

DOD readies new transgender policy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Wednesday was to sweep away Trump-era policies that largely banned transgender people from serving in the military, issuing new rules that offer them wider access to medical care and assistance with gender transition, defense officials told The Associated Press.

The new department regulations allow transgender people who meet military standards to enlist and serve openly in their self-identified gender, and they will be able to get medically necessary transition-related care authorized by law, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal decisions not yet made public.

The changes come after a two-month Pentagon review aimed at developing guidelines for the new policy, which was announced by President Joe Biden just days after he took office in January.

Biden's executive order overturned the Trump policy and immediately prohibited any service member from being forced out of the military on the basis of gender identity. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin then

gave the Pentagon two months to finalize the more detailed regulations that the military services will follow.

The new rules also prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. Their expected release Wednesday coincided with International Transgender Day of Visibility.

Austin has also called for a reexamination of the records of service members who were discharged or denied reenlistment because of gender identity issues under the previous policy. Results of that review have not been released.

Until a few years ago, service members could be discharged from the military for being transgender, but that changed during the Obama administration. In 2016, the Pentagon announced that transgender people already serving in the military would be allowed to serve openly, and that by July 2017, they would be allowed to enlist.

After Donald Trump took office, however, his administration delayed the enlistment date and called for additional study. A few weeks later, Trump caught military leaders by surprise, tweeting that the government wouldn't accept or allow transgen-

der people to serve "in any capacity" in the military.

After a lengthy and complicated legal battle and additional reviews, the Defense Department in April 2019 approved a policy that fell short of an all-out ban but barred transgender troops and recruits from transitioning to another sex and required most individuals to serve in what the administration called their "birth gender."

Under that policy, currently serving transgender troops and anyone who had signed an enlistment contract before the effective date could continue with plans for hormone treatments and gender transition if they had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria.

But after that date, no one with gender dysphoria who was taking hormones or had transitioned to another gender was allowed to enlist. Troops that were already serving and were diagnosed with gender dysphoria were required to serve in the gender assigned at birth and were barred from taking hormones or getting transition surgery.

The new policies being released Wednesday are similar to those developed in 2016.

Study finds military spouses hit hard by job losses

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — More than 40% of working military spouses reported losing their jobs during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, impacting a population that already faced an unemployment rate six times higher than the national average, according to an annual survey.

"This has been a devastating period for military spouse employment," said Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO and board president of Blue Star Families, a nonprofit that conducts research and advocates on behalf of military families.

The group's report on its annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey released Tuesday found that during the pandemic, about 42% of working spouses reported they lost their jobs, with the most common reason being a

furlough or layoff. The pre-pandemic unemployment rate for military spouses was about 24% and the civilian unemployment rate was 3.5% in February 2020, the month before coronavirus began shutting down America, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Additionally, 47% of military spouses had to reduce their work hours, primarily to care for children who were now either home from child care or attending school virtually.

"We're seeing military spouses leave the workforce at higher rates than other demographic groups," said Shelley Kimball, senior director of research and program evaluation at Military Family Advisory Network, who participated in a virtual discussion Tuesday of the survey results. "Very often it's because all of these competing pressures become too much and they just

think, 'I'm going to wait it out.' That's a huge decision with long-lasting career and financial implications that affects the whole family."

Conducted every year since 2009, this year's survey solicited responses in September and October, receiving input from nearly 11,000 service members, veterans and their spouses. The group's report included more than a dozen recommendations for the Defense Department and lawmakers that focused on addressing discrimination, potential barriers for retaining service members and improving the financial standing of military families.

The survey also found that 51% of active-duty spouse respondents agreed their military affiliation prevented them from receiving a promotion at some point in their career, compared to only 16% of veterans.

US nuclear weapons lack spare parts

McClatchy Washington Bureau

MINOT AIR FORCE BASE, N.D. — When hundreds of land-based nuclear armed ballistic missiles were first lowered into underground cement silos spread across the vast cornfields here in 1970, the weapons were only intended to last a decade before a newer system came in.

Fifty years later, these missiles — called the Minuteman III — are still on alert, manned by members of the U.S. Air Force in teams of two who spend 24 hours straight below ground in front of analog terminals from the 1980s, decoding messages and running tests on the missiles' systems to check if they could still launch if needed.

But it's not the age of weapons or the decades-old technology that troubles their operators. It's that the original manufacturers who supplied the gears, tubes and other materials to fix those systems are long gone.

To make repairs, airmen are often forced to take parts from another machine. Two of the airmen at Minot told McClatchy that the facility's missile guidance system often needs parts or attention because of constant wear and tear.

The price to modernize

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Mark Milley and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will seek billions to keep the 50-year-old land based missiles running while a debate begins on whether they should be re-

placed.

