

Vaccine ruling halts ship deployment

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy officers said they cannot deploy a Norfolk, Va.-based warship after a federal judge ruled the service commanders are prohibited from acting against the ship's captain for refusing the coronavirus vaccine despite their insistence they have lost faith in his ability to command.

The Navy commander, identified only by his rank in court papers, filed a lawsuit in the Middle District of Florida in October with several other service members seeking relief from the military's coronavirus vaccine mandate on religious grounds.

The commander later broke off from the class-action suit, refiling in January with an unnamed Marine lieutenant colonel to challenge the military's vaccine mandate.

Last month, District Judge Steven Merryday granted a preliminary injunction barring the Navy from requiring the commander or the lieutenant colonel to take the vaccine or issuing "any punitive or retaliatory measure against [them] pending a final

judgment in the case."

The Navy on Feb. 28 asked Merryday for an emergency stay on the injunction, arguing the order prevents the service "from removing an officer from ... commanding officer billets who the military has deemed unfit for command," according to court documents.

"The order is an extraordinary intrusion upon the inner workings of the military that presents a direct and imminent threat to national security during a global military crisis, and it indefinitely sidelines a Navy warship," the service said in its appeal on the injunction.

The ship is a guided-missile destroyer. The Navy has already sent at least four similar warships from Norfolk to Europe as Russia's war on Ukraine intensifies, the service has said.

In the judge's response, Merryday accused the Navy's attorneys of attempting "to evoke the frightening prospect of a dire national emergency resulting from allegedly reckless and unlawful overreaching by the district judge" and denied their appeal.

The denial forces the Navy to keep the commander in his position and bars the Marine Corps from canceling the lieutenant colonel's upcoming assignment to command a combat logistics battalion — a job that would require her to visit ally nations across the world, many of which require U.S. service members to be vaccinated, according to the court papers.

While the judge held the military is trampling on the commander's and lieutenant colonel's religious rights, the Navy argued in its appeal that "the threat to military readiness and national security outweighs the impact on these plaintiffs of additional military proceedings while an appeal is pending in this matter," especially in the commander's case.

It's not just the commander's lack of vaccination stopping the Navy from deploying him. Higher ranking officers have also "lost confidence in [the commander's] ability to lead and will not deploy the warship with him in command" because of several reports of failed leadership, according to court documents.

Russian airstrike hits maternity hospital in Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian airstrike devastated a maternity hospital Wednesday in the besieged port city of Mariupol and wounded at least 17 people, Ukrainian officials said, amid growing warnings from the West that Moscow's invasion is about to take a more brutal and indiscriminate turn.

The ground shook more than a mile away when a series of blasts slammed into the Mariupol complex, blowing out windows and ripping away much of the front of one building. Police and soldiers rushed to the scene to evacuate victims, carrying out a heavily pregnant and bleeding woman on a stretcher.

Another woman wailed as she clutched her child. In the courtyard, mangled cars burned, and a blast crater went at least two stories deep.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on

Twitter that there were "people, children under the wreckage" and called the strike an "atrocity." Video shared by Zelenskyy showed cheerfully painted hallways strewn with twisted metal.

"There are few things more depraved than targeting the vulnerable and defenseless," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted, adding that Russian President Vladimir Putin will be held "to account for his terrible crimes."

Authorities, meanwhile, announced new cease-fires Wednesday morning to allow thousands of civilians to escape from bombarded towns around Kyiv as well as the southern cities of Mariupol, Enerhodar and Volnovakha, Izyum in the east and Sumy in the northeast.

It was not immediately clear whether anyone was able to leave other cities, but people streamed out of Kyiv's suburbs,

many headed for the city center, as explosions were heard in the capital and air raid sirens sounded repeatedly. From there, the evacuees planned to board trains bound for western Ukrainian regions not under attack.

Civilians leaving the Kyiv suburb of Irpin were forced to make their way across the slippery wooden planks of a makeshift bridge, because the Ukrainians blew up the concrete span to Kyiv days ago to slow the Russian advance.

They trudged past a crashed van with the words "Our Ukraine" written in the dust coating its windows.

"We have a short window of time at the moment," said Yevhen Nyschuk, a member of Ukraine's territorial defense forces. "Even if there is a cease-fire right now, there is a high risk of shells falling at any moment."

Harris visits Poland amid fighter jet unrest

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vice President Kamala Harris' trip to Warsaw to thank Poland for taking in hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion took an unexpected turn before she even left Washington. She'll be parachuting into the middle of unexpected diplomatic turbulence over fighter jets.

The Polish government on Tuesday came out with a plan to transfer its Russian-made fighter planes to a U.S. military base in Germany, with the expectation that the planes would then be handed over to Ukrainian pi-

lots trying to fend off Russian forces. In turn, the United States would supply Poland with U.S.-made jets with "corresponding capabilities."

But the Poles didn't run that idea past the Biden administration before going public with it, and the Pentagon quickly dismissed the idea as not tenable. Warplanes flying from a U.S. and NATO base into airspace contested with Russia would raise the risk of the war expanding beyond Ukraine.

