

Navy is under fire after watchdog report

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Members of the House Armed Services Committee on Thursday questioned the culture and readiness of the Navy's surface fleet after a government watchdog report showed crew shortages, overworked sailors and other issues continue to abound years after several costly disasters.

The report issued by the Government Accountability Office last month found the Navy's maintenance process for ships is plagued by insufficient staffing and equipment, inadequate training, low morale and missing data.

In a hearing with Navy officials, House lawmakers said they were disheartened to read about the same problems that surfaced during investigations of the 2017 crashes of the USS John S. McCain and USS Fitzgerald and the 2020 fire aboard USS Bonhomme Richard. The collisions killed 17 sailors while the fire injured 63 sailors and civilians.

"I worry that the Navy's progress in implementing findings from these accident in-

vestigations might mostly be on paper, and that in practice, they're not translated into lasting change," said Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif. "I'm worried that the surface Navy is not thinking deeply enough about how to change the culture, to evaluate morale and to empower officers and sailors to voice concerns when they see problems."

Adm. William Lescher, vice chief of naval operations, and Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener, commander of the naval surface force in the Pacific Fleet, pointed to several new programs to improve training and maintenance delays but acknowledged challenges and shortcomings.

In 2017, junior officers boarding a ship received 150 hours of training in simulators and now they receive 750 hours, Kitchener said. Every sailor is also now required to enroll in an engineering course.

The Navy is increasingly turning to artificial intelligence technology and data collection to cut down on maintenance delays and reduce the amount of time sailors spend performing maintenance during 67-hour work weeks, Lescher said. For the past year, commanders have tracked every indi-

vidual's proficiency and experience level to fill experience gaps on ships, Kitchener said.

"There is no lack of understanding of the power of data," Lescher said.

Technology is also being harnessed to tackle chronic fatigue. Most sailors sleep five or fewer hours per night, according to the GAO report. Kitchener said the Navy set a goal last year to bring that number to 7.5 hours and is using wearable sleep trackers to document progress.

Data shows sailors are now sleeping about 6 hours per night so "clearly there's a lot more work to be done," Kitchener said.

There is also room for improvement with maintenance, he said. The Navy struggled with continuous maintenance of ships in the past due to requirements that ships be operational but has now established a better balance. However, some problems persist at the naval base in Sasebo, Japan, due to capacity issues, Kitchener said.

"In general, we are not deferring maintenance," he said. "If we do defer any kind of maintenance, that decision is done at the highest level."

Russians take nuclear plant; no radiation after fire

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian troops Friday seized the biggest nuclear power plant in Europe after a middle-of-the-night attack that set it on fire and briefly raised worldwide fears of a catastrophe in the most chilling turn in Moscow's invasion of Ukraine yet.

Firefighters put out the blaze, and no radiation was released, U.N. and Ukrainian officials said, as Russian forces pressed on with their week-old offensive on multiple fronts and the number of refugees fleeing the country topped 1.2 million.

While the vast Russian armored column threatening Kyiv remained stalled outside the capital, President Vladimir Putin's military has launched hundreds of missiles and artillery attacks on cities and other sites around the country, and made significant gains on the ground in the south in an apparent bid to cut off Ukraine's access to the sea.

In the attack on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear

plant in the southeastern city of Enerhodar, the chief of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Mariano Grossi, said a Russian "projectile" hit a training center, not any of its six reactors.

The attack triggered global alarm and fear of a catastrophe that could dwarf the world's worst nuclear disaster, at Ukraine's Chernobyl in 1986. In an emotional nighttime speech, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he feared an explosion that would be "the end for everyone. The end for Europe. The evacuation of Europe."

But nuclear officials from Sweden to China said no radiation spikes had been reported, as did Grossi.

Authorities said that Russian troops had taken control of the overall site but that the plant staff continued to run it. Only one reactor was operating, Grossi said in the aftermath of the attack.

Two people were injured in the fire, Grossi said. Ukraine's state nuclear plant operator

Enerhoatom said three Ukrainian soldiers were killed and two wounded.

The crisis at Zaporizhzhia unfolded after Grossi earlier in the week expressed grave concern that the fighting could cause accidental damage to Ukraine's 15 nuclear reactors at four plants around the country.

Nuclear safety expert Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington said the presence of reactors in the war zone adds a new and highly dangerous dimension to the crisis in Ukraine.

"These plants are now in a situation that few people ever seriously contemplated when they were originally built, and that is the potential that they would be in the middle of a war zone," he said.

In the wake of the attack, Zelenskyy appealed again to the West to enforce a no-fly zone over his country. But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg ruled out that possibility, citing the risk of a much wider war in Europe.

NATO nixes no-fly zone over Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

RZESZOW, Poland — NATO on Friday ruled out setting up a no-fly zone in Ukraine amid concerns of sparking a wider war with Russia, but will consider sharply increasing the number of allied troops deployed to central and Eastern Europe, the alliance's top official said.