It's a difficult ask: At the same time, the Pentagon is also in the middle of the most expensive nuclear modernization effort in its history.

All three legs of the nuclear triad — air, land and sea defenses launched from silos, overhead strategic bombers or nuclear submarines — are getting replaced with newer weapons systems simultaneously.

The next-generation replacement bombers, missiles and submarines now under development have a price tag topping \$400 billion and are expected to be a primary topic of questioning during hearings as lawmakers debate whether modernizing all three legs is necessary.

Kansas City complex

Due to the high cost of developing brand-new weapons, the default for the military has often been keeping the existing nuclear missiles running for a few additional years.

All of the repair and life extension work for nuclear missiles or bombs is handled at just a few offsite locations across the United States. All of the non-nuclear parts of any of the warheads rely on just one place, the Department of Energy's Kansas City National Security Campus.

"There are no backup places," said Lisa Gordon-Hagerty, the former head of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration, which is responsible for

maintaining the nation's nuclear stockpile. That means there isn't a way to quickly obtain spares in an emergency, she added.

The non-nuclear components that are produced at the Kansas City facility include items as basic as wiring or bolts, and as complex as the weapon's firing system. They make up more than 80% of each weapon, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Milley's message

To prepare for upcoming congressional hearings on the defense budget, Milley went to Minot.

He climbed inside a B-52 Stratofortress that's been flying since 1960 to talk to the crew and ask them what upgrades would help their missions. The UH-1N Huey that carried him to the missile silo has been in service since 1969.

"We're moving into a period where the engineering lifespan of these systems is nearing its end," Milley said. And until, unless we have something better come along, I think we need to update and modernize the one we have."

As he departed the launch facility, Milley took a marker to write a message to the missileers. It's a place near the exit where crews who have completed their tours and visiting defense leaders have also scribbled notes.

"Every day there is no nuke war, you won," Milley wrote.

2 JBLM soldiers arrested in pizza delivery driver robbery

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Two Joint Base Lewis-McChord soldiers were arrested Sunday in Olympia, Wash., after using handguns and a knife to rob a pizza delivery driver and force him into the backseat of a vehicle, according to local police.

Pfcs. Daniel Cano-Real, 19, and John Medina, 20, are charged with first-degree robbery and kidnapping and were listed Tuesday as inmates at Thurston County Jail with bond set at \$150,000.

Officers with the Olympia Police Department pulled over a ve-

hicle at about 12:45 a.m. Sunday for driving the wrong way on a one-way street in the downtown of Olympia to find the two soldiers and a 19-year-old man inside, said Lt. Paul Lower, a police spokesman. One soldier was driving with a Domino's pizza box sitting in the passenger seat. The other soldier was in the backseat with a man wearing a Domino's T-shirt.

"The driver was being almost overly friendly, but wouldn't make eye contact," Lower said. "The two back passengers wouldn't make eye contact."

The patrol officer called for another officer to come to the scene. From the passenger side of the car, the second officer noticed the man in the Domino's shirt had his hands bound by a zip tie, so the police asked everyone to get out of the car, Lower said.

Once police separated the men, the delivery driver "broke down and said he had been kidnapped," Lower said. A search of the vehicle found handguns and a knife.

Further investigation revealed the two soldiers, both armed with a handgun, accosted the driver

after he made a pizza delivery at a residence and stole his money. They then forced him into the backseat of their vehicle while one of the soldiers drove the delivery driver's car into a ditch.

The people who received the pizza observed the car crash, as well as someone fleeing the scene, and they called police, Lower said.

The soldiers serve as artillery mechanics in the 593rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, said Lt. Col. Neil Penttila, spokesman for the base.

Biden plans to tax firms to improve infrastructure

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden wants \$2 trillion to reengineer America's infrastructure and expects the nation's corporations to pay for it.

The president traveled to Pittsburgh on Wednesday to unveil what would be a hard-hatted transformation of the U.S. economy as grand in scale as the New Deal or Great Society programs that shaped the 20th century.

White House officials said the spending over eight years would generate millions of new jobs as the country shifts away from fossil fuels and combats the perils of climate change. It is also an effort to compete against the technology and public investments made by China, the world's second-

largest economy and fast gaining on the United States' dominant position.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the plan is "about making an investment in America — not just modernizing our roads or railways or bridges but building an infrastructure of the future."

Biden's choice of Pittsburgh for unveiling the plan carries important economic and political resonance. He not only won Pittsburgh and its surrounding county to help secure the presidency, but he launched his campaign there in 2019. The city famed for steel mills that powered America's industrial rise has steadily pivoted toward technology and health care, drawing in college graduates from western Pennsylvania in a

sign of how economies can change.