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Wednesday stressed that Poland's support to Ukraine has been defen-

sive and that any decision whether to make the MiG-29 planes available to Ukraine would be up to the U.S. and NATO — and then only if all nations agreed.

"Poland is not a side in this war," he said, adding, "Such a serious decision like handing over planes must be unanimous and unequivocally taken by all of the North Atlantic Alliance."

The plane issue provided a rare moment of disharmony in what has been a largely united effort by NATO allies to assist Ukraine without getting embroiled in a wider war with Russia.

And it meant Harris was flying into fractious terrain Wednesday as she opens a two-day visit to Poland and Romania and tries to patch things up.

"This fighter jet situation is a messy deal, and Harris will have to go there and smooth things out," said Daniel Fried, who served as U.S. ambassador to Poland for President Bill Clinton and was a senior adviser in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. "There's plenty of discussion on the way ahead that needs to be had with the Poles that is better to have in an in-person conversation."

Top lawmakers reach deal on Ukraine aid, \$1.5T spending

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders reached a bipartisan deal early Wednesday providing \$13.6 billion to help Ukraine and European allies plus billions more to battle the pandemic as part of an overdue \$1.5 trillion measure financing federal agencies for the rest of this year.

Though a tiny fraction of the massive bill, the money countering a Russian blitzkrieg that's devastated parts of Ukraine and prompted Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II ensured the measure would pass with robust bipartisan support. President Joe Biden requested \$10 billion for military, humanitarian and economic aid last week, and Democratic and Republican backing was so staunch that the figure grew to \$12 billion Monday and \$13.6 billion just a day later.

"We're going to support them against tyranny, oppression, violent acts of subjugation," Biden said at the White House.

Party leaders planned to whip the 2,741-page measure through the House on Wednesday and the Senate by week's end, though the latter chamber's exact timing was unclear. Lawmakers were spurred by the urgency of helping Ukraine before Russia's military might makes it too late.

They also faced a Friday deadline to approve the government-wide spending measure or face a weekend election-year federal shutdown. As a backstop against delays, the House planned to pass a bill Wednesday keeping agencies afloat through March 15.

Over \$4 billion of the Ukraine aid was to help the country and Eastern European nations cope with the 2 million refugees who've already fled the fighting. Another \$6.7 billion was for the deployment of U.S. troops and equipment to the region and to transfer American military items to Ukraine and U.S. allies, and there was economic aid and money to enforce economic sanctions against Russia as well.

USAF parenthood departure broadened for dual couples

By JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

Either person in a dual-Air Force marriage now may request to separate from active duty up to 12 months after the birth or adoption of a child, the service announced this week.

Prior to the change, the separation option applied only to the mother in such marriages.

It's the second update of the policy in five years, as the service looks to be more diverse and inclusive. In 2017, the Air Force gave new mothers up to 12 months after having a baby to request separation from active duty.

Previously, pregnant women had the option to leave the service only before giving birth.

The ability to apply for caregiver separation allows "new parents more time to decide how to balance their careers with a new child," Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly, deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel and services, said in a statement Tuesday.

The top enlisted leader in the service said the policy took effect March 1.

"We're getting after it, folks ... with more to come," Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force JoAnne Bass said on her official Facebook page Tuesday.

Bass' post had garnered nearly 3,000 likes and 240 comments as of Wednesday afternoon, and many of those who posted welcomed the change.

"Thank you AF! This is the biggest step in the right direction, for both men AND women!" one commenter wrote.

Several women said they wished that this had been the policy when they were in the Air Force.

"I'm so happy those behind me have this option so maybe it's not as much of a struggle for them like it was for me," said one post. "I hope more women are able to pursue their ambitions with this option instead of feeling like they don't have a choice."

White House: Venezuela freed 2 Americans

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Venezuelan government has freed two jailed Americans, including an oil executive imprisoned alongside colleagues for more than four years, as it seeks to improve relations with the Biden administration amid Russia's war with Ukraine, the White House announced Tuesday night.

Gustavo Cardenas was released following a secret weekend visit to Venezuela by senior Biden administration officials, the first White House trip to the country in more than two decades. Also freed was Jorge Fernandez, who was arrested last year on what the White House described as "spurious charges."

The release came hours after Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro signaled an interest in improving relations at a time when Russia's invasion of Uk-

raine has sparked concerns in the United States over rising gas prices. In a televised address, he appeared to indicate he was willing to accede to U.S. demands that he resume negotiations with his opponents as a first building block for any relief from U.S. sanctions that have been punishing the OPEC nation for years.

U.S. officials have not detailed any other specific outcomes of the talks, but said the release reflected months of relationship-building, particularly involving Roger Carstens, the administration's special presidential envoy for hostage affairs. Carstens made a trip to Venezuela in December that did not immediately result in the release of detainees but that senior administration officials credited with establishing trust and laying the groundwork for Tuesday's outcome. He returned to Venezuela last weekend with

other administration officials.

