

Mosque hit by Russians; war nears capital

Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine — Russian forces pounding the port city of Mariupol shelled a mosque that was sheltering more than 80 people, including children, the Ukrainian government said Saturday. Fighting also raged in the outskirts of Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, and Russia kept up its bombardment of other resisting cities.

There was no immediate word of casualties from the shelling of Mariupol's elegant, city-center mosque. The encircled city of 446,000 people has endured some of Ukraine's worst misery since Russia invaded, with unceasing barrages thwarting repeated attempts to bring in food, water and medicine, evacuate trapped civilians and even bury the dead.

"They are bombing it (Mariupol) 24 hours a day, launching missiles. It is hatred. They kill children," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said during a video address.

An Associated Press journalist in Mariupol witnessed tanks fir-

ing on a nine-story apartment building and was with a group of hospital workers who came under sniper fire on Friday. A worker shot in the hip survived, but conditions in the hospital were deteriorating: electricity was reserved for operating tables, and people with nowhere else to go lined the hallways.

Among them was Anastasiya Erashova, who wept and trembled as she held a sleeping child. Shelling had just killed her other child as well as her brother's child, Erashova said, her scalp crusted with blood.

"We came to my brother's (place), all of us together. The women and children went underground, and then some mortar struck that building," she said. "We were trapped underground, and two children died. No one was able to save them."

Ukraine's military said Saturday that Russian forces captured Mariupol's eastern outskirts, tightening the armed squeeze on the strategic port. Taking Mari-

pol and other ports on the Azov Sea could allow Russia to establish a land corridor to Crimea, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014.

Zelenskyy encouraged his people to keep up their resistance, which many analysts said has prevented the rapid offensive and military victory the Kremlin likely expected while planning to invade Russia's ex-Soviet neighbor.

Later Saturday, Zelenskyy reported that 1,300 Ukrainian soldiers have died in fighting since the Feb. 24 start of the Russian invasion.

Zelenskyy again deplored NATO's refusal to declare a no-fly zone over Ukraine and said Ukraine has sought ways to procure air defense assets, though he didn't elaborate.

Zelenskyy also accused Russia of employing "a new stage of terror" with the alleged kidnapping of the mayor of Melitopol, a city 119 miles west of Mariupol. After residents of the occupied city dem-

onstrated for the mayor's release Saturday, the Ukrainian leader called on Russian forces to heed the calls.

"Please hear in Moscow!" Zelenskyy said. "Another protest against Russian troops, against attempts to bring the city to its knees."

In multiple areas around the capital, artillery barrages sent residents scurrying for shelter as air raid sirens wailed. Britain's Defense Ministry said Russian ground forces that had been massed north of Kyiv for most of the war had edged to within 15 miles of the city center and spread out, likely to support an attempted encirclement.

Putin held a 90-minute call with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Saturday. Putin spoke about "issues related to agreements under discussion to implement the Russian demands" for ending the war, the Kremlin said without providing details.

Bill boosts funding for troops, families, weapons

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The \$1.5 trillion federal spending bill on its way to President Joe Biden's desk will pour \$728 billion into the military, funding pay raises for troops, assistance for military families, weapon purchases and other defense expenditures for the fiscal year.

The budget bill boosts spending for defense by \$32 billion compared to that of last year, and it was passed by Congress in tandem with a \$13.6 billion emergency aid package for war-torn Ukraine. The emergency aid package includes an additional \$6.5 billion for the Pentagon.

The bipartisan measure funds the 2.7% pay raise that all 2.1 million service mem-

bers received at the beginning of the year through the remainder of fiscal year 2022, which ends Sept. 30. Those salary increases gave junior enlisted troops about \$790 more per year and more senior officers an extra \$2,600. An additional \$167 million will fund a minimum \$15 per hour wage for all Department of Defense employees, according to the House Committee on Appropriations.

Lawmakers also set aside \$278 million in housing assistance for military families grappling with the lingering effects of the coronavirus pandemic on home expenses.

The bill adds \$516 million for the construction and improvement of schools on military bases and gives military families \$24.2 million for assistance with child care costs.

The new funding plan also tackles gender-based violence in the military, appropriating \$540 million for sexual assault prevention and response programs, counsel for victims and other initiatives.

Cancer research by the Defense Department will receive a \$578 million infusion of funding, including \$150 million for a breast cancer research program, according to the House Committee on Appropriations.