The Democratic president's infrastructure projects would be financed by higher corporate taxes — a trade-off that could lead to fierce resistance from the business community and thwart any attempts to work with Republican lawmakers. Biden hopes to pass an infrastructure plan by summer, which could mean relying solely on the slim Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate.

The White House said the largest chunk of the proposal includes \$621 billion for roads, bridges, public transit, electric vehicle charging stations and other transportation infrastructure. The spending would push the country away from internal

combustion engines that the auto industry views as an increasingly antiquated technology.

Another \$111 billion would go to replace lead water pipes and upgrade sewers. Broadband internet would blanket the country for \$100 billion. Separately, \$100 billion would upgrade the power grid to deliver clean electricity. Homes would get retrofitted, schools modernized, workers trained and hospitals renovated under the plan, which also seeks to strengthen U.S. manufacturing.

The new construction could keep the economy running hot, coming on the heels of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package — economists already estimate it could push growth above 6% this year.

GOP Rep. Gaetz investigated for alleged sexual relationship

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz, a prominent conservative in Congress and a close ally of former President Donald Trump, said Tuesday that he is being investigated by the Justice Department over a former relationship but denied any criminal wrongdoing.

Gaetz, who represents parts of western Florida, is accused of having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a 17-year-old girl and paying her to travel with him, and he is under investigation to determine if he violated federal sex trafficking laws, a person familiar with the case told The Associated Press.

The probe has been underway for nearly a year and Gaetz has been aware for months that he was under investigation, the person said. The Justice Department has also been looking into whether Gaetz, 38, may have also been involved in relationships with other underage girls, the person said.

The person could not publicly discuss the details of an ongoing investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Gaetz told Axios that his lawyers were informed that he was the subject of an investigation "regarding sexual conduct with wom-

en" but that he was not a target of the probe. He denied that he ever had a relationship with any underage girls and said the allegations against him were "as searing as they are false."

A subject is conventionally thought of as someone whose actions fall within the scope of a criminal investigation, whereas a target is someone whom prosecutors have gathered evidence linking to a crime. But during the course of an investigation, a subject can become a target.

Gaetz's comments came shortly after The New York Times first reported the investigation. It is a federal crime to transport a minor over state lines for sex.

Gaetz said that the allegations were part of an extortion plot by a former Justice Department official.

"Over the past several weeks, my family and I have been victims of an organized criminal extortion involving a former DOJ official seeking \$25 million while threatening to smear my name," Gaetz said in a statement.

Gaetz said his family has been cooperating with the FBI and said his father was wearing a recording device, at the FBI's direction, "to catch these criminals." He demanded the Justice Department release the recordings.

Suspect arrested in attack on Asian American woman

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A parolee convicted of killing his mother nearly two decades ago was arrested on charges including felony assault as a hate crime for attacking an Asian American woman near New York City's Times Square, police said early Wednesday.

Police said Brandon Elliot, 38, is the man seen on video kicking and stomping the woman Monday. They said Elliot was living at a hotel that serves as a homeless shelter a few blocks from the scene of the attack.

Elliot, who is Black, was convicted of stabbing his mother to death in the Bronx in 2002, when he was 19. He was released from prison in 2019 and is on lifetime parole.

He faces charges of assault as a hate crime, attempted assault as a hate crime, assault and attempted assault in Monday's attack, police said.

The victim was identified as Vilma Kari, a 65-year-old woman who emigrated from the Philippines, her daughter told The New York Times. She was discharged from the hospital Tuesday after being treated for serious injuries, a hospital spokesperson said.

Witnesses: Crowd angrier as Floyd stopped moving

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Onlookers grew increasingly angry as they begged Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin to take his knee off George Floyd's neck, but Chauvin would not let up, and another officer forced back members of the crowd who tried to intervene, witnesses testified Tuesday at Chauvin's murder trial.

Witness after witness described how Chauvin was unmoved by their pleas, with the teenager who shot the harrowing video of the arrest that set off nationwide protests testifying that the officer gave the crowd a "cold" and "heartless" stare.

"He didn't care. It seemed as if he didn't care what we were saying," said Darnella Frazier, 18, one of several witnesses who testified through tears.

Chauvin continued to kneel on Floyd while fellow Officer

Tou Thao held the crowd of about 15 back, even when one of the onlookers identified herself as a firefighter and pleaded repeatedly to check Floyd's pulse, according to witnesses and bystander video.

"They definitely put their hands on the Mace, and we all pulled back," Frazier told the jury.

The firefighter, Genevieve Hansen, wept on the witness stand as she recalled how she was not allowed to give any medical assistance or tell the police what to do, such as administering chest compressions.

"There was a man being killed," said Hansen, who testified in her dress uniform and detailed her emergency medical technician training. "I would have been able to provide medical attention to the best of my abilities. And this human was denied that right."