Senior administration officials, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the government, declined to say how Cardenas and Fernandez were selected for release among nearly 10 American detainees. But they said the possibility of additional releases remains.

Cardenas and five other executives of Houston-based Citgo, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil giant, had been in detention in Venezuela since 2017 when they were led away by masked security agents while at a meeting in Caracas. They had been lured to Venezuela to attend a meeting at the headquarters of Citgo's parent, PDVSA.

They were sentenced on charges stemming from a never executed plan to refinance some \$4 billion in Citgo bonds by offering a

50% stake in the company as collateral. Prosecutors accused the men of maneuvering to benefit from the proposed deal.

Besides the other members of the Citgo 6, several other Americans remain held in Venezuela. Two former Green Berets, Luke Denman and Airan Berry, were arrested for their involvement in a confusing plot to overthrow Maduro, and former U.S. Marine Matthew Heath was detained on weapons charges.

Fernandez was detained in February 2021 near the border with Colombia after he was found in possession of a drone, whose use is restricted in Venezuela. He was accused of terrorism.

The weekend discussions came three years after the U.S. broke off relations with Maduro and recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader.

First Jan. 6 trial ends in conviction on all counts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Texas man was convicted on Tuesday of storming the U.S. Capitol with a holstered handgun, a milestone victory for federal prosecutors in the first trial among hundreds of cases arising from last year's riot.

A jury also convicted Guy Wesley Reffitt of obstructing Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote on Jan. 6, 2021, of interfering with police officers who were guarding the Capitol and of threatening his two teenage children if they reported him to law enforcement after the attack. Jurors deliberated about three hours and convicted him on all counts.

The verdict could be a bellwether for many other Capitol riot cases. It could give Justice Department prosecutors more leverage in plea negotiations and further discourage other defendants from gambling on trials of

their own.

Gregg Sofer, a former federal prosecutor, said before Reffitt's trial started that it would be "the canary in the coal mine."

"If you're a defendant awaiting trial at this point, the canary just died," said Sofer, now a partner at the law firm Husch Blackwell. "I do think it is likely to affect people's perceptions about the likelihood of their success."

Reffitt, 49, of Wylie, Texas, didn't testify at his trial, which started last Wednesday.

Outside court, his wife, Nicole, said the verdict was "against all American people. If you're going to be convicted on your First Amendment rights, all Americans should be wary. This fight has just begun."

In a statement after the verdict, U.S. Attorney Matthew Graves in Washington thanked the jury "for upholding the rule of law and for its diligent service in this case."

Proud Boys leader is charged with conspiracy in Jan. 6 riot

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A leader of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group was arrested Tuesday on a conspiracy charge for his suspected role in a coordinated attack on the U.S. Capitol to stop Congress from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory.

Henry "Enrique" Tarrio wasn't there when the riot erupted on Jan. 6, 2021. Police had arrested Tarrio in Washington two days before the riot and charged him with vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church during a protest in December 2020. The day before the Capitol was attacked, a judge ordered Tarrio to stay out of Washington.

But Tarrio didn't leave town as he should have, the indictment said. Instead, he met with Oath Keepers founder and leader Elmer "Stewart" Rhodes and others in an underground park-

ing garage for approximately 30 minutes.

"During this encounter, a participant referenced the Capitol," the indictment says.

The indictment is a further proof of how far the Justice Department is going to prosecute the leaders of extremist groups whose members are suspected to have planned the attack on the U.S. Capitol, even if they weren't in attendance themselves. The latest conspiracy charge zeroes in on organized groups that plotted in advance — as federal prosecutors distinguish them from hundreds of other supporters of then-President Donald Trump who were at the scene that day and were charged.

Tarrio, who has since stepped down from his post as Proud Boys chairman, didn't immediately respond to a text message seeking comment on his arrest and indictment. He served five months for the unrelated case.

Texas official quits over uncounted ballots

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The election administrator in Texas' most populous county submitted her resignation Tuesday following problems with last week's primary, including about 10,000 mail ballots that weren't counted the day of the election, issues with voting machines and a lack of poll workers.

Harris County Elections Administrator Isabel Longoria announced during a meeting of county commissioners she would resign on July 1.

Longoria said she took responsibility for the problems during last Tuesday's election in Harris County, where Houston is located.

"Ultimately, the buck stops with me to address these issues and conduct elections on behalf of the voters. I didn't meet my own standards," she said.

Longoria's resignation came during a meeting that at times became contentious as some officials and residents asked that she either resign or be fired, and some echoed the false and dis-

proven claims made by former President Donald Trump about a stolen 2020 election.

"Our freedoms are being stolen from us. Our rights for a free and fair election are being stolen and we know who's doing it. ... We are no longer going to stand by and be silent. We're no longer going to be miss nice guys anymore. We've had it. We're fighting," said Dorothy Hablinski, who told commissioners she's been an election worker for years.

Others who spoke during the meeting, including some election judges, said they dealt with a variety of problems, including long lines because voting machines weren't working and long waits to get help from technical support.