Veterans will see increased investment in mental health care initiatives, women's health care and caregiver support programs as well as efforts to combat homelessness.

Significant funds would also be doled out for the procurement of weapons, including \$25.9 billion for 13 new Navy ships and \$8.5 billion for 85 F-35 fighter jets.

Army grants religious waiver for COVID shot

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army for the first time granted a soldier a permanent religion-based exemption from taking the mandatory coronavirus vaccine, according to new service data published Friday.

The new waiver granted for an active-duty soldier comes some three months after the Army's deadline for active troops to become fully vaccinated against the virus. Army officials have denied 536 religion-based waiver requests among the 3,760 soldiers seeking such an exemption, according to the data.

Meanwhile, the Army has yet to discharge any soldiers for refusing the vaccine weeks after the service said it would begin

kicking out those troops would not get the shots. Army Secretary Christine Wormuth ordered service commanders on Jan. 31 to begin the process to involuntarily separate some vaccine refusers "as expeditiously as possible."

The Army is the Pentagon's only service that has yet to remove vaccine refusers. Wormuth said last month that she expected to remove only a "small number" of soldiers for refusing the vaccine and expected many of those denied waivers to take the inoculation ultimately.

Those denied exemptions to the Army's vaccine mandate have seven days to start the vaccination process or file an appeal of their denial before commanders are to begin the process of kicking them out, accord-

ing to Wormuth's January order. The service data published Friday shows Army officials have also granted seven medical-based exemptions for active-duty soldiers and denied 657 requests for medical waivers.

Some 96% of the Army's about 486,000 active-duty soldiers have been fully vaccinated and another 1% were partially inoculated, the service said Friday.

The Army is the third of the Pentagon's military services to grant an active-duty service member an exemption to taking the coronavirus vaccine for "sincerely held religious beliefs." In total, Pentagon officials have now granted 26 religious waivers for active-duty troops across the military, according to data from each service.

5 West Point cadets overdose on spring break in Fla.

The Washington Post

A group of five U.S. Military Academy cadets were among six men who overdosed on a powdery substance believed to have been cocaine laced with the opioid fentanyl while on spring break in South Florida, police said Friday.

Police arrived at a rental home in Wilton Manors, Fla., on Thursday at around 5 p.m. in response to a medical emergency. Upon arrival, the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue administered medical aid to six young men, including four who were found in cardiac arrest on the front lawn, police said. A seventh female patient was later treated after

feeling ill, according to police.

Fort Lauderdale Fire Department Battalion Chief Steve Gollan told WTVJ on Friday that four of the people involved took a substance that appeared to be cocaine laced with fentanyl, and that two other people in the group were exposed to the opioid when they tried to administer CPR. The two people exposed to the fentanyl also went into cardiac arrest, Gollan said.

"Officers from the Wilton Manors Police Department took precautionary measures by evacuating and securing the residence due to the unidentified powdery substance," police said in a news release. "The

Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Hazmat Team responded to the scene, tested the material and discovered the substance was laced with the powerful and deadly synthetic opioid drug, Fentanyl."

All six of the men were administered Narcan, an emergency medicine that restores breathing halted by overdoses of fentanyl, Gollan said.

West Point spokeswoman Beth R. Smith confirmed to The Washington Post that four cadets, including one football player, were taken to the hospital. A fifth cadet was not taken to the hospital, she said. One of the young men involved is not a cadet.

More US troops deploy to Europe in wake of invasion

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — U.S. soldiers continued to deploy Friday to Europe, joining thousands already sent overseas to support NATO allies amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

About 130 soldiers from the 87th Division Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Division Sustainment Brigade, lined up with rucksacks inside a terminal at Hunter Airfield in Savannah before marching outside and boarding their chartered flight. It departed amid grey skies and rain.

Republican U.S. Rep. Earl "Buddy" Car-

ter, of Pooler, Georgia, was among those in attendance. He was seen "fist-bumping" many of the soldiers as they boarded the plane.

The battalion's soldiers are in addition to the estimated 3,800 soldiers from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division who have deployed in recent weeks from nearby Fort Stewart, said Lt. Col. Lindsey Elder, the division's spokesperson.

Spec. Danton Belucio, who has served in the Army for three years, said he looked forward to going on his first deployment.

"I've always wanted to actually go on

one to do something different," he said. "It makes me feel like I'm helping somebody."

Maj. Gen. Charles Costanza, the 3rd Infantry's commander, said recently that soldiers are being told to prepare for six months overseas, though deployments could be lengthened or shortened per developments in Ukraine.