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter, accused of killing Floyd last May by pinning the 46-year-old handcuffed Black man to the pavement for what prosecutors said was 9 minutes, 29 seconds. Floyd was arrested after being accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store.

Floyd's death, along with the bystander video of him pleading that he couldn't breathe, triggered sometimes-violent protests around the world and a reckoning over racism and police brutality across the U.S.

The most serious charge against the now-fired white officer carries up to 40 years in prison.

The defense has argued that Chauvin did what his training told him to do and that Floyd's death was not caused by the officer but by a combination of illegal drug use, heart disease, high

blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body.

On Tuesday, the prosecution asked multiple witnesses to describe their horror at what they saw, buttressing the testimony with multiple videos, some of which had never been seen before. Many testified about feelings of helplessness and guilt as Floyd gasped for air, pleaded for his life and finally fell limp and silent, his eyes rolling back in his head.

The testimony was apparently aimed at showing that Chauvin had multiple opportunities to think about what he was doing and change course.

But Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson also sought to portray the onlookers as angry and agitated, in an apparent attempt to show that the crowd posed a potential threat to police that might have distracted them during their encounter with Floyd.

Pfizer says vaccine helps younger teens as well

Associated Press

Pfizer announced Wednesday that its COVID-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12, a step toward possibly beginning shots in this age group before they head back to school in the fall.

Most COVID-19 vaccines being rolled out worldwide are for adults, who are at higher risk from the coronavirus. Pfizer's vaccine is authorized for ages 16 and older. But vaccinating children of all ages will be critical to stopping the pandemic — and helping schools, at least the upper grades, start to look a little more normal after months of disruption.

In a study of 2,260 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents compared to 18 among those given dummy shots,

Pfizer reported.

It's a small study that hasn't yet been published, so another important piece of evidence is how well the shots revved up the kids' immune systems. Researchers reported high levels of virus-fighting antibodies, somewhat higher than were seen in studies of young adults.

Kids had side effects similar to young adults, the company said. The main side effects are pain, fever, chills and fatigue, particularly after the second dose. The study will continue to track participants for two years for more information about long-term protection and safety.

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech in the coming weeks plan to ask the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and European regulators to allow emergency use of the shots starting at age 12.

Air Force civilian barred from base over allegations

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

A civilian employee for Air Force Materiel Command has been barred from his workplace over allegations that he voiced support for violence against the U.S. government, a service spokesman said Tuesday.

The civilian is "currently barred from entering the installation where he is employed for supporting violent behavior against the U.S. government," said Derek Kaufman a spokesman for AFMC, which is based at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. Kaufman declined to name the individual or the installation where he was employed.

Air Force officials included the allegations against the man as part of a presentation that they compiled to guide airmen through the ongoing Pentagon-

mandated stand-down to address the threat of extremism within the ranks. An Air Force official confirmed the case was among several examples of extremism mentioned in training slides issued last month.

The slide alleged the man identified himself as a member of the far-right Proud Boys group and threatened to join in civil war against the federal government in the wake of the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump, which included members of the Proud Boys.

Kaufman declined to discuss the individual further, citing privacy and other concerns. He declined to say Tuesday whether an investigation into the civilian had been launched or whether the individual was still employed by the Air Force.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man's nose gets bitten off during fight

ID POCATELLO — Police in eastern Idaho said a man had his nose bitten off during a bar fight last weekend.

The Pocatello Police Department responded to the fight at the Odyssey Bar, the Idaho State Journal reported. The fight happened after two Pocatello men got into an argument at a birthday party celebration inside the bar, police said. The argument moved outside the building, where it reportedly turned physical.

Police said one man was pinned on the ground and being punched in the face when he grabbed the puncher's head and bit off his nose. Someone at the bar retrieved the nose and put it on ice so it could be reattached, police said.

Hospital workers told police that the severed nose could be reattached, but an update on the man's condition was not available.

Man drove his friend to hospital in stolen loader

NE LINCOLN — A Nebraska man could face several charges after allegedly driving his friend to a hospital in the bucket of a front-end loader.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported the 32-year-old suspect allegedly stole the huge \$75,000 front-end loader and showed up at a Lincoln hospital with a 40-year-old man riding in the bucket. The man told police he did it because the man was injured. There were no immediate details about the man's injuries.

Police said in addition to stealing the machine, the driver was intoxicated and blocked an ambulance bay.

Police arrested the man on suspicion of felony theft, fourth-offense driving under the influence and driving with a revoked license.

Man in court on food tampering charges

ME PORTLAND — A New Hampshire man accused of putting razor blades in supermarket pizza dough, leading to a nationwide recall, made his first court appearance since being charged with federal crimes.

Nicholas Mitchell, 39, of Dover, N.H., made a video appearance before a federal magistrate in which he pleaded not guilty to two federal counts of tampering with a consumer product.