Late Saturday, election officials said that an "oversight" led to 10,000 ballots not being counted. Those votes — 6,000 Democratic and 4,000 Republican — were added to the final tallies on Tuesday. The new votes didn't change the outcome of any races tabulated by The

Associated Press.

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the county's top elected official, said the problems with last week's election were unacceptable, including insufficient training for election workers. Before Longoria offered her resignation, Hidalgo had indicated she wanted a change in leadership in the local office that runs and manages elections.

"It is vital, particularly given the pandering that has taken hold over the past few years around our nation that voters understand that while several aspects of this election ... were problematic, we have no evidence to suggest that the full count once certified ... is not accurate. We don't need to go there because that tears down trust in our electoral system," she said.

The March 1 primary was the first election of the U.S. midterms and the first statewide election that took place in Texas under new, tighter voting laws. Thousands of mail ballots were rejected statewide for not hav-

ing the new, required identification.

Longoria said the new voting laws as well as rhetoric related to distrust about elections has become a distraction to conversations about how to make the voting process better.

"It doesn't excuse any mistakes that were made. But to ignore the culture of fear and lies that lead to political violence and an attack on our democracy is to miss a crucial variable in this problem," she said.

Last week's election was the first time that many of the county's electorate had used new voting machines that had paper ballots.

The number of races up for election was so large that it stretched each voter's paper ballot to two pages, creating issues with ballots sometimes getting stuck as they were inserted into the machines.

Longoria said her office's staff was stretched thin, forcing many to work for 24 hours straight or longer so that votes could be counted.

US customs agents find 52 reptiles in suspect's clothes

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A man who tried to slither past U.S. border agents in California had 52 lizards and snakes hidden in his clothing, authorities said Tuesday.

The man, a 30-year-old U.S. citizen, was driving a truck when he arrived at the San Ysidro border crossing with Mexico on Feb. 25 and was pulled out for additional inspection, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said in a statement.

Agents found 52 live reptiles tied up in small bags "which were concealed in the man's jacket, pants pockets and groin area," the statement said.

Nine snakes and 43 horned lizards were seized from the man, who was arrested. Some of the species are considered endangered, authorities said.

"Smugglers will try every possible way to try and get their product, or in this case live reptiles, across the border," said Sidney Aki, Customs and Border Protection director of field operations in San Diego. "In this occasion, the smuggler attempted to deceive CBP officers in order to bring these animals into the U.S., without taking care for the health and safety of the animals."

The man, a 30-year-old U.S. citizen, was arrested.

American who got first pig heart transplant dies

Associated Press

The first person to receive a heart transplant from a pig has died, two months after the groundbreaking experiment, the Maryland hospital that performed the surgery announced Wednesday.

David Bennett, 57, died Tuesday at the University of Maryland Medical Center. Doctors didn't give a cause of death, saying only that his condition had begun deteriorating several days earlier.

Bennett's son praised the hospital for offering the last-ditch experiment, saying the family hoped it would help further efforts to end the organ shortage.

For decades, doctors have sought to one day use animal or-

gans for life-saving transplants. Bennett, a handyman from Hagerstown, Md., was a candidate for this newest attempt only because he otherwise faced certain death — ineligible for a human heart transplant, bedridden, on life support and out of other options.

Prior attempts at such transplants — or xenotransplantation — have failed largely because patients' bodies rapidly rejected the animal organ. This time, the Maryland surgeons used a heart from a gene-edited pig: Scientists had modified the animal to remove pig genes that trigger the hyper-fast rejection and add human genes to help the body accept the organ.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ice-fishing shanty blown across bay; anglers safe

MI MCKINLEY TOWNSHIP—Three anglers are safe after a homemade ice-fishing shanty was blown about a mile across a bay in Michigan by winds that neared 50 mph, authorities said.

A person onshore called Huron County dispatchers after seeing someone struggling with the shanty as it was being blown across the ice on Saginaw Bay off McKinley Township, Huron County Sheriff Kelly Hanson said in a news release.

Hanson said a fire department airboat was taken to the site for a rescue, but the three men eventually made it across the ice to shore on their own.

Section of oceanside Cliff Walk collapses

RI NEWPORT—A stretch of the iconic oceanside Cliff Walk in Newport was closed to the public after a 20-foot section collapsed. No injuries were reported.

The walk is a major tourist draw offering breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean on one side and Newport's Gilded Age mansions on the other.

The area around the collapse will be closed for the foreseeable future according to city officials, who said public safety crews are assessing the damage.

Boy rescued from tree getting stuck saving cat

IN INDIANAPOLIS—A teenager who scaled a tree at an Indianapolis park to rescue a cat he spotted high up in the branches ended up stuck himself

and in need of a rescue, officials said.

The 17-year-old boy was at Holiday Park when he saw the cat and decided to rescue it by climbing 35 feet into the tree, the Indianapolis Fire Department said in a news release.

When he couldn't get down, firefighting crews were called. They used a rope system to lower the teen to the ground. He was released to his parents, although the cat remained in the tree.