The Pentagon has ordered roughly 12,000 service members from various U.S. bases to Europe, with a couple of thousand more already stationed abroad shifting to other European countries.

Jackson setting collegial tone before her hearings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Engaging in lawyerly small talk, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley was telling Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson last week how he met his wife while clerking at the high court.

Jackson already knew the story, he discovered. She even “filled in some of the details for me.” “So I thought — she’s very well prepared.”

Jackson was prepared, as well, for the Republican senator’s questions about Guantanamo Bay detainees she represented 15 years ago as a public defender and, after that, in private practice. Hawley said after the meeting that he is still concerned about that part of her record but found her forthcoming and engaging, with a “very high degree” of legal acumen. “I think her hearings will be very substantive,” he said.

Jackson, who sits on the federal appeals court and would replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer, is unlikely to need support from Hawley or any other Republican to be confirmed, and may not win over any of them. But as she makes the rounds at the Capitol, traversing from one Senate office to the next before her confirmation hearings later this month, Jackson is networking with zeal, restoring a collegial tone to a con-

firmation process that had grown increasingly embittered during the Trump era.

“I want to make this a bipartisan vote,” Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin said after Breyer announced his retirement. “I think it is not only good for the Supreme Court, it’s good for the Senate.”

Democrats and the White House are hoping that Jackson’s enviable resume, empathetic style and historic potential as the first Black female justice will win at least a few crossover votes. And because her confirmation to replace the liberal-leaning Breyer wouldn’t shift the ideological balance of the court, Republicans aren’t expending much political energy opposing her.

Even if other Republicans don’t vote for Jackson, it’s clear that she has impressed many of them as she has navigated the awkward ritual of the meet and greet. Texas Sen. John Cornyn praised her experience as a public defender and said she was “charming.” North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis noted how prepared she was, a move he said was “wise.” Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse shook her hand and congratulated her while the two smiled for cameras under a large buffalo head on his office wall.

Judge blocks probe of trans youths’ parents

Associated Press

A Texas judge on Friday blocked the state from investigating as child abuse gender confirming-care for transgender youth.

District Judge Amy Clark Meachum issued a temporary injunction preventing the state from enforcing Republican Gov. Greg Abbott’s directive to compel the Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate reports of youth receiving such care.

The injunction broadens Meachum’s earlier order blocking the state’s investigation of the parents of one transgender teenager. The American Civil Liberties Union and Lambda Legal sued on behalf of the parents of the 16-year-old girl over the investigation and Abbott’s directive. Meachum scheduled a trial for July 11 on the challenge to Abbott’s directive.

Meachum ruled that by issuing the direc-

tive without a new law or rule, the governor and officials’ actions “violate separation of powers by impermissibly encroaching into the legislative domain.”

The lawsuit marked the first report of parents being investigated following Abbott’s directive and an earlier nonbinding legal opinion by Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton labeling certain gender-confirming treatments as “child abuse.” DFPS said it had opened nine investigations following the directive and opinion.

The groups also represent a clinical psychologist who has said the governor’s directive forces her to choose between reporting clients to the state or losing her license and other penalties.

Paxton said he planned to appeal the judge’s ruling.

“I’ll win this fight to protect our Texas children,” Paxton tweeted.

Texas clinics’ lawsuit over abortion ban likely ending

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas Supreme Court on Friday dealt essentially a final blow to abortion clinics’ best hopes of stopping a restrictive law that has sharply curtailed the number of abortions in the state since September and will now fully stay in place for the foreseeable future.

The ruling by the all-Republican court was not unexpected, but it slammed the door on what little path forward the U.S. Supreme Court had allowed Texas clinics after having twice declined to stop a ban on abortions after roughly six weeks of pregnancy.

It spells the coming end to a federal lawsuit that abortion clinics filed even before the restrictions took effect in September — and were then rejected at nearly every turn, and in nearly every court, for six months.

“There is nothing left, this case is effectively over with respect to our challenge to the abortion ban,” said Marc Hearn, attorney for the Center for Reproductive Rights, which led the challenge against the Texas law known as Senate Bill 8.

Although Texas abortion clinics are not dropping the lawsuit, they now expect it will be dismissed in the coming weeks or months.

Texas’ law leaves enforcement up to private citizens, who are entitled to collect what critics call a “bounty” of \$10,000 if they bring a successful lawsuit against a provider or anyone who helps a patient