Mitchell was arrested in October 2020 after razor blades were found in pizza dough sold at a Hannaford supermarket in Saco, Maine. Product tampering also occurred at Hannaford stores in Sanford, Maine, and Dover, N.H.

The tampering led to a recall of the dough at Hannaford stores in five states. The recall later extended to Shaw's and Star Markets.

Off-duty firefighter gets bee swarm to buzz off

NM LAS CRUCES — A Las Cruces firefighter who is also a beekeeper is credited with safely removing a swarm of bees found inside a parked car.

City of Las Cruces spokesman

Dan Trujillo said the incident occurred outside an Albertson's supermarket.

A shopper had put his groceries in his car and was about to drive when he spotted the swarm in the backseat. Firefighters were called and secured the area. Trujillo said crews decided to call on Jesse Johnson, an off-duty firefighter with beekeeping experience.

Johnson arrived with proper beekeeping attire as well as tools and was able to remove the bees. The whole process took about two hours.

Woman accuses police of improperly selling car

MS JACKSON — A woman said that the Jackson police department sold her car last year after it had been held as part of a shooting investigation when they should have returned it to her.

Tonya Hughes told WLBT that she let her godson use the car in August of 2017, and it was later involved in a shooting. City Council member Kenneth Stokes said someone drove up and opened fire on the vehicle and wounded her godson.

Hughes said the police told her that they needed the vehicle as part of the investigation, the station reported, but that it would be returned to her after the investigation was completed. But she said the police told her it was sold at auction last year.

Lawmakers mull sinking ferry to save money

AK ANCHORAGE — Alaska lawmakers are contemplating sinking a fer-

ry to save money.

Members of the Alaska Legislature are considering turning the ferry Malaspina into an artificial reef, the Anchorage Daily News reported. The ship is one of the oldest of the state's eight ferries.

The Malaspina has been tied down since 2019 because of a lack of funding, but it still costs the state about \$450,000 in maintenance per year.

Sinking the ship as an artificial reef could cost between \$500,000 and \$1 million, but may make long-term financial sense, said state Department of Transportation Deputy Commissioner Rob Carpenter.

Lighthouse closed for two years to do repairs

NC HARKERS ISLAND — The Cape Lookout Lighthouse in North Carolina will be closed for two years while repairs are made to the iconic structure, the National Park Service said.

The 163-foot tall lighthouse at Cape Lookout National Seashore was built between 1857 and 1859. It has undergone numerous repairs and upgrades over the years, but during an inspection in February, engineers discovered serious safety concerns, including cracks in iron landing plates as well as separations between the iron stairs and masonry.

As a result of the safety concerns, the lighthouse will not be open for climbing this season. The Cape Lookout Lighthouse Keepers Quarters Museum, located near the base of the lighthouse, will remain open to visitors.

— From wire reports



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MLB season opens amid hope for better days

The Washington Post

By mid-March, after most teams had gotten used to the coronavirus protocols and made their first rounds of cuts, Alex Cora's face already betrayed the unusual wear and tear of managing in these times.

For Cora, this Major League Baseball season is particularly complicated. He was fired as manager of the Boston Red Sox after his role in the Houston Astros' sign-stealing scandal became clear and he was suspended for the 2020 regular season and postseason. Boston rehired him in November, stirring further conversation about what forgiveness and redemption look like in a sport trying to answer a long list of uncomfortable questions.

Faith in industry leaders has been shaken by revelations about sexual harassment and the culture that facilitates it. Hopes for avoiding another devastating work stoppage have been destabilized by widespread mistrust among players, owners and MLB. Concerns about sustaining the game's appeal linger as three true outcomes — the strikeout, the walk and the home run — dominate a sport beloved for the way unpredictability mixes with routine.

On early spring mornings, sticky August afternoons and

frigid late October evenings, survival in baseball is about quiet endurance, dogged compartmentalization and a willingness to wear even the unseemly effects of adversity as badges of honor.

But everyone is sporting bigger, shinier badges this year. Owners lost revenue. Young players lost a year of minor league games. Veterans lost a chance at milestones. Front offices lost reliable data upon which to make decisions because the 60 disjointed games teams did play last year were held in such unusually unstable circumstances that many executives have said they aren't sure how much that sample can predict future behavior.

At the same time, MLB and the players' union are on course for an ugly collision when the collective bargaining agreement expires in December. Fans are facing a few more months of limited opportunities to sit in ballparks, even as many players are reveling in the notion of having any fans at all on Opening Day. And everyone who loves the sport lost their sense of certainty, no longer assured that no matter what happens, baseball is the constant.

In 2021, the Dodgers will try to end any discussion about the legitimacy of their short-season title by winning another one.

