of the civil rights battles of a half-century ago.

In fiery speeches, pointed statements and tweets, party leaders on Friday decried the law signed the day before by the state's Republican governor as specifically aimed at suppressing Black and Latino votes and a threat to democracy. President Joe Biden released an extended statement, calling the law an attack on "good conscience" that denies the right to vote for "countless" Americans.

"This is Jim Crow in the 21st Century," Biden said, referring to laws of the last century that enforced heavy-handed racial segregation in the South.

"It must end. We have a moral and Constitutional obligation to act," he said. He told reporters the Georgia law is an "atrocious" and the Justice Department is looking into it.

Georgia's Republican governor, Brian Kemp, lashed back, accusing Biden of attempting to "destroy the sanctity and security of the ballot box" by supporting what the governor sees as federal intrusion into state responsibilities.

Behind the chorus of outrage, Democrats are also wrestling with the limits on their power in Washington, as long as Senate filibuster rules allow Republicans to block major legislation, including H.R. 1, a sweeping elections bill now pending in the Senate.

Biden and his party are seeking to build and sustain momentum in the realm of public opinion — hoping to nationalize what has so far been a Republican-led, state-by-state movement to curb access to the ballot — while they begin a slow, plodding legislative process. Allies meanwhile plan to fight the Georgia law, and others, in court.

"What's happening in Georgia right now, underscores the importance and the urgency," said Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., in an interview Friday. "This is about what is fundamental to our identity as an American

people — one person, one vote."

It is expected to be a monthslong slog in the narrowly divided Congress, specifically the Senate, where Democrats are, for now, unwilling to muscle their slim majority to change filibuster rules, despite the party's urgent calls for action.

Instead, the Democrats are prepared to legislate the old-fashioned way, unspooling arguments in lengthy Senate debates, spilling out of the committee hearing rooms and onto the Senate floor, and forcing opponents to go on the record as standing in the way — much as South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond was positioned when he filibustered the Civil Rights Act of the last century.

"They're literally squeezing the arteries of the lifeblood of America," Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., the son of civil rights activists, said in an interview. "They are choking what makes us distinct and unique on the planet Earth."

Booker would not, however, openly call for the end of the filibuster, a parliamentary tool requiring at least 60 votes to advance Senate legislation in some cases.

# N. Korea rebukes Biden over criticism

*Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea on Saturday snapped back at President Joe Biden's criticism of its ballistic missile tests, calling his comments a provocation and encroachment on the North's right to self-defense and vowing to continuously expand its "most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power."

The statement issued by senior official Ri Pyong Chol came after the North tested-fired two short-range missiles off its eastern coast, Thursday, in the first ballistic launches since Biden took office.

Experts say the flight data released by South Korea's military and North Korea's own description of the tests indicated that the North tested a new solid-fuel weapon that is designed to evade missile defense systems and is potentially nuclear-capable.

Biden was restrained as he admonished North Korea for the launches, which were a violation of U.N. sanctions against the North.

"We're consulting with our allies and partners," Biden said at the first news conference of his presidency on Thursday. "And there will be responses if they choose to escalate. We will respond accordingly. But I'm also prepared

for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization."

In comments carried by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency, Ri said the North expresses "deep apprehension" over Biden's remarks that were "openly revealing his deep-seated hostility toward the DPRK." DPRK refers to North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Ri said it was "gangster-like logic" for the United States to criticize the North's tactical weapons tests when the Americans are freely testing intercontinental ballistic missiles.

## Putin hails military performance in Arctic drills

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday hailed the military's performance during recent Arctic drills, part of Moscow's efforts to expand its presence in the polar region.

Navy chief Adm. Nikolai Yevmenov reported to Putin that the exercise has featured three nuclear submarines simultaneously breaking through Arctic Ice, and warplanes flying over the North Pole.

Last week's drills were conducted around Alexandra Land, an island that is part of the Franz Josef Land archipelago where the military has recently built a base.

Russia has prioritized beefing up its military presence in the Arctic region, which is

believed to hold up to one-quarter of the Earth's undiscovered oil and gas. Putin in the past has cited estimates that put the value of Arctic mineral riches at \$30 trillion.

Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway all have been trying to assert jurisdiction over parts of the Arctic, as shrinking polar ice opens new opportunities for tapping resources and opening new shipping lanes.

As part of its efforts to project its power over the Arctic, the Russian military has rebuilt and expanded numerous facilities across the polar region in recent years, revamping runways and deploying additional surveillance and air defense assets.

As part of last week's maneuvers, a pair of

MiG-31 fighters flew over the North Pole, Yevmenov said. A Defense Ministry video featured them being refueled by a tanker plane.

The video also showed three nuclear submarines that smashed through the Arctic ice next to one another.

Putin noted that the exercise was unprecedented for the military and praised its skills. He added that the maneuvers also have proven the reliability of Russian weapons in polar conditions.

The Russian military has expanded the number and the scope of its war games amid bitter tensions in ties with the West, which have sunk to post-Cold War lows after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea.

## Lawmakers reintroduce legislation on burn pits

**By NIKKI WENTLING**

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers reintroduced legislation Friday to streamline the process for veterans to get benefits because of illnesses from burn pits and other toxic exposures.

The legislation would lessen the proof required for veterans to receive benefits. Currently, veterans must provide proof of their medical conditions and evidence of their locations at specific burn pits or points where the exposure occurred. Then, they must undergo a medical exam and start a disability compensation claim, which can take years.

Under the new bill, veterans would need to prove only that they deployed to parts of the Middle East, southwest Asia and Africa

since 1990 and suffer from a condition associated with toxic exposure.

Throughout the 1990s and the post-9/11 wars, the military used open-air pits to burn garbage, jet fuel, paint, medical waste and plastics. Veterans diagnosed with cancers, respiratory issues and lung diseases at young ages have blamed exposure to the toxic fumes. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs has contended that there is not sufficient evidence to support those claims.

"More than three million service members could have been exposed to toxic burn pits, yet the VA continues to deny them care by placing the burden of proof on veterans suffering from rare cancers, lung diseases and respiratory illnesses," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said in a statement Friday.

"The bottom line is that our veterans served our country, they are sick and they need health care — period."

Gillibrand and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., reintroduced the bill in the Senate, and Reps. Raul Ruiz, D-Calif., and Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., are leading the House version.

The lawmakers are planning a rally outside the U.S. Capitol on April 13 with veterans service organizations, other advocates and comedian Jon Stewart, who has recently fought for veterans suffering the effects of burn pit exposure.

"This legislation includes presumption and actually fixes this urgent and immoral issue," Stewart said in a statement Friday. "Anything else just delays and denies the treatment and benefits our warriors need."



# Music serenades at NYC vaccine center

Associated Press

NEW YORK — On a recent weekday, the sounds of Vivaldi, Mozart and Bach greeted hundreds of just-inoculated New Yorkers as they entered a medical observation area at one of the city's biggest COVID-19 vaccination sites, the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.

Hearing the music, many stopped to record videos of the five musicians in a piano and string ensemble gathered on-stage, performing live.

For people on the road to immunity from the coronavirus, experiencing live music in the same space that served as a field hospital at the height of the pandemic was a fitting accompaniment on a day of hope.

For some of the musicians, it was something more.

Pianist Barbara Podgurski said her recent performances at the vaccination site were her first in public since the pandemic battered the city last spring.

"There were three months where I didn't play the piano because I felt hopeless," she said. "The reaction ... I haven't heard in a year. You realize how much people need music in their lives, to feel beauty and magic. It gives them hope."

The music is part of a series of daily, two-hour midday concerts from a collaboration between the nonprofit group Sing for Hope and violinist Victoria Paterson, who started her own nonprofit, Music and Medicine.

Paterson said many of her fellow musicians have been out of work since the city's music and performance scene shut down last spring.

## Florida

MIAMI — A Florida business owner has been convicted of illegally receiving more than \$2 million in coronavirus relief funds.

A federal jury in Fort Myers found Casey David Crowther, 35, guilty Friday of bank fraud,

making a false statement to a lending institution and two counts of money laundering, according to court records. A sentencing date hasn't been set.

Crowther applied for a loan last April on behalf of his company, Target Roofing & Sheet Metal, Inc., according to a criminal complaint. Prosecutors said he claimed the funds would only be used for business-related purposes, such as retaining workers and paying bills.