A 21-year-old woman who was the cat's owner hired a private company to retrieve the feline.

Feds seize counterfeit pills made with fentanyl

OR PORTLAND—Narcotics agents seized about 150,000 counterfeit oxycodone pills made with fentanyl and about 20 pounds of fentanyl powder in what federal authorities believe is the biggest seizure of the drug in Oregon's history, authorities said.

Four men are charged with conspiring to distribute and possess with intent to distribute 400 grams or more of fentanyl. Officers seized the drugs, which have an estimated street value of \$3.9 million, during a drug buy between the men and a federal informant in an Oregon City parking lot, according to a Homeland Security Investigations agent.

Man rescued 2 straight days on mountain hikes

AZ FLAGSTAFF—A 28-year-old New York man needed to be rescued twice on consecutive days while hiking in a northern Arizona mountain range, authorities said.

The Brooklyn man, whose

name wasn't released, first called 911 to say he got lost while hiking on Humphreys Trail in the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff, Coconino County Sheriff's officials said.

Snowcat vehicles from the ski resort drove the man off the mountain and he declined medical attention.

The next day, the hiker called 911 to say he needed help after injuring himself in a fall near the saddle area of Humphreys Trail.

An Arizona Department of Public Safety rescue helicopter was sent to pick up the man and another hiker who'd stopped to help him.

Officials: 3 kayakers rescued from deep mud

NC OAK ISLAND—Crews rescued three kayakers stranded in deep mud as the tide rose on the North Carolina coast last weekend, officials said.

Oak Island Water Rescue received a report that kayakers were stuck in the mud and marsh along the Intracoastal Waterway on Oak Island, The Charlotte Observer reported.

Rescuers pulled out the two kayakers stuck in the mud and took them to Brunswick County EMS staff waiting at a boat ramp, then returned for the third kayaker, officials said. Officials did not release details of the kayakers' conditions.

Mountain lion attacks man outside home

CO DURANGO—Wildlife officials in southwest Colorado were looking for a mountain lion that attacked a man outside of his home last weekend.

Michael Warren, 47, was in his home when his dogs started barking aggressively and he heard a thud on his front porch, The Durango Herald reported.

He went outside to investigate and immediately felt something grab his leg.

Warren said he saw a mountain lion run away, and footage from a security camera later confirmed the sighting. He sustained several puncture wounds to his lower leg but refused medical treatment.

Matt Sturdevant, a district wildlife manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, said the mountain lion will likely be euthanized if it is captured because it attacked a human.

2 cited for transporting and releasing feral hogs

LA PITKIN—Two Louisiana men in their early 20s were accused of taking a dozen or more feral hogs from one parish and releasing them in another.

The men, aged 20 and 21, from the Vernon Parish town of Pitkin, were cited in February after one of them posted video on social media showing the hogs being released, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said in a news release.

They told agents they wanted to hunt the hogs, enforcement spokesman Adam Einck said in an email.

The men were issued citations on one count each of illegally transporting live feral hogs and releasing them into the wild. The transportation charge can bring up to a \$900 fine and six months in jail. Releasing them into the wild carries a \$400 to \$950 fine and up to 120 days in jail.

— From wire reports

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Wilson, Wagner exits signal new era for Seahawks

Associated Press

SEATTLE — With two brush strokes over the span of about 10 hours, the Seattle Seahawks said goodbye to giant foundations of their Super Bowl history.

Gone is quarterback Russell Wilson, traded to Denver in a blockbuster move. Gone is Bobby Wagner, the defensive stalwart and likely future Hall of Famer, released as part of a salary cap squeeze.

So long history. Hello, rebuild.

That is the apparent direction the Seahawks are headed after a Tuesday that won't be forgotten by their fans. The team agreed to send Wilson to Denver early in the day, according to two people familiar with the negotiations who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because the trade can't be announced until after the start of the new league year next week.

Hours later, Wagner confirmed to the AP that the Seahawks had informed him he was being released, his \$20 million salary cap hit for 2022 deemed too much for Seattle to absorb.

And with that, the final two starters still around from Seattle's Super Bowl winning team from 2013 — ones that seemed des-

tinued to be lifelong players for the team — were no longer Seahawks.

Their situations differed. Wilson had to waive a no-trade clause to accept the move to Denver. Wagner spoke at the end of the season of wanting to return but also knew the weight of his contract.

"I understand there is a business side to this, but there's a lot of optimism on my end that I'll be back," Wagner said in early January. "I'm not worried about it. Obviously, I can't control everything. I can only control my part."

No matter the reasons behind their departures, it's a massive change for the team.

For the majority of 10 seasons, the leaders on both sides of the ball were never questioned. Taken one round apart in the 2012 draft, Wagner and Wilson walked into Seattle's practice facility and almost immediately laid claim to spots they never relinquished other than for injury.

Wagner was a six-time first-team All-Pro selection, building a résumé, that no matter the next phase of his career, is likely good enough for a gold jacket and induction to the Hall of Fame.