They have sudden rivals in the San Diego Padres, who acquired elite starters on back-to-back days and obliterated off-season norms by giving a 14-year contract to 22-year-old shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr. — the kind of dynamic young star who could help increase the sport's popularity.

Meanwhile, on the other coast, the National League East is promising a fascinating race as the under-new-ownership New York Mets, the ascending Atlanta Braves, the talented Philadelphia Phillies, the pitching-heavy Washington Nationals and the upstart Miami Marlins combine to make the division five could-be playoff teams deep.

That division is the exception to the norm because several small-market teams seem to be counting pennies instead of wins again — a pattern that frustrates players and big-market teams that subsidize their spending through revenue sharing. Although little data is publicly available to show how much money teams lost to the pandemic-shortened season, everyone made less than they planned.

Some teams held back in their spending as a result. The Tampa Bay Rays, as maddening for their unwillingness to pay up for homegrown stars as

for their ability to keep winning without them, traded away the man who started Game 6 of the World Series for them, Blake Snell, and let another key starter, Charlie Morton, depart in free agency.

Others, such as the Padres and Dodgers, saw a chance to leapfrog more conservative competition. A year after winning the World Series with a team aided by its extensive starting pitching depth, the Dodgers committed a record \$40 million to reigning National League Cy Young Award winner Trevor Bauer. They enter this season as early favorites to repeat as champions, a feat no team has achieved since the Yankees compiled three straight titles from 1998 to 2000.

While MLB wanted to delay the season at least a month until coronavirus case numbers fell further across the country, the union's argument — that the relative success of the 2020 season proved MLB could proceed on its usual schedule — feels prescient, at least early on. On Friday, MLB had seen 17 positive tests out of 72,751 conducted, a 0.02% positive rate. On Saturday, Red Sox reliever Matt Barnes tested positive for the coronavirus, sending Boston into a flurry of contact tracing and crossed fingers, a reminder of how fragile the stability will be.

NFL owners approve expanding to 17-game season

Associated Press

The NFL is increasing the regular season to 17 games and planning to have full stadiums for those games.

While reducing the preseason to three games, the league will be able to generate additional revenue, of course. America's most popular sport also will provide more content for the broadcast partners who soon will be spending a total of about \$10 billion a year on

rights fees.

Team owners at a virtual meeting Tuesday approved the 17th game as expected, marking the first time in 43 years the regular season has been increased. It went from 14 to 16 games in 1978.

The Super Bowl now will move back a week to Feb. 13, which places it directly in the middle of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Coincidentally, NBC has the broadcast rights to both.

Each extra NFL game will be an interconference matchup based on where teams finished in the previous season. AFC teams will be hosting the 17th game in 2021.

Beyond next season, the league plans for some of the extra games to be played at international sites, with regular hosts London and Mexico City possibly joined by other venues.

"This is a monumental moment in NFL history," NFL

Commissioner Roger Goodell said. "The CBA with the players and the recently completed media agreements provide the foundation for us to enhance the quality of the NFL experience for our fans. And one of the benefits of each team playing 17 regular-season games is the ability for us to continue to grow our game around the world."

Some players have voiced their unhappiness with the expanded regular season.

Unbeaten Zags, UCLA reach Final Four

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Can anybody stop these guys?

For the 30th straight time this season, Gonzaga answered that question with a resounding “No.”

The Bulldogs got on a roll and put on a show, cruising into the Final Four with an 85-66 beatdown of a Southern California team that was nowhere near ready for what it ran into Tuesday night.

Drew Timme had 23 points and five rebounds and, after one dunk, pretended to slick down his handlebar mustache for the few thousand fans in the stands.

“This is a really, really big deal,” coach Mark Few said of the program’s return to the Final Four after a four-year hiatus. “And Zags know how to celebrate, OK?”

The top-seeded and top-ranked Bulldogs (30-0) will be the third team to bring an undefeated record into the Final Four since the bracket expanded to 64 teams in 1985. The last team to go undefeated was Indiana in 1976. On Saturday in the national semifinals, Gonzaga will face 11th-seeded UCLA, which beat Michigan 51-49 in a later Elite Eight game.

In the early contest, Timme did whatever he wanted against the nation’s fourth-

ranked defense — a team that won its first three tournament games by an average of 21 points — as did pretty much everyone else in a white uniform.

Jalen Suggs finished with 18 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists. All-American Corey Kispert had 18 points and eight boards on an “off” night — only 6-for-19 from the floor. The Bulldogs shot 44% in the second half and “only” 50% for the game. That was five under their nation-leading average, but it didn’t matter much.

“We just tried to stay moving,” Suggs said about attacking the Trojans’ zone, which had been shutting down teams all month in Indy. “We didn’t let the ball get too sticky. We kept moving, flashing into the high post. It was a lot for them to deal with — good cuts off the baseline, vertical cuts off the wings.”