But shortly after receiving the money \$2.1 million, Crowther made a series of personal purchases, including nearly \$690,000 on a 2020 40-foot catamaran, which he registered in his name, the complaint said. He also paid \$100,000 to a former business partner.

## Texas

AUSTIN — A Texas judge is allowing the City of Austin to continue to require face coverings in local businesses weeks after Republican Gov. Greg Abbott ended a statewide mask mandate and other COVID-19 safety measures.

The ruling Friday by state District Judge Lora Livingston was at least a temporary victory for local leaders in the liberal state capital who have repeatedly clashed with Abbott over his handling of the pandemic.

Face coverings have only ever been loosely enforced in Texas, which earlier this month became the biggest state to drop COVID-19 restrictions.

## California

LOS ANGELES — The Federal Emergency Management Agency plans to stop operating two mass vaccination sites in California next month, just days before the state makes everyone 16 and older eligible for a shot.

The two sites in Oakland and Los Angeles opened in Febru-

ary for an eight-week pilot program that concludes on April 15. The sites will switch from the Pfizer to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which requires just one shot, during the final two weeks of operation so that people do not have to sign up for a second dose elsewhere.

State and county officials said they would have liked the program to continue, though it provided a small fraction of California's overall shots. Each site was set up to vaccinate 6,000 people per day but they have been administering up to 7,500 shots per day, according to the state Office of Emergency Services. Since the sites are federally managed, those shots are separate from California's overall weekly allocation, which is now about 1.8 million shots per week.

## Indiana

CLARKSVILLE — A southern Indiana nurse has been charged with practicing medicine without a license for allegedly removing a nursing home resident's oxygen mask hours before he died from COVID-19 last year.

Connie Sneed, 52, was charged Thursday with the felony, which in Indiana carries a potential penalty of one to six years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

Authorities began investigating the man's April 2020 death at a nursing home in Clarksville, Ind., after learning that Sneed wrote in a social media post that she had asked the man if he wanted her to remove his oxygen mask so he could "fly with the angels."

In that Facebook post, Sneed called her alleged actions, "the hardest thing I've ever done in 28 years," according to an inspection report from the Indiana Department of Health.

## Kansas

MISSION — Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly announced

Friday that anyone in Kansas age 16 or older will be allowed to get a coronavirus vaccine starting Monday because the state expects to get enough of the medicine to speed up its inoculation process for the second time in two weeks.

Kelly's announcement means the state will enter the fifth and final phase of its vaccine distribution. The move to make vaccines available to another 400,000 people comes after weeks of criticism from Republicans in the GOP-controlled Legislature that the effort is not moving quickly enough and not organized enough for people to easily learn where and when they can get shots.

## Washington

SEATTLE — The union representing 7,000 Seattle Public Schools employees has ratified an agreement to bring elementary students back into the classroom for in-person instruction on April 5.

The Seattle Times reports the agreement makes official a return to school buildings for the district during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seattle is Washington's largest public school district with more than 50,000 students.

The Seattle Education Association had 82% of members approve the deal this week.

The parents of about 58% of SPS students indicated in a districtwide survey this week that they plan to return their children to school for hybrid instruction, a district spokesperson said. The district received responses from families of 14,272 of its 24,648 currently enrolled students.

Under the agreement, elementary school students and secondary students with disabilities would return to buildings on April 5 — Gov. Jay Inslee's deadline for districts to offer in-person instruction for young students.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### 'Not haunted' house hits the real estate market

**MA** BOSTON — A Massachusetts woman noticed something strange about the "For Sale" sign outside a home in her neighborhood.

On top of the sign with the name of the broker and their contact information was a sign with the words "Not Haunted" in big red letters.

"This just went up around the corner and I HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS," Margot Bloomstein wrote in a tweet that included an image of the sign, The Boston Globe reported.

The house is west of Boston but Bloomstein didn't want to say exactly where to respect the homeowner's privacy, she said. But she reached out to the real estate agency to learn more about the sign.

The consensus is that the sign is a prank — maybe played by a ghost with a sense of humor.