As Russia's war on Ukraine enters its second week, calls from Ukraine for more alliance support have been building. Among the requests: a NATO-enforced no-fly zone.

But imposing one in Ukraine, which might have to be enforced by shooting down Russian warplanes, is a step too far for NATO, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said after an emergency meeting at allied headquarters in Brussels.

"We understand the desperation, but also believe if we did that, we'd end up in something that could end up in a full-fledged war in

Europe, involving many more countries," Stoltenberg said.

Ukraine Foreign Minister Kuleba Dmytro participated virtually in Friday's talks, including the debate over a no-fly zone.

"We are not going to move into Ukraine, either on the ground or in the airspace," Stoltenberg added.

However, allies are "seriously considering a significant increase" in troops and air defenses, Stoltenberg said.

The final decision on a long-term force posture change could come at a heads of state summit in June.

Meanwhile, weaponry from NATO states continues to flow into Ukraine in the form of anti-tank Javelins, Stinger missiles, small arms and ammunition, government officials from across the alliance have said.

As talks got underway in Brussels, Stoltenberg and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned Russia's push into Ukraine,

where attacks have intensified and civilians are among the targets.

Blinken also said allies are ready to defend NATO turf if challenged.

"Ours is a defensive alliance. We seek no conflict. But if conflict comes to us, we are ready for it and we will defend every inch of NATO territory," Blinken said.

So far, the Russian military has faced stiff resistance from the Ukrainian military, a force that Russian President Vladimir Putin has underestimated, Stoltenberg said.

Still, the attacks by Russia are expected to get worse in the days ahead with cities under siege and civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, being among the targets, he said.

"The days to come are likely to be worse. With more death, more suffering, and more destruction, as the Russian armed forces bring in heavier weaponry and continue their attacks across the country," Stoltenberg said.

Most of Army's V Corps HQ to deploy to Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

RZESZOW, Poland — The U.S. Army's V Corps will deploy the bulk of its headquarters to Europe to enhance command and control of ground forces as troops continue to deploy to the Continent in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine.

About 300 additional soldiers out of Fort Knox, Ky., are headed to Germany and Poland, where they will help coordinate operations up and down NATO's eastern flank, the Army said in a statement Thursday.

The V Corps troops are among the several thousand that have been ordered by President Joe Biden to take up positions stretching from the Baltics to Poland, Germany and Romania.

"As America's forward deployed corps, we were built for this mission," Lt. Gen. John S. Kolasheski, V Corps commander, said in the statement.

The V Corps main headquarters will complement a forward headquarters based in Poznan, Poland, where the unit already has around 200 soldiers based.

With the recent arrival in Germany of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division from Fort Stewart, Ga., the Army now has three tank brigades in Europe simultaneously.

One of those units, the 1st Armored Brigade out of Fort Riley, Kan., has had its Europe rotation extended because of Russia's war on Ukraine.

V Corps will be tasked with managing the influx of forces as they carry out training missions with allies.

Navy recovers F-35 that sank into South China Sea

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

The Navy has recovered the advanced F-35C Lightning II fighter jet from the bottom of the South China Sea that it lost after a crash aboard an aircraft carrier more than a month ago, service officials announced Thursday.

The stealth jet was lifted Wednesday from a depth of 12,400 feet using a remotely operated diving vehicle and a crane from a diving support construction vessel known as Picasso, according to the 7th Fleet, which is based in Yokosuka, Japan. U.S. officials have said in recent weeks that it was critical to recover the F-35, which crashed Jan. 24 during normal training operations aboard the carrier USS Carl Vinson. Some Pentagon officials worried China would at-

tempt to find the downed fighter before the United States.

Navy Capt. Gareth Healy, who commanded the task force which recovered the plane, said in a statement that his team encountered "unique challenges" to find and recover the jet on "an aggressive and achievable timeline." He credited his team with success in accomplishing that goal in 37 days.

The Navy on Thursday released photos of the wrecked \$103 million plane that showed aircraft sitting on Picasso's deck wrapped in a protective covering after it was hoisted from the sea. The service said the plane would be taken to an unnamed nearby military facility for evaluation. Officials plan eventually to return it to the United States, according to 7th Fleet.

States left with stockpile as vaccine demand drops

Associated Press

As demand for COVID-19 vaccines collapses in many areas of the U.S., states are scrambling to use stockpiles of doses before they expire and have to be added to the millions that have already gone to waste.

From some of the least vaccinated states, like Indiana and North Dakota, to some of the most vaccinated states, like New Jersey and Vermont, public health departments are shuffling doses around in the hopes of finding providers that can use them.

State health departments told The Associated Press they have tracked millions of doses that went to waste, including ones that expired, were in a multi-dose vial that couldn't be used completely or had to be tossed for some other reason like temperature issues or broken vials.

Nearly 1.5 million doses in Michigan, 1.45 million in North Carolina, 1 million in Illinois and almost 725,000 doses in Washington couldn't be used.