This had the feel of a Globetrotters game at times, filled with fancy bounce passes through traffic, reverse layups, a swooping power dunk from Joel Ayayi (nine points) and the occasional post-basket flex from the 6-foot-10 Timme.

Gonzaga led sixth-seeded USC 7-0 after two minutes, 25-8 after 8:30 and 36-15 after Kispert took a nifty dish from Timme for an easy layup with 6:03 left in the half.

UCLA 51, Michigan 49: UCLA has made more trips to the Final Four than any pro-

gram but North Carolina.

None of the 18 was more surprising than this one.

After sneaking into the NCAA Tournament off four straight losses, and barely surviving Michigan State in their First Four game, the Bruins took down top-seeded Michigan on Tuesday night to continue a run for the ages.

Johnny Juzang poured in 28 points while playing most of the second half on a hurt ankle, and coach Mick Cronin’s bunch of stubborn overachievers survived a set of nail-biting misses by the Wolverines in the final seconds for a victory that made UCLA only the fifth No. 11 seed to reach the national semifinals.

“These guys get all the credit,” said Cronin, who had never been to the Elite Eight in 18 years as a college head coach, much less the Final Four. “Unbelievable heart, toughness. Nobody picked us. Nobody believed in us. That’s how we like it.”

They’ll be big underdogs again Saturday night: Overall No. 1 seed Gonzaga is up next.

Michigan (23-5) missed its final eight shots, including a three-pointer by Mike Smith with a couple of seconds left and another by Franz Wagner at the buzzer, sending the Bruins (22-9) flying off the bench in a wild celebration.

South Carolina women run away from Texas

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Zia Cooke scored 16 points and South Carolina used its stifling defense to advance to the Final Four for the third time, shutting down Texas for a 62-34 victory Tuesday night.

Top-seeded South Carolina blocked 14 shots, nine by Laetitia Amihere, and held No. 6 Texas to 23% shooting. The Longhorns were outscored 10-0 in the fourth quarter.

Destanni Henderson and Victoria Saxton each scored 12 for the Gamecocks, and Amihere also had 10 points and eight rebounds.

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley ran her championship game record against Texas’ Vic

Schaefer to 6-0, dating to when they faced each other in the SEC when Schaefer was at Mississippi State. That includes beating Schaefer in the 2017 national final.

The Gamecocks (26-4) won the Hemisfair Region to advance to Friday’s national semifinal against No. 1 Stanford.

South Carolina ran out to a 19-point lead in the third quarter, then responded to a Longhorns run with a burst started by a three-pointer from Henderson.

Schaefer took the Texas job in April 2020 and coaxed an impressive postseason run out of the Longhorns behind a grinding defense that carried the school to the brink of its first women’s Final Four since 2003.

Texas was playing to be just

the third No. 6 seed to make the Final Four since Notre Dame in 1997.

But the Longhorns looked tired after tough wins over UCLA and Maryland and may have simply been worn out by the time they matched up with the big and quick Gamecocks, who pressured the ball on the perimeter and denied shots inside.

Audrey Warren led Texas (21-10) with 13 points.

Stanford 78, Louisville 63: Lexie Hull scored 21 points and the Cardinal reached the Final Four by rallying late.

Next up for the top-seeded Stanford is South Carolina on Friday night in a rematch of the 2017 national semifinals. The Cardinal dropped that one 62-

53, ending its previous appearance in the Final Four. UConn and Arizona meet in the other national semifinal.

Stanford (29-2) trailed by 12 midway through the third quarter before scoring 13 consecutive points to take its first lead since early in the game. The teams traded baskets the rest of the period and No 2 seed Louisville (26-4) was up 50-48 heading into the final quarter.

The Cardinal scored the first 10 points of the fourth to go up 58-50. That run was capped by Kiana Williams’ three-pointer. The San Antonio native had a rough start to the game, missing 11 of her first 12 shots. She finally got going offensively, hitting four shots in a row to help Stanford build its lead.

Oilers blanked by Canadiens, Price

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Brendan Gallagher and Artturi Lehkonen each had a goal and an assist and the Montreal Canadiens returned from a lengthy break and beat the Edmonton Oilers 4-0 on Tuesday night.

Montreal was playing for the first time since a 5-4 home shootout victory over the Vancouver Canucks on March 20. Two days later, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Joel Armia went on the NHL's COVID list. As a result, the Canadiens had four games postponed — three with Edmonton and another against Ottawa.

"I think we knew we were going to have energy," Montreal captain Shea Weber said. "Obviously rest is key, especially in a season like this where it's tough to get rest."

"We just harped on the little things like keeping it simple, especially early on trying to get back into it."