### Woman seeks to return heirlooms found in chest

**MI** ALPENA — Did you know Ellen Prince? A Los Angeles woman has a wedding dress, photos and letters that belonged to Prince, a native of Alpena, Mich. They were inside a chest discovered decades ago in California.

K.C. Thompson is looking for family members who would appreciate the possessions, The Alpena News reported.

"I feel like I am the custodian of her life," Thompson told the newspaper of Prince, who also used Forte as a last name. "I'm so curious to know more about her, and I hope the people in Al-

pena will help me return Ellen home ... All of these family heirlooms belong with her family."

The chest was one of three acquired by Thompson's cousin in 1986 when workers in North Hollywood were hauling them out of a home where the owner had died.

### 3 sent to hospital after chair falls off ski lift line

**PA** TANNERSVILLE — Three people were injured when a chair fell off a ski lift line at an eastern Pennsylvania resort and crashed to the ground, authorities said.

Sgt. Shawn Goucher of Pocomo Township police said that during the accident at Camelback Resort in Monroe County three people fell about 15 feet near the top of the mountain and were taken away by a St. Luke's University Health Network ambulance.

"Camelback Resort is working with the appropriate state authorities to investigate yesterday's incident involving the Sullivan Lift," the resort said in a statement. "The health and safety of our guests and associates is and remains our number one priority."

### Surfer rescues man and dog from choppy lake

**MN** DULUTH — A Minneapolis man who was surfing the choppy waters of Lake Superior helped save a man who was struggling in the water while trying to rescue a dog.

Darby Voeks, 26, was about to jump off the pier at Park Point in Duluth to catch one last wave when a woman in a wheelchair

rolled up and said she needed help because her aide, 29, had gone into the water to rescue her dog. Voeks, who was in a wetsuit, dropped his surfboard and jumped in, the Star Tribune Reported.

The rescued man was treated at the scene for possible hypothermia.

### Carjacking ends after interstate pursuit

**NJ** WINSLOW TOWNSHIP — Police in New Jersey arrested a woman who they said had shot a man and stole his car in Philadelphia.

The woman first tried to steal a car at gunpoint before fleeing the scene and confronting a man in a car, police said. The man was shot in the back and the woman drove off, police said.

Officers chased the woman into New Jersey where she was captured after the vehicle had crashed. Her name was not released.

The man who was shot was taken to Presbyterian Hospital, where he was in critical condition.

### School bus driver resigns after driving drunk charge

**IA** FOREST CITY — A school bus driver in northern Iowa has resigned following her arrest on a charge of second-offense drunken driving while she was transporting young school children.

Rebecca Anne Spencer, 44, resigned from the Forest City Community School District, the Mason City Globe Gazette reported.

Spencer was charged with one count of second-offense

OWI and three counts of child endangerment. Her prior OWI conviction occurred on Sept. 20, 2016.

### Teens blame autopilot for crash with patrol car

**FL** PALM COAST — A pair of South Carolina teenagers claimed that their car was on autopilot before it crashed into a Florida deputy's patrol car, officials said.

A deputy pulled over a white 2018 Tesla after watching it pull out of a gas station parking lot and travel on the wrong side of the road, officials said. The car initially came to a stop and then backed into the deputy's patrol vehicle.

The deputy reported finding two girls, ages 14 and 15, inside the car, but neither was in the driver seat. The girls said the Tesla was driving itself in autopilot mode when it backed into the patrol car. Investigators later determined that one of the teens was operating the vehicle before putting it in autopilot, causing the crash.

### Dog wounded on freeway in car-to-car shooting

**CA** CALABASAS — A dog was seriously wounded but two people escaped injury when someone in a car fired a gun into another vehicle on a Southern California freeway, authorities said.

The shooting occurred on northbound U.S. 101 near Calabasas, the California Highway Patrol said.

The dog was taken to an animal hospital for treatment, ABC 7 TV reported.

— From The Associated Press

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# UCLA, USC: From late night to prime time

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — UCLA and Southern California games are usually late-night viewing for most college basketball fans during the regular season but both programs have prime-time spots for the second week-end of March Madness.

The Los Angeles schools are among four Pac-12 teams in the men's Sweet 16, the first time since 2007 and third time overall that the Bruins and Trojans have both made it to the regional semifinals in the same tournament.