The percentage of wasted doses in California is only about 1.8%, but in a state that has received 84 million doses and administered more than 71 million of them, that

equates to roughly 1.4 million doses.

Providers there are asked to keep doses until they expire, then properly dispose of them, the California Department of Public Health said.

The national rate of wasted doses is about 9.5% of the more than 687 million doses that have been delivered as of late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday. That equates to about 65 million doses.

The problem is not unique to the U.S. More than a million doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine expired this week in Guatemala, because nobody wanted to take the shot.

Vaccination program managers say that tossing out doses is inevitable in any inoculation campaign because of the difficulty in aligning supply and demand for a product with a limited shelf life.

But the coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 6 million people and shattered economies across the globe, and every dose that goes to waste feels like a missed opportunity considering how successful the vaccines are in preventing death and serious disease.

Lindsey Graham rebuked after calling for Putin's assassination

The Washington Post

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., was sharply criticized by fellow lawmakers on both sides of the aisle Thursday after saying that the "only way" to end the crisis in Ukraine is for Russians to assassinate President Vladimir Putin.

"Is there a Brutus in Russia? Is there a more successful Colonel Stauffenberg in the Russian military?" Graham tweeted, referencing the Roman politician who participated in the assassination of Julius Caesar and the German military officer who attempted to kill Adolf Hitler.

"The only way this ends is for somebody in Russia to take this guy out," he said. "You would be doing your country — and the world — a great service."

Other members of Congress swiftly criticized Graham's tweets as reckless, including members of his own party.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas said,

"This is an exceptionally bad idea." Sanctions and boycotts of Russian oil and gas are solutions, along with military aid for the Ukrainians, Cruz said.

"But we should not be calling for the assassination of heads of state," he added.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., called Graham's remarks "dangerous" and "unhinged."

"We need leaders with calm minds & steady wisdom," she wrote. "Not blood thirsty warmongering politicians trying to tweet tough by demanding assassinations."

Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., said calls for Putin's assassination from United States politicians "aren't helpful."

"I really wish our members of Congress would cool it and regulate their remarks as the administration works to avoid WWII," Omar tweeted. "As the world pays attention to how the US and [its] leaders are responding."

Pelosi slams GOP lawmakers Boebert, Greene

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had stern words Thursday for two of the most right-wing members of her chamber after their outbursts during President Joe Biden's State of the Union.

"I agree with what Sen. Lindsey Graham said, 'Shut up.' That's what he said to them. They should just shut up," the California Democrat told reporters about the conspicuous interruptions by GOP Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert during Tuesday's address.

The first incident took place as Biden was talking about immigration on the southern border. Greene, a Georgia freshman and member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, stood up and began chanting, "Build the wall! Build the wall!" in reference to the border wall former President Donald Trump began building during his administration.

The second incident happened as Biden began to discuss how his son Beau, who died of cancer, was among many veterans who may have suffered from toxic exposure to military burn pits used extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan. Beau Biden, a U.S. Army major, died in 2015.

"A cancer that put them in a flag-draped coffin," Biden started to say, when Boebert yelled, "You put them in. Thirteen of them!"

Boebert, a freshman from Colorado, said her comments were made in defense of the 13 service members who were killed during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan last August.

In the chamber, the comment drew an outpouring of boos from Democrats, adding a note of political division to an address that received several moments of robust bipartisan applause. The television cameras were focused on Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, when the heckling occurred. He was caught on camera mumbling what appeared to be "shut up" under his breath in response.

The incidents were just the latest breach of decorum for a presidential address, an annual event where unruly behavior by lawmakers has become more frequent. Republican Rep. Joe Wilson shouted "you lie!" at President Barack Obama during a joint speech to Congress in 2009. Eleven years later, Pelosi ripped up a copy of Trump's speech while standing behind him.

UN watchdog: Iran nuclear cache grows

Associated Press

VIENNA — The United Nations' atomic watchdog said Thursday that it believes Iran has significantly increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium in breach of a 2015 accord with world powers.

The International Atomic Energy Agency told member nations in its confidential quarterly report that Iran has an estimated 73.1 pounds of uranium enriched to up to 60% fissile purity, an increase of 34.1 pounds since November.

Such highly enriched uranium can be easily refined to make atomic weapons, which is why world powers have sought to contain Tehran's nuclear program. The 73.1-pound figure brings Iran closer to hav-

ing enough weapons-grade uranium to produce a nuclear weapon.

In a report to member states about its work in Iran seen by The Associated Press, IAEA estimated that as of Feb. 19, Iran's stockpile of all enriched uranium was 7048.3 pounds, an increase of 1559.5 pounds.

The Vienna-based agency said it was unable to verify the exact size of Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium due to limitations Tehran imposed on U.N. inspectors last year. IAEA's monitoring and verification activities in Iran continue to be "seriously affected" by Iran's decision to stop letting inspectors access the agency's monitoring equipment, the report states.

Senior diplomats from Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia have been meeting with Iranian officials in Vienna since November to discuss bringing Tehran back into compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The pact eased sanctions on Iran in return for curbs on its nuclear program.