Wilson will forever be the starting quar-

terback of the team's first Super Bowl winner, and for a decade gave the Seahawks a franchise QB and one of the most exciting players in the league.

In some ways, they are staking their reputations to being able to find the team's next quarterback, and the additional move to release Wagner only added to the major questions about where the franchise goes next.

Is this the start of a full rebuild for the Seahawks with a head coach who will turn 71 in September?

Does Seattle believe quarterbacks Drew Lock — reportedly part of the trade — or Jacob Eason have the chance to be the starter this fall?

Did the team fall in love with one of the quarterbacks at the combine and is hoping to land another Wilson-like home run in the draft?

Or will the Seahawks use the capital obtained in the Wilson deal to try and find another veteran quarterback available either in free agency or via trade?

Those answers will come beginning with the start of the new league year. None may be able to satisfy Seattle's fans stinging from the trade.

Union preparing another proposal in MLB talks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Negotiators for locked-out players were preparing their latest response to Major League Baseball on Wednesday during a recess in talks after Commissioner Rob Manfred let pass his deadline to reach a deal preserving a 162-game season.

The sides negotiated on and off for 16½ hours until 3 a.m. Wednesday morning, then broke for the union to hold a morning conference call with its executive board.

On the 98th day of the lock-out, MLB said no additional games had been canceled and talks will continue. The union's proposal was expected at some point after 2 p.m.

MLB made moves Tuesday toward players on the key economic issues of the luxury tax, the amount of a new bonus pool for pre-arbitration-eligible

players and minimum salaries. The league also pushed for its long-held goal of an international amateur draft.

Teams would rotate picking in different quadrants of the first round over a four-year period, and a slotting system would be installed similar to what the union agreed to starting in 2012 for the amateur draft covering residents of the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada.

The international draft proposal includes hard slots that could not be negotiated by individuals. MLB estimates \$17 million in additional spending for international players above the \$166.3 million spent by the 30 teams in 2021. The draft would start in 2024.

The union's long steadfast opposition to an international draft remains an obstacle to an agreement. International players would lose the right to pick

which team they sign with. The age for the draft would be in the year a player turns 16.

Manfred originally set a Feb. 28 deadline for preserving opening day on March 31.

After 16½ hours of bargaining in Jupiter, Fla., that began Feb. 28 and ended at 2:30 a.m. the following morning produced progress, Manfred extended that deadline to 5 p.m. the following day.

Talks broke down, and Manfred announced the first two series for each team during the season had been canceled. Negotiators returned to New York and resumed bargaining on Sunday.

While it appears there is no chance opening day could take place as originally scheduled, MLB told the union that Tuesday was the last possible day to reach an agreement that would allow a modified 162-game

schedule, along with full salary and service time needed to reach free agency for players.

MLB on Tuesday offered a tax threshold starting at \$230 million and rising to \$242 million, a person familiar with the proposal said, confirming a move first reported by The Athletic. The person, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because no public statements were authorized, said management's proposal contained tougher penalties at a higher payroll level than in the expired agreement.

The union began the week at \$238 million for this year, rising to \$263 million in 2026.

The union entered Monday asking for an \$80 million bonus pool for this year and MLB was at \$30 million. MLB offered a \$700,000 minimum salary and the union asked for \$725,000.

Zags outlasts Gaels for WCC title

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Chet Holmgren spent most of his night frustrated as he got banged around and shots clanged away. Drew Timme, except for a spurt early in the second half, found little room to pull off his variety of drop steps and up-and-unders.

Gonzaga still found a way to pick apart one of the nation's toughest defenses and win another West Coast Conference title.

These Zags are deep, dangerous and may be poised for another extended March run.

Andrew Nembhard scored 19 points, Rasir Bolton added 18 and top-ranked Gonzaga outlasted No. 17 Saint Mary's 82-69 Tuesday night to win its eighth WCC tournament title in nine years.

"Their offense is as good as any in the country," Gaels coach Randy Bennett said. "There's a lot of things you have to do right to have a chance and we did that for a while, but you have to do it for 40 minutes."

The Zags (26-3) spent a good portion of their 25th straight WCC title game trying to shake gritty St. Mary's. Gonzaga had a hard time getting out in transition, had to work through multiple options to get decent looks and found passing lanes clogged with Gaels.

None of that slowed it down.

The Zags shot 58% and hit nine straight shots during a stretch in the second half to

pull away after Saint Mary's had cut the lead to two. Nembhard and Bolton led the way, combining for 17 straight points to all but lock up a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament for Gonzaga.

"We had to dig very, very deep," Zags coach Mark Few said. "We called on everybody and everybody delivered. That's what makes it so special."

The Gaels (25-7) managed to slow the game's pace to its liking, preventing the Zags from getting out in transition for easy baskets. Gonzaga still found a way to outscore Saint Mary's, making 16 of 23 shots in the second half to win its 20th WCC tournament title.

Logan Johnson led the Gaels with 21 points and Tommy Kuhse added 15.

"It was a closer game than the difference," St. Mary's Bennett said. "I didn't think we played bad. They're good and we didn't defend well enough. You can't do that against them."