"To see UCLA, USC and all the other conference teams having this excellent success throughout this tournament, it's just very satisfying and inspirational," said former UCLA great Bill Walton, who announces games for ESPN and the Pac-12 Network.

Most of the country might be shocked about the Pac-12's success, but UCLA coach Mick Cronin isn't one of them.

"I coached in the Big East in

the heyday, 11 teams in the NCAA Tournament (in 2011), so I know good teams," said Cronin, who is in his second season in Westwood after 13 years at Cincinnati. "Teams in the Pac-12 play hard. We have excellent coaching. It's way more competitive physically than the rest of the country knows because most people are sleeping when we play."

The conference is assured of at least one team in the Elite Eight with USC (24-7) facing Oregon (21-6) in a West Region matchup Sunday night. UCLA (20-9) also plays Sunday when it meets Alabama (26-6) for a spot in the East Region final.

The Bruins and Trojans are crosstown rivals but both have built tournament runs on similar traits — strong coaching, great defense and local players leading the way.

Cronin is one of only five coaches to direct teams to the last nine tournaments. The Bruins appeared to be in for a short stay when they trailed

Michigan State by 14 in the first half of their First Four game, but they rallied for an 86-80 overtime victory.

Over the last five halves and overtime, which also includes wins over BYU and Abilene Christian, the Bruins are holding opponents to 38.8% shooting from the floor.

USC's Andy Enfield was the Pac-12 Coach of the Year after the Trojans were ranked for the final month of the regular season. This is the fifth time in eight seasons he has directed the Trojans to more than 20 wins.

USC demolished Kansas 85-51 on Monday, which marks the biggest win by a team over the Jayhawks in NCAA Tournament history. The Trojans held Drake and Kansas to 29% shooting in both games.

"USC basketball is on the rise. Over the last 80 years, it's been like a roller coaster. A lot of great players, coaches and teams, but we're trying to build the program and sustain the

success," Enfield said.

Both teams are winning with rosters featuring area players. USC's Evan Mobley — who was raised in Riverside County — is the first player in conference history to be named Player of the Year along with capturing top defensive and freshman honors. The only other player to do that from a Power Five conference was Kentucky's Anthony Davis in 2012.

Mobley is expected to be the second straight USC player to be a lottery pick in the NBA Draft.

UCLA sophomore Johnny Juzang, a Tarzana, Calif., native who began his career at Kentucky, is the first Bruins player since Reggie Miller to score 20 points or more in his first two NCAA Tournament games.

With the Lakers and Dodgers bringing championships back to Los Angeles within the past six months, USC and UCLA are hoping their runs can eventually end with the same result.

## NCAA president: Poor communication reason for inequity

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Mark Emmert acknowledged the glaring failures to give the coaches and players in the women's tournament the same attention the NCAA gave the men was a result of a lack of communication between the two basketball staffs along with focusing on trying to tip off both events safely during a pandemic.

The NCAA president said the oversights resulted in overlooking differences that led to inequities that have cast a dark, looming cloud over the women's tournament.

"Clearly we should have had better communication between my teams," Emmert said in a 30-minute interview with The Associated Press on Friday. "Clearly we should have really had a better focus on a number

of those details that are hardly details, but are really, really important.

"The emphasis that needed to be on health and wellness and the complete and utter focus on how to pull this off in a pandemic led us to get our eye off the ball on a handful of things and that's really unfortunate. Had we done that better we wouldn't have had these things emerge."

The NCAA announced on Thursday that it was hiring a law firm to review potential gender equity issues in all men's and women's championship events.

"We can't just say we're in favor of everything being equivalent and fair, we've got to make sure that's actually the case across the board," Emmert said.

The NCAA has been accused the past two weeks of not pro-

viding equal amenities to the teams in the men's and women's Division I basketball tournaments. Among other things, female players, coaches and staff in San Antonio have criticized the NCAA for not initially providing a full weight-training area to the women's teams, noting the men's teams in Indianapolis did not have the same problem.

"We dropped the ball in San Antonio in the women's basketball tournament," Emmert said.

He said now the focus is on making sure it doesn't happen again.

"We know that we've had decades of undervaluing women's sports throughout the entire sports spectrum," Emmert said. "We need to think through how we address that. We need to think through how we want to more aggressively support and

promote women's sports."