The United States pulled out of the accord under former President Donald Trump and reimposed sanctions on Iran, prompting Tehran to resume its uranium enrichment.

The IAEA announced earlier Thursday that Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi would travel to Tehran for meetings with senior Iranian officials on Saturday.

Ex-officer cleared in Breonna Taylor raid shooting

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — A former Kentucky police officer was found not guilty Thursday on charges he endangered neighbors the night he fired into Breonna Taylor's apartment during a botched drug raid that resulted in Taylor's death.

The panel of eight men and four women delivered its verdict for Brett Hankison about three hours after it took the case following closing arguments from prosecution and defense attorneys.

None of the officers involved in the March 13, 2020, raid were charged with Taylor's death, and

Hankison did not fire any of the bullets that killed the 26-year-old Black woman. His acquittal likely closes the door on the possibility of state criminal charges against any of the officers involved in the raid. A federal investigation into whether the officers violated her civil rights is underway.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, and a group of friends and family left quickly without commenting after the verdict.

Hankison did not appear outside the courtroom after the verdict was read. But his attorney Stewart Mathews said he and

Hankison were "thrilled."

Asked what might have swayed the jury, Mathews replied, "I think it was absolutely the fact that he was doing his job as a police officer."

Assistant Kentucky Attorney General Barbara Maines Whaley said she respected the verdict but had no further comment.

Prosecutors stressed in opening statements that the case wasn't about Taylor's death or the police decisions that led to the raid. Jurors were shown a single image of her body, barely discernible at the end of the hallway.

Taylor had been settling down for bed when officers arrived at her door. She was shot multiple times in her hallway and died at the scene.

Protesters filled the streets for months after Kentucky Attorney General David Cameron's office declined to seek charges against any of the officers in connection to Taylor's death. Taylor's name and those of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery — Black men who died in encounters with police and white pursuers — became rallying cries for racial justice during nationwide protests in 2020.

Fla. GOP sends 15-week abortion ban to governor

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Abortions after 15 weeks would be banned in Florida under a bill Republican senators sent to Gov. Ron DeSantis late Thursday, capping a bitter debate in the statehouse as a looming U.S. Supreme Court decision may limit abortion rights in America.

DeSantis, a Republican, has previously signaled his support for the proposal and is expected to sign it into law.

"I want abortion to be legal, safe and accessible but I fear this bill moves us in the other direction, forcing women with means to travel out of state and those struggling

economically to resort to potentially dangerous options," said Sen. Lori Berman, a Democrat.

The measure comes as Republicans across the country move to tighten access to the procedure after the U.S. Supreme Court signaled it would uphold a similar 15-week abortion ban in Mississippi and potentially overturn *Roe v. Wade*. A decision in that case is expected later this year.

The Florida bill contains exceptions if the abortion is necessary to save a mother's life, prevent serious injury to the mother or if the fetus has a fatal abnormality. The state currently allows abortions up to 24 weeks of

pregnancy.

Republicans have often said the bill is reasonable because it is not a total ban on the procedure and still gives women enough time to consider whether to get an abortion, even in cases of rape, incest or trafficking.

"The only thing that we're asking in this bill is that whatever decision you make, you do it before the 15 weeks," said Republican Sen. Ileana Garcia.

GOP lawmakers in West Virginia and Arizona have also introduced similar 15-week abortion bans similar to the Mississippi law under review by the Supreme Court.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man arrested for impersonating officer

NC RALEIGH — A North Carolina sheriff's office has arrested for a third time a man who they said was impersonating a law enforcement officer.

The Wake County Sheriff's Office said in a news release that an off-duty deputy was traveling east on U.S. Highway 70 in Garner when he saw a Dodge Charger with active blue lights. The deputy called in the sighting and a description of the car to dispatchers.

Investigators determined that the vehicle belonged to Devin Alexander Stenulis, who has been arrested twice for impersonating a law enforcement officer in the last five years, the news release said. An inspection of the vehicle found several lights and a lightbar that could be mistaken as a law enforcement vehicle, according to the sheriff's office.

Man ordered to repay \$40M for tax fraud

KS KANSAS CITY — A Kansas man was sentenced to three years in prison and ordered to repay \$40 million to the IRS for tax fraud related to a professional auto racing business.

Scott Tucker, 59, a former race car driver from Leawood, pleaded guilty in November to filing a false or fraudulent tax return. Federal prosecutors in Kansas said Tucker submitted false information on a tax return in 2010 for his auto racing business called Level 5 Sports. The information was intended to disguise the amount of taxes

due from the business.

His sentence will be served concurrently with a sentence of more than 16 years that he is serving in New York for operating a payday lending scheme that prosecutors said exploited 2 million borrowers.

Moose killed after attacking dog sled team

ME ST. DAVID — A cow moose attacked a Maine teen, his dad and their sled dogs during a snowstorm Tuesday night — a 45-minute ordeal that only ended when the 17-year-old shot the moose with a neighbor's rifle.