The teams have turned the WCC tournament into a running off-Strip show since it moved to Las Vegas in 2009. They have met nine times in the title game at Orleans Arena and one or the other has won the championship every year. The Zags have 10 titles over the 13-year run, the Gaels three (the last in 2019).

The rivals split during the regular season: Gonzaga ran roughshod over Saint Mary's in Spokane, Wash., and the Gaels bullied the Zags for a 10-point win in Moraga, Calif.

The go-round with a title on the line started as a defensive slog, both teams putting up difficult shots and making sloppy mistakes against the pressure. But Gonzaga revved up its smooth-moving machine midway through the first half, going on a 15-4 run to go up 29-18.

The Gaels made a short push, but the Zags had a 38-28 halftime lead despite Timme and Holmgren combining for just four points on 2-for-9 shooting.

Saint Mary's bogged the game down again to start the second half, and turning it into a half-court duel. The Gaels won the efficiency battle, methodically working for good shots to cut Gonzaga's lead to 52-50 midway through. Gonzaga found the right gear again after that, hitting nine straight shots to push the lead to 71-59. Nembhard had 10 points and Bolton seven during the run.

Saint Mary's had no answer this time.

"Rasir started it off and shots opened up for us down the stretch," said Nembhard, who also had seven assists and two steals. "We knew guys had confidence in us to take them and we have confidence in ourselves."

Delaware wins CAA for 1st NCAA berth since 2014

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jyare Davis scored 18 points, Andrew Carr had 17 points and 12 rebounds for his second career double-double and fifth-seeded Delaware beat No. 2 seed UNC Wilmington 59-55 on Tuesday night to claim the Colonial Athletic Association tournament championship.

Delaware (22-12) won its sixth conference tournament title, along with the teams from 1992 (NAC), 1993 (NAC), 1998 (America East), 1999 (America East) and 2014 (CAA). The Hens will be looking for their first NCAA Tournament victory in six tries.

Jaylen Sims scored 18 points on 4-for-15 shooting for UNC Wilmington (23-9), which swept the regular-season series with

Delaware.

Northeast Conference

Bryant 70, Wagner 43: At Smithfield, R.I., Peter Kiss had 34 points as the top-seeded Bulldogs cruised past the Seahawks for the first Northeast Conference tournament championship in program history.

Bryant (22-9) set the Division I program record for wins this season and clinched its first NCAA Tournament berth since beginning the transition from Division II in 2008.

Atlantic Sun

Bellarmine 77, Jacksonville 72: At Louisville, Ky., CJ Fleming scored a career-high 27 points, Dylan Penn added 22 and the Knights defeated the Dol-

phins in the Atlantic Sun Conference tournament, handing the automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament to regular-season champion Jacksonville State.

The Knights, in the second year of a four-year transition to D-I, became heroes in Jacksonville, Ala. Top-seeded JSU fell at home 54-51 to the Dolphins on Saturday, but since Bellarmine is ineligible for the NCAA Tournament, the Gamecocks will go dancing.

Horizon League

Wright State 72, Northern Kentucky 71: At Indianapolis, Trey Calvin made a jumper from just inside the free-throw line with 10.5 seconds left to complete a late comeback from 16 points down as the Raiders

claimed the Horizon League championship and an automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament.

Marques Warrick got open off a screen and drilled a three-pointer with 22 seconds left to put Northern Kentucky in front 71-70. The Norse had time to take the last shot but Bryson Langdon, open at the three-point line, had a defender arrive at the same time as the ball and his shot with a hand in his face was off.

Summit League

South Dakota State 73, North Dakota State 69: At Sioux Falls, S.D., Douglas Wilson had 21 points and 11 rebounds as the Jackrabbits beat the Bison to claim the league's NCAA berth.

Ovechkin ties Jagr for 3rd on career goals list

Associated Press

CALGARY, Alberta — Alex Ovechkin scored twice and moved into a tie for third place on the NHL's career goals list, and Nic Dowd scored the go-ahead goal as the Washington Capitals rallied in the third period and beat the Calgary Flames 5-4 on Tuesday night.

Ovechkin's second goal, into an empty net at 18:12 of the third that gave Washington a 5-3 lead, was his 766th career goal, tying him with Jaromir Jagr for third place in NHL history. Wayne Gretzky leads the list with 894 goals, and Gordie Howe is second with 801.

"Obviously, it's always nice to hear those kind of milestones, numbers," Ovechkin said. "It's pretty big, obviously, and how I always said, being with those names and in this company, it's a pretty cool moment."

The 36-year-old Ovechkin has 36 goals this season and has scored in three straight games.

"I think guys are just excited for him," said Capitals coach Peter Laviolette. "We don't talk about it much. I think everybody knows what's going on and it's awesome to be a part of."

Connor Sheary and Anthony Mantha also scored for Washington (31-18-9), which won its third straight. Vitek Vanecsek made 31 saves and improved to 13-7-5.