The NCAA has also received criticism for using the term March Madness only to promote and brand the men's tournament. Emmert said the popular nickname could be used for the women's tournament if organizers and those who support the game want it.

"The mark March Madness isn't exclusively the men's basketball mark and it wasn't intended in that context," he said. "There has been an ongoing discussion about how to build the women's basketball brand and how much similarity versus how much distinction is appropriate between the two games."

Emmert apologized to women's basketball players.

"We failed to deliver the things they earned and deserved," he said.



# Garcia comes up aces at Match Play

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Needing to win the final hole to advance, Bob MacIntyre drilled a driver to 3 feet of the cup on the 371-yard 18th hole. Moments later, Sergio Garcia ended one of the record eight sudden-death playoffs with a hole-in-one.

Already the most fickle event in golf, the Dell Technologies Match Play on Friday was an endless frenzy.

Kevin Na lectured Dustin Johnson about not waiting for a putt to be conceded — 6 inches — and then birdied the last two holes to oust the No. 1 player in the world. Patrick Cantlay, practically flawless with 14 birdies and an eagle over two days, managed only two birdies and lost a playoff with a three-putt.

When it finally ended, Jon Rahm at No. 3 was the only player from the top 20 seeds who made it to the knockout stage of the weekend at Austin Country

Club.

“You just never know what can happen out there,” Billy Horschel said after beating Max Homa on the third playoff hole.

Just about everything did.

Garcia beat Lee Westwood in the longest of the eight playoffs with a 9-iron from 161 yards to a front pin on the par-3 fourth hole that landed just beyond the pin and trickled back into the cup.

“Well, 28 years on tour and I thought I had seen everything. I hadn’t!” Westwood posted on Twitter.

Equally stunning was the drive of MacIntyre, the 24-year-old from Scotland with plenty of spunk and loads of fight. He was 1 down against Adam Long, who was poised to advance with Johnson in the group ahead about to lose to Na.

Johnson backed away from his 6-foot par putt — Na only had 4 feet for birdie — and his

caddie, brother Austin, stepped in a few feet from the cup to help read the putt. Out of nowhere, a ball shot up the left side of the bank around the green and rolled in front of the caddie’s feet.

Dustin had to mark MacIntyre’s ball so he could putt. MacIntyre was oblivious to what happened except he knew he hit the shot of his life.

“Probably one of the best and one of the luckiest golf shots I’ve hit in my life,” MacIntyre said. “You’ve just got to keep fighting until the end, and it just shows anything can happen in this game.”

His only chance was a low bullet, and it caught the downward slope for extra run toward the left side of the green, which MacIntyre couldn’t see. He heard it was on the green.

“I didn’t have a clue how close,” MacIntyre said. I’m thinking it’s going to be just on the green below the slope. Go-

ing to have hopefully two putts maybe to win the hole. But when I seen where they put the ball back down I was like, ‘No way!’

“And that’s what you play the game for, these moments.”

Given how three days of group play have gone, no telling what to expect on the win-or-go-home weekend. It will include a trio of Texas Longhorns, including Jordan Spieth for the first time since 2016. He won three straight holes around the turn and, unlike Thursday when he let Matthew Wolff off the hook, Spieth managed to close out Corey Connors.

Scottie Scheffler halved his match when Xander Schauffele made an 8-foot birdie putt on the last hole, and then Scheffler returned the favor with a 12-foot birdie on the second extra hole. The other Longhorn is Dylan Frittelli of South Africa, who became the first No. 64 seed in Match Play history to make it to the weekend.

## NASCAR goes for first ride through the dirt at Bristol

Associated Press

It only took one session in the dirt for Kevin Harvick to change his mind about NASCAR’s latest experiment.

Harvick was one of the loudest detractors headed into the first Cup Series race on a dirt track since 1970. He had been dreading Sunday’s race at Bristol Motor Speedway from the moment NASCAR put this harbinger on the schedule.

And it was only two weeks ago that Harvick groaned about 250-laps around the Tennessee bullring — he called it “the longest dirt race in the history of mankind” — and predicted it would be a struggle for drivers so accustomed to concrete to even make it to the checkered flag.