Caleb Hayes and his eight-dog team were returning to the family's kennel business in St. David after a training run. His father, Jonathan Nathaniel Hayes, rode ahead on a snowmobile.

"When we pulled onto our property, the moose was stomping puppies and bashing dog houses," the father told the The Bangor Daily News. All the dogs escaped unhurt, he said.

Then the dog sled team began pulling Caleb Hayes toward the moose. He refused to let go of the ganglines — the harness system that connects the dogs.

The high school junior got away, and his dad told him to take the snowmobile and bring a gun from their neighbor.

Caleb Hayes still planned to compete in the race he was training for.

'Monkey Whisperer' guilty of illegal trade

FL TAMPA — A Florida man who went by the nickname "the Monkey Whis-

perer" pleaded guilty to illegally transporting and selling primates, including a species considered endangered.

Jimmy Wayne Hammonds, 57, of Parrish, faces up to eight years in prison. Prosecutors said Hammonds owned and operated the wildlife breeding and sales business The Monkey Whisperer LLC, through which he tried to sell a capuchin monkey to a buyer in California, even though the buyer could not legally own it. Hammonds was accused of organizing the illegal transport of the monkey across the country.

City Council OKs ban on sale, use of fireworks

OR PORTLAND — The Portland City Council has voted to ban the sale and use of fireworks in the city.

The unanimous vote Wednesday comes after a temporary ban in 2021 around the Fourth of July, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

Fireworks caused 44 fires in the city in 2020 between June 23 and July 6. Portland had 15 fires caused by fireworks during a similar time period in 2021 when the devices were temporarily banned. One of the Fourth of July fires ignited after someone threw fireworks in a dumpster. Three people died.

Man saved after clinging to ice chunk

AK ANCHORAGE — An Alaska man walking on a shoreline wound up clinging to a chunk of ice for more than 30 minutes in frigid water when the shoreline ice broke loose and carried him out into

Cook Inlet.

Jaime Snedden, 45, of Homer, was taken to a hospital, where he was treated for hypothermia. He was expected to fully recover, Alaska Wildlife Troopers said.

Snedden "was reported to have been walking along the shoreline on the ice when it broke free and drifted into Cook Inlet with the outgoing current," Troopers spokesman Tim DeSpain said in an email to The Associated Press on Monday. Snedden was swept about 300 yards out into the inlet, near the mouth of the Anchor River.

Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jeremy Baum arrived and saw only Snedden's head and arms visible above water as he clung to the ice chunk.

The fishing vessel Misty was about 3 miles away and responded to an urgent marine broadcast seeking help. The Misty arrived about the same time as Baum, who launched an inflatable pack raft and rowed to Snedden's location.

State wants to return unclaimed money

LA BATON ROUGE — The state of Louisiana has \$900 million waiting to be claimed by its residents.

Kathleen Lobell runs the State's Unclaimed Property division, and she is trying to give that money to its owners.

"Some of the amounts in our system are quite large. We pay out six-figure claims all the time. We've had claims over a million dollars," Lobell said Monday.

To claim the funds, go to lacashclaim.org.

— From Associated Press

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RBs out to change draft perceptions

Associated Press

Kenneth Walker III believes NFL scouts may be shortchanging this year's running backs contingent.

He sees a promising group of skillful, multifaceted players, more than one worthy of being a first-round draft pick in April. Walker, in fact, could be at the head of the class following his 2021 breakout season at Michigan State, especially if he tests well between now and then.

The problem: Many teams find more value waiting to take a running back. So Walker and nearly three dozen other runners will spend this week trying to change minds at the NFL's annual scouting combine in Indianapolis.

"I feel like that's a goal in my mind, to be drafted early," Walker said Thursday. "And also just for other running backs as well, I feel like we've got to get them off the board, too."

Convincing scouts to change their ways won't be easy.

With this year's draft heavy on big guys — offensive and defensive linemen — and receivers, it appears light on the splashy, offensive playmakers out of the backfield. Even the quarterback class has been criticized for its lack of star power.

Yet, as much as coaches want to talk about winning championships by running the ball and stopping the run, it's the backs who have taken the biggest hits on recent draft weekends.

Only four have been taken in the first round over the past three seasons, and only twice during the last nine years have four or more been selected among the top 50. While some believe this year's class is solid and deep, it also could be the first time since 2014 and the second in 22 years that no running back is a first-rounder.

"I love this running back group," NFL Network analyst Daniel Jeremiah said last week. "Again, I don't think there's going to be one that goes in the first round. I was talking with a personnel director the other day and he said, 'Let's just circle the fourth round.' You're going to get a great back in the fourth round, especially if you want a bigger back."

That's a significant departure from not long ago when top-10 picks were used on Todd Gurley, Ezekiel Elliott, Leonard Fournette and Saquon Barkley in four successive drafts starting in 2015. Since then, no back has been selected higher than 24th.

It's unlikely the trend changes this year despite a wide-ranging group of prospects.