Adam Ruzicka, Oliver Kylington and Elias Lindholm scored for Calgary (34-15-7), which had its 13-game unbeaten streak snapped on home ice. Dan Vladar had 22 saves and fell to 8-4-1.

Devils 5, Avalanche 3: Nathan Bastian scored a power-play goal with 6:56 left to put host New Jersey on top as the Devils rallied from a three-goal deficit to beat Colorado.

Tomas Tatar, Ty Smith and Damon Severson also scored for the Devils. Nico Daws made 23 saves for New Jersey, which had its biggest comeback win of the season over the NHL-leading Avs.

Yegor Sharangovich iced the game with a short-handed, empty-net goal. Jesper Bratt added three assists and Jack Hughes had two, with both helping out on the game-winner.

Coyotes 9, Red Wings 2: Nick Schmaltz followed his franchise-record seven-point game with two goals and two assists, and Arizona rolled to an easy win at Detroit.

Schmaltz had two goals and five assists in

an 8-5 victory over Ottawa on Saturday. His 11 points in two games is also a franchise record.

Jakob Chychrun and Nick Ritchie each had two goals and an assist and Barrett Hayton notched four assists for the Coyotes, who have won three straight for the first time this season.

Wild 5, Rangers 2: Kevin Fiala scored twice in the second period, Marcus Foligno added a goal and two assists, and host Minnesota beat New York.

Ryan Hartman and Joel Eriksson Ek also scored for the Wild, who broke a three-game home losing streak and won for only the third time in their last 11 games. All-Star Cam Talbot stopped 23 shots for his third win at home in more than three months.

Dryden Hunt and Mika Zibanejad scored for the Rangers, whose three-game winning streak was stopped.

Predators 2, Stars 1: Roman Josi scored with 1:22 remaining to give host Nashville the win over Dallas.

Ryan Johansen also scored and Juuse Saros made 22 saves for the Predators, who have won two straight.

Panthers 4, Penguins 3: Anthony Duclair scored the tiebreaking goal in the second period and Carter Verhaeghe added an insurance score in the third as Florida won at Pittsburgh.

Duclair and Verhaeghe matched career highs in goals. Duclair scored his 23rd of the season and Verhaeghe his 18th as the Panthers won their fourth straight overall and fifth straight on the road.

Senators 4, Blues 1: Tim Stutzle and Josh Norris each scored a power-play goal and Ottawa won at St. Louis.

Flyers 2, Golden Knights 1: Carter Hart made a career-high 47 saves, Oskar Lindblom and Justin Braun scored, and host Philadelphia won consecutive games for the first time in a month.

Maple Leafs 6, Kraken 4: Auston Matthews had his third hat trick of the season to raise his NHL-leading goal total to 43 as host Toronto rallied to beat Seattle.

Jets 7, Lightning 4: Paul Statny scored twice to lead host Winnipeg past Tampa Bay.

Blackhawks 8, Ducks 3: Patrick Kane had a goal and five primary assists for a career-high six points, and host Chicago beat banged-up Anaheim.

Irving hot from 3, has a rare 5 50-point games

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kyrie Irving hit nine three-pointers and scored a season-high 50 points, and the Brooklyn Nets snapped a four-game skid with a 132-121 victory over the Charlotte Hornets on Tuesday night.

Irving became one of 22 players in NBA history with five 50-point games, according to Basketball Reference. His career high is 57 points on March 12, 2015, while with the Cleveland Cavaliers in an overtime win against San Antonio.

Andre Drummond dominated inside, finishing with 20 points and 14 rebounds for Brooklyn, which got back to .500 on the season and moved into sole possession of eighth place in the Eastern Conference standings, breaking a tie with the Hornets.

Suns 102, Magic 99: DeAndre Ayton and Landry Shamet scored 21 points each, and Mikal Bridges blocked a potential tying three-pointer in the final seconds to help Phoenix win at Orlando.

After Cameron Payne's two free throws put the Suns up by three with 6.9 seconds left, Orlando's Franz Wagner put up a three-pointer that Bridges deflected.

Cavaliers 127, Pacers 124: Darius Garland had 41 points and 13 assists and hit a decisive pair of free throws with 14 seconds left to lead Cleveland to a win at Indiana.

The Pacers went up 124-122 with 40 seconds remaining when Malcolm Brogdon was credited with a basket after Evan Mobley was called for goaltending. Mobley then tied the game on a putback before Garland put the Cavs ahead with his free throws.

Bucks 142, Thunder 115: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 39 points and Milwaukee won at Oklahoma City for its fifth consecutive victory.

Antetokounmpo made 13 of 19 shots and had seven rebounds and seven assists.

Grizzlies 132, Pelicans 111: Ja Morant had 24 points, eight rebounds and eight assists, and Jaren Jackson Jr. and Desmond Bane added 22 points apiece as host Memphis built an early lead and routed New Orleans.

The win solidified the Grizzlies' hold on second place in the Western Conference.

Warriors 112, Clippers 97: Klay Thompson scored 20 points, and host Golden State snapped a five-game skid by beating Los Angeles.