After 51 laps of practice Friday — in a truck, no less — Har-

vick had done an about-face.

“This has been a weekend that I had big X’s through, and honestly, that’s as much fun as I’ve had in a race car in a long time,” Harvick said. “Just getting over my anxiety and being able to do something way outside my comfort zone was rewarding.”

Harvick was one of seven Cup regulars entered in Saturday night’s Truck Series race so they could get some experience on dirt. It was his first Truck Series race since 2015 but Harvick wanted as much track time as possible on the red clay surface.

NASCAR returned to a traditional three-day race weekend for the first time since the pandemic began and scheduled a pair of Friday practice sessions for both the Truck Series and the Cup Series. When practice was complete, truck series regular

Ben Rhodes called Harvick a contender.

The favorites for Sunday, though, are expected to be the drivers who both started their careers racing on dirt and still do throughout the NASCAR season. But race favorite Kyle Larson had a huge temperature spike during Friday’s final practice and an engine change will send him to the back of the field at the start of Sunday’s race.

And of the 10 fastest drivers on the day, very few were dirt regulars. Ryan Blaney was fastest overall, followed by Alex Bowman and then Denny Hamlin, who last raced on dirt as an 8-year-old in a go-kart.

Blaney felt the track conditions changed dramatically from the start of the day through the final practice session — and not for the good.

“It’s rough, slick. Really rough, actually,” Blaney said. “The track is kind of coming up and there are crazy big divots. It’s rough.”

Blaney also said dust made for poor visibility until the sunset.

The cars were indeed much slower — at least 5 seconds slower a lap from times turned on Bristol’s concrete — and Hamlin expected some changes to be made to either the track surface or the race format before Sunday.

The starting lineup will be set by heat races on Saturday and pit stops during the race will be controlled with only tire changes permitted. Rain is expected at Bristol both Saturday and Sunday, which would impact a track surface that has drivers concerned about tire wear.

# Harden, Griffin help Nets beat Pistons

Associated Press

DETROIT — James Harden scored 44 points and Blake Griffin added 17 in his return to Detroit, lifting the Brooklyn Nets to a 113-111 victory over the Pistons on Friday night.

Harden was back after missing a game because of neck soreness. He added 14 rebounds and eight assists. Brooklyn was still without Kevin Durant (left hamstring strain) and Kyrie Irving (personal reasons).

Griffin spent three-plus years with the Pistons, but he reached a buyout agreement with Detroit earlier this month and went to the contending Nets. The Pistons played a tribute video for him during a first-half timeout, and he stood to acknowledge the small number of fans in attendance.

Jerami Grant scored 19 points for Detroit.

**Celtics 122, Bucks 114:** Jayson Tatum scored 34 points, Marcus Smart had 23 and Boston beat host Milwaukee to snap the Bucks' eight-game winning streak and split the two-game series.

Kemba Walker added 21 points, and Jaylen Brown had 18 for the Celtics.

For the second straight game, the Celtics held Giannis Antetokounmpo in check, holding him to 16 points, well below his 28.6 average. Khris Middleton had 19 points and Jrue Holiday 17 for the Bucks.

Milwaukee won the opener 121-119 on Wednesday night.

**Jazz 117, Grizzlies 114:** Donovan Mitchell scored 35 points, Rudy Gobert had 25 and Utah beat Memphis for its 18th straight home victory.

Gobert added nine rebounds, and Mitchell had six assists and five rebounds to help the Jazz improve to 33-11. Bojan Bogdanovic added 17 points and Jordan Clarkson had 14.

Ja Morant had 30 points and 11 assists for Memphis. Jonas Valanciunas added 14 points and 18 rebounds, Dillon Brooks had 22 points and Grayson Allen 17. The Grizzlies dropped to 21-21, falling for the first time in four games.

Memphis had a chance to force overtime when Mitchell missed a driving bank shot with 14.4 seconds left. Brooks missed a three-pointer on the other end, and Mike Conley won a jump ball with 1.9 seconds remaining to seal the victory.

**Suns 104, Raptors 100:** At Tampa, Fla., Chris Paul and Deandre Ayton each scored 19 points and Phoenix held off Toronto despite not making a field goal in the last 3:50.