Walker finished as last season's top rusher with 1,646 yards, 15th in yards per carry (6.22) and tied for eighth in touchdown runs (18). Jeremiah thinks Walker runs more powerfully than his listed weight of 210 pounds suggests, and Walker's goal is to run the 40-yard dash in 4.4 seconds at Indy.

But he's not even Jeremiah's top-rated back.

That title belongs to Isaiah Spiller of Tex-

as A&M, who posted back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons in 2020 and 2021 and also made 74 receptions over three seasons.

Other top backs include Iowa State star Breece Hall; Georgia's national championship-winning tandem of Zamir White and James Cook III, the younger brother of Minnesota Vikings running back Dalvin Cook; and Alabama's Brian Robinson Jr.

All want to prove they can play three downs in the NFL and are capable of becoming multi-dimensional players such as Deebo Samuel and Cordarrelle Patterson.

"Those guys are really unique because they can play wide receiver or running back, and I feel like with them you never really know what they're going to do because they can do so many different things," Hall said. "I feel like if every running back was like that, then the game would be better as a whole. But those guys are really elite athletes and they're one of a kind."

It's not only running backs who have something to prove.

The quarterbacks, who began working out Thursday, have neither a clear frontrunner to be the first off the draft board nor anyone expected to go in the top five overall picks. Quarterbacks have been selected No. 1 or No. 2, or both, every year since 2015.

"There's a chip on all our shoulders because they're saying this class is not as good," Cincinnati quarterback Desmond Ridder said. "But you're going to see a lot of success out of us."

MLB, union meet, discuss next step in stalled talks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Deputy Commissioner Dan Halem and chief union negotiator Bruce Meyer met for 1½ hours Thursday and discussed the major issues in the stalled talks to reach a deal that would end Major League Baseball's lockout.

Union general counsel Ian Penny and MLB Executive Vice President Morgan Sword also participated in the session.

The players' association executive board held a conference call later Thursday. There was no known decision on the timing of the next negotiating session.

Baseball's ninth work stoppage was in its 92nd day Thursday and is the sport's first labor conflict to cause games to be canceled since the 1994-95 strike wiped out the World Series for the first time in 90

years.

Negotiations broke off Tuesday after the ninth straight day of meetings in Jupiter, Fla., and baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred announced that opening day on March 31 and the first two series for each team this season had been canceled. He said there would be insufficient training time for the March 31 openers.

Negotiating teams then headed home.

The sides had made progress during 16½ hours of bargaining that ended at 2:30 a.m. Tuesday but were still far apart on areas that include the key economic components of the luxury tax, pre-arbitration bonus pool and minimum salaries. The sides expressed anger at each other's proposals when talks resumed later that day.

Fitch Ratings said the cancellation will

not impact MLB and stadium-level debt ratings for now due to liquidity that included dedicated debt reserve funds sufficient for a season-long stoppage. Fitch said MLB's media contracts are structured for continued payments in 2022 during a lockout, with the possibility of repayments due later.

"The coronavirus-affected 2020 season demonstrates that the league and its teams have financial resources to withstand a shortened season, albeit with reliance on liquidity support from ownership or debt financing," Fitch said, adding that "a prolonged work stoppage could also alienate fans and corporate sponsors, which could not only affect revenue in the current season but could drag on the growth of the sport in the longer term."

Coach K to bid Cameron farewell

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Duke's Mike Krzyzewski has spent more than four decades preparing seniors for managing the emotions that come with taking the court a final time at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

This week, the retiring Hall of Famer must do that for someone new: himself.

"Little bit of thinking yesterday: 'This is your last game at Cameron,' Krzyzewski said Thursday, two days before his fourth-ranked Blue Devils host North Carolina to close the regular season. "It's crazy, how did that happen? How is it here? ... I'll have to spend some time, have a meeting with me.

"Maybe a few tough talks about keeping my eyes on the road, so to speak."

The 75-year-old known to many as "Coach K" has spent the better part of a year deflecting questions about his looming retirement and trying to avoid being a distraction or creating additional pressure on his fourth-ranked Blue Devils. The approach has worked, with a roster led by players with NBA futures securing the program's outright first Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title since 2006.

Now there are no more deflections, no more chances to push questions into the distance. The moment is here, with Krzyzewski down to one home game — fittingly against the rival Tar Heels — and no more than 10 games left in an impressive career.

As Krzyzewski said he told his staff

Thursday morning: "Who would've ever thought? It's my Senior Day."

"I think I'm just going to overall — I'm talking to myself right now — just let it happen," Krzyzewski said. "And see what the hell happens. But try not to let it negatively influence anything for my players, because look, for them, it's their game. ... And I'm responsible for making sure that they have the best chance to win that game."

Krzyzewski's résumé includes a college-coaching record 1,196 victories to go with five NCAA championships. So much of that success originated in the 82-year-old campus arena, with its cramped confines (9,314 capacity) and rowdy students packed into bleachers practically on top of the court along the length of the sideline to create an intimidating and ear-ringing homecourt advantage.