With a revised schedule, the Canadiens play their remaining 24 games in 42 days. Kotkaniemi was removed from the COVID list Monday and scored Tuesday. Armia remains sidelined.

Tomas Tatar also scored for Montreal (15-8-9). Carey Price stopped 16 shots for the shutout, his first of the season and the 49th of his career.

"Breaks are hard to come by in a season like this," Weber said. "Ask us in a month how we're going to feel playing every second night and back-to-backs."

"It's going to be a lot different story."

Connor McDavid had a goal disallowed for the Oilers (22-14-1), who were coming off a 3-2 overtime road win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday night. McDavid had his 11-game point streak (seven goals, 16 assists) snapped, yet still leads the NHL in scoring with 63 points (21 goals, 42 assists).

Rangers 5, Capitals 2: Artemi Panarin had a goal and two assists and host New York scored five unanswered goals to beat Washington.

Panthers 4, Red Wings 1: Carter Verhaeghe scored two goals to lift host Florida over Detroit.

Blue Jackets 3, Lightning 1: David Savard scored his first goal in two years and Columbus won at Tampa Bay.

Bruins 5, Devils 4 (SO): Charlie Coyle and David Pastrnak scored in the shootout, and Boston rallied to beat visiting New Jersey.

Blackhawks 2, Hurricanes 1: Dylan Strome and Alex DeBrincat scored in a 3:33 span early in the second period, Kevin Lankinen made 31 saves and host Chicago beat Carolina.

Predators 3, Stars 2 (OT): Eeli Tolvanen scored at 1:29 of overtime to give host Nashville a victory over Dallas.

Murray, Porter lead Nuggets past slow-starting 76ers

Associated Press

DENVER — Jamal Murray scored 30 points, Michael Porter Jr. added 27 and the Denver Nuggets raced out to a 25-point lead on their way to a 104-95 win over the slow-starting Philadelphia 76ers on Tuesday night.

Nikola Jokic added 21 points for the Nuggets, who played in front of a home crowd for the first time since the pandemic shut down the 2019-20 season in mid-March of last year.

"They made all the difference in the world for us," Murray said. "It was just good to have them back in the building."

Especially after the 76ers' backups made a late run to turn the blowout into a contest.

"We thought it was going to be easy," Jokic said after the Nuggets jumped out to a 44-22 lead after one quarter but watched Philadelphia's second-teamers chip away in the second half.

Reserve Tyrese Maxey led the Sixers with 13 points, all in the fourth quarter.

The much-anticipated match-

up between East-leading Philadelphia and rejuvenated Denver, which made the biggest headlines at the trade deadline with the additions of Aaron Gordon and JaVale McGee, quickly fizzled with the Nuggets' first-quarter flourish.

Before they took a 68-45 lead into the locker room, Jokic stepped up to the free throw line and was met by chants of "MVP! MVP! MVP!" from the first crowd at Ball Arena since the pandemic shut down the 2019-20 season more than a year ago.

The crowd consisted of employees of Kroenke Sports and Entertainment and health care professionals who have been on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19.

Denver coach Michael Malone welcomed the rowdies back to the arena formerly known as the Pepsi Center, normally one of the loudest venues in the NBA. He said he was glad to have family watch them in person for the first time since last March.

"The fact that we are inviting

front-line workers is a tremendous gesture," Malone said with a shoutout to the work "these frontline workers have been doing on a daily basis to help fight COVID and all the damage it has inflicted upon us as a city, a state, a country and all across the world."

The 76ers' backups closed the third quarter on a 10-2 run and kept up the pressure in the fourth.

"Well, the positive is that the clock finally expired," Philadelphia coach Doc Rivers said. "That was one very good positive, because I was hoping they would do the AAU rules and just keep the clock (running). I thought we should have had a running clock from the first quarter on."

Hornets 114, Wizards 104: Terry Rozier scored 27 points, Gordon Hayward had 26 points and a season-high 11 rebounds and Charlotte won at Washington.

The Hornets have won four of five after losing Rookie of the Year favorite La Melo Ball to a

fractured right wrist.

The Wizards (17-29) played without NBA leading scorer Bradley Beal for the second straight game due to a bruised right hip. Rui Hachimura tied his career high with 30 points for Washington.

Devonte' Graham scored 17 points and Cody Zeller had 16 points and 13 rebounds for the Hornets, who have won four of five.

Magic 103, Clippers 96: Chuma Okeke scored 18 points and visiting Orlando rallied in the fourth quarter to snap host Los Angeles' six-game winning streak.

The Magic didn't have the lead until late in the fourth quarter and went on a 17-3 run to close the game.

Suns 117, Hawks 110: Devin Booker scored 21 points, Dario Saric added 20 and Phoenix held on in the final minutes to beat visiting Atlanta.

The Suns have won six of their past seven games, while the Hawks have dropped four of five.