Paul and Devin Booker converted four free throws in the final 42 seconds. Booker had 16 points to help the Suns improve to 30-14.

Paul also had eight assists, and Ayton had nine rebounds and two blocks — the last block on Siakam in the final minutes.

**Nuggets 113, Pelicans 108:** Nikola Jokic had 37 points and nine assists and visiting Denver outlasted New Orleans.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 25 points, and Jamal Murray had 23 points and 11 assists for the Nuggets.

**Trail Blazers 112, Magic 105:** Newly acquired guard Norman Powell scored 22 points and hit five three-pointers in his Portland debut and the Trail Blazers overcame the absence of star guard Damian Lillard to beat host Orlando.

C.J. McCollum scored seven of his 22 points in the fourth quarter. Portland won for a second night in a row and improved to 14-6 this season in back-to-back sets of

games. Lillard sat out with a left knee contusion.

**Hawks 124, Warriors 108:** John Collins scored a career-high 38 points and had 12 rebounds in visiting Atlanta's victory over Golden State.

Andrew Wiggins scored 29 points for the Warriors in their fourth straight defeat, which also included a 141-119 loss at Sacramento on Thursday night.

**Timberwolves 107, Rockets 101:** Karl-Anthony Towns had 29 points and 16 rebounds, and Juancho Hernangomez added 19 points in host Minnesota's victory over Houston.

**Hornets 110, Heat 105:** Malik Monk scored 32 points, Terry Rozier had 26 points and a career-high 11 assists and Charlotte handed visiting Miami its sixth straight loss.

**Pacers 109, Mavericks 94:** Domantas Sabonis had 22 points and 15 rebounds, Malcolm Brogdon also scored 22 points and Indiana beat host Dallas.

**Lakers 100, Cavaliers 86:** Montrezl Harrell had 24 points and 10 rebounds and the Lakers rallied in the second half to beat visiting Cleveland and snap a four-game losing streak.

# Ovechkin scores twice as Capitals beat Devils

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored twice, Ilya Samsonov made 24 saves and the Washington Capitals rode their best players to a 4-0 victory Friday night and two-game sweep of the New Jersey Devils.

Ovechkin has scored 10 times in his past 10 games and has a team-best 17 goals this season. He's eight shy of Marcel Dionne for fifth on the NHL's career goal list after scoring his 722nd and 723rd and is tied for sixth in the league after putting up just seven in his first 19 games.

Nicklas Backstrom and Connor Sheary also scored.

With Ovechkin rolling, the

Capitals have won nine of their past 10 games and are back atop the East Division. They're tied at 48 points with former coach Barry Trotz's New York Islanders but hold the tiebreaker having played one fewer game.

**Coyotes 5, Sharks 2:** Christian Dvorak scored twice to help host Arizona beat San Jose.

Nick Schmaltz, Dryden Hunt and Phil Kessel also scored for Arizona, and Adin Hill stopped 20 shots. The win moved the Coyotes within two points of St. Louis for fourth place in the West Division.

Tomas Hertl and Patrick Marleau scored for San Jose. Marleau's goal was the 564th of

his career, tying him with Mats Sundin and Joe Nieuwendyk for 23rd in NHL history. Martin Jones stopped 23 shots.

**Ducks 4, Blues 1:** John Gibson made 33 saves in his first game back after missing five with a lower-body injury and visiting Anaheim beat St. Louis.

Sam Steel and Max Jones scored and Derek Grant and Richard Rakell added empty-netters to help the Ducks win for the second time in nine games.

Ryan O'Reilly scored for St. Louis. The Blues have lost three straight and six in a row at home.

**Jets 3, Flames 2:** Paul Stastny had a goal and an assist as

visiting Winnipeg held on to beat Calgary in the first of three straight games between the teams.

Blake Wheeler and Kyle Connor also had a goal and an assist for Winnipeg. Connor Hellebuyck stopped 25 shots to win in his league-leading 27th start of the season.

Milan Lucic and Matthew Tkachuk scored in a fourth straight loss for the Flames. Jacob Markstrom finished with 26 saves.

The Flames have totaled four goals in their last four games. Calgary is 4-5-0 since Darryl Sutter took over as head coach March 8.