In all, Krzyzewski has a 572-75 record (.884) in 42 seasons of home games.

His Cameron farewell will be an emotional spectacle, adding another layer to a rivalry that annually commands the spotlight and features neighboring teams with a combined 11 NCAA championships.

The cheapest ticket on StubHub as of Thursday afternoon was \$3,250, with seats climbing north of \$10,000 — including some with asking prices of \$50,000 and, improbably, \$99,988 each. The school expects around 80 of Krzyzewski's former Duke players to attend, just one example of how his influence on the sport will continue long

past his retirement.

Steve Wojciechowski will be among that group.

The former Blue Devils defensive-minded point guard best known as "Wojo" became an assistant on Krzyzewski's staff before spending seven seasons as Marquette's head coach until last year. His enduring Cameron moment came on his Senior Day in 1998, when Duke rallied to beat a North Carolina team featuring future NBA players Antawn Jamison and Vince Carter.

At the horn, Wojciechowski turned and ran straight to Krzyzewski for a firm and lasting hug amid the rare sight of "Cameron Crazies" storming the court to celebrate.

"It's surreal," Wojciechowski said. "How many things in your life have been consistent over a 40-year period, where you know you go somewhere and turn on the TV, there's a constant there that you can depend on? In all of our lives? Very few."

Not every memory is quite as sweet, though.

Arizona State coach Bobby Hurley, the point guard on Krzyzewski's first two NCAA title teams, still remembers Krzyzewski working out the team after a long bus ride home following a January 1991 loss at Virginia.

"Coach said to go get taped and we were going to practice," Hurley said. "And we practiced like another two hours, so that was probably a not-so-good behind-the-scenes memory at Cameron Indoor."

No. 6 Kansas avenges loss, holds off TCU

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Ochai Agbaji scored 22 points, Dajuan Harris blocked Mike Miles' shot in the final seconds and sixth-ranked Kansas avenged a loss to TCU two days earlier with a 72-68 victory Thursday night that kept the Jayhawks tied atop the Big 12 heading into their regular-season finale.

Christian Braun added 12 points, Harris had 11 and David McCormack 10 for the Jayhawks (24-6, 13-4), who head into their game against No. 21 Texas on Saturday tied with third-ranked Baylor in the conference standings.

The Bears play Iowa State in their regular-season finale on Saturday.

No. 2 Arizona 81, Stanford 69: Bennedict Mathurin scored 24 points, Christian Koloko added 21 and the host Wildcats bounced back from a sluggish start.

The Wildcats (27-3, 17-2 Pac-12) labored through most of the first half after clinching the Pac-12 regular-season title Tuesday. Arizona found an offensive rhythm to close the half, and turned up the defensive pressure in the second to remain undefeated (16-0) at home.

No. 14 Houston 84, Temple 46: Fabian White Jr. had 26 points and six rebounds and the Cougars scored the first 15 points in a rout of the visiting Owls.

No. 20 Illinois 60, Penn State 55: Darin Williams made four three-pointers

on his way to a season-high 14 points, helping the host Illini hold off the Nittany Lions.

The victory keeps Illinois (21-8, 14-5 Big Ten) in contention for a share of the conference title if it can beat Iowa and Wisconsin loses to Nebraska on Sunday. The Badgers already clinched a share of the Big Ten title, and can win it by beating the Huskers.

No. 23 Ohio State 80, Michigan State 69: Malaki Branham scored 22 points and Ohio State snapped a two-game losing streak with a win over the visiting Spartans.

No. 24 Iowa 82, Michigan 71: Keegan Murray scored 15 of his 23 points in the first half to help the visiting Hawkeyes build a big lead on the way to a win over the Wolverines.

Durant not enough, Heat rally past Nets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kevin Durant's shot looked good the whole way, one that would have given the Brooklyn Nets the lead with under a minute left.

After 1½ months of misery without their superstar, the Nets couldn't have asked for a better scenario than Durant taking the potential go-ahead three-pointer in his return.

"I played on the Olympic team with KD, so a lot of times a lot of his shots look like they're going in," Miami Heat star Bam Adebayo said. "He just missed."

After their season went sideways when Durant went down, the Nets will need those to start falling — and he believes they will.

"I felt great," Durant said. "I'm only going to get better, more comfortable out there."

He couldn't stop the Nets' slide, as Adebayo had 30 points, 11 rebounds and six assists to lead Miami to a 113-107 victory on Thursday night.

Tyler Herro added 27 points for the Eastern Conference-leading Heat, who bounced back from a tough loss in Milwaukee a night earlier with an impressive victory despite missing some of their top players.

Durant had 31 points in his first game since Jan. 15, and his return from a 21-game absence with a sprained left knee ligament inspired the Nets to a 16-point lead. But Miami tightened up its defense in the second half and held off a late surge by the Nets.

Durant had a three-point attempt from straightaway that would have given the Nets the lead go in and out with 57 seconds left, and the Heat worked it inside to Adebayo on the ensuing possession for a 111-107 advantage with 35 seconds to go.

The Nets are 32-32. They were 5-16 without Durant, tum-

bling all the way from second place in the Eastern Conference to eighth. Only the Knicks (3-16) and Rockets (3-15) had been worse since Jan. 16, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Brooklyn was still without Kyrie Irving and Ben Simmons on Thursday, so even Durant wasn't enough against the Eastern Conference leaders.

Clippers 132, Lakers 111: At Los Angeles, Reggie Jackson scored 12 of his season-high 36 points in the fourth quarter, added nine assists and eight rebounds and the Clippers completed a four-game season sweep of the Lakers.

Mavericks 122, Warriors 113: Luka Doncic scored 41 points and host Dallas beat Golden State for the second time in five days, holding off the Warriors after a huge fourth-quarter rally for the victory in California.

Hawks 130, Bulls 124: Bogdan Bogdanovic's three-pointer with 1:41 left gave Atlanta the lead and Trae Young scored 39 points in the Hawks' victory over visiting Chicago.

Celtics 120, Grizzlies 107: Jayson Tatum scored 37 points and host Boston beat Memphis for its ninth victory in 11 games.

Kings 115, Spurs 112: Harrison Barnes had 27 points and visiting Sacramento held off San Antonio, keeping Spurs coach Gregg Popovich a victory shy of tying Don Nelson's NBA record.

Pistons 108, Raptors 106: Cade Cunningham had 22 points and 12 rebounds, Jerami Grant scored 26 points and Detroit held off host Toronto for its sixth straight victory over the Raptors.

Saddiq Bey added 23 points to help the Pistons give coach Dwane Casey another victory over the team that fired him in May 2018.

Malkin has goal, 2 assists as Pens beat Lightning

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Evgeni Malkin had a goal and two assists, Tristan Jarry made 20 saves and the Pittsburgh Penguins beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 5-1 on Thursday night.

It was Malkin's 103rd career three-point game, which ranks fourth in team history behind Mario Lemieux (272), Sidney Crosby (155) and Jaromir Jagr (129).

"I thought that was Geno's best game of the year to this point," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said.

"Tonight I thought he was just in beast mode the way he commanded the puck."

Malkin played in his 20th game after starting the season sidelined by a knee injury.

Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper was given a game misconduct for arguing with officials with 53.7 seconds remaining in the second period after the Lightning received an extra minor penalty stemming from a scrum.

Cooper was unhappy that referee Wes McCauley briefed Sullivan on the calls but did not come to the Lightning bench.

"I'm not so sure in all the years like, what I said is something that he never heard before in his history of reffing," Cooper said. "I want to know what that was."

Sidney Crosby, Danton Heinen, Brock McGinn and Jake Guentzel had the other Pittsburgh goals as the Penguins improved to 19-6-3 on the road, including wins in eight of their last nine.

Capitals 4, Hurricanes 0: Alex Ovechkin and Evgeny Kuznetsov scored on the power play, Vitek Vanecek stopped all 36 shots he faced and host Washington snapped a three-game losing streak.

Ovechkin scored his 33rd goal of the season and his 763rd in the NHL to move three back of Jaromir Jagr for third place on the career list.

Wild 5, Flyers 4: Ryan Hartman had two goals, and Jonas Brodin and Matt Boldy scored 25 seconds apart in the third period to lead visiting Minnesota to a comeback victory.

Frederick Gaudreau also scored and Kevin Fiala had two assists for the Wild, who snapped a four-game skid. Cam Talbot made 26 saves. Minnesota won for just the second time in eight games.

Panthers 3, Senators 0: Patrick Hornqvist and Ryan Lomberg scored 12 seconds apart in the third period, Sergei Bobrovsky made 18 saves for his 36th career shutout and host Florida defeated Ottawa to snap a three-game slide.

Canucks 4, Islanders 3: Nils Hoglander and rookie Vasily Podkolzin scored 45 seconds apart midway through the third period and Thatcher Demko made 24 saves as visiting Vancouver edged New York.

Vancouver has won seven of its past 10 games and is 19-8-4 since Bruce Boudreau replaced Travis Green as coach in early December.

Blackhawks 4, Oilers 3 (OT): Alex DeBrincat scored 2:23 into overtime, and host Chicago beat Edmonton.

Bruins 5, Golden Knights 2: Craig Smith scored three goals to lead Boston.

The Heat improved to 4-1-0 on their six-game road trip, and 9-3-2 in their last 14 away from home.

Coyotes 2, Avalanche 1: Nick Schmaltz scored early in the third period, Karel Vejmelka stopped 42 shots and struggling Arizona got a victory at home over NHL-leading Colorado.

Canadiens 5, Flames 4 (OT): Ben Chiarot scored his second goal of the game 1:03 into overtime to give visiting Montreal a victory over Calgary.

Pacific Division-leading Calgary missed a chance to set a franchise record of 12 consecutive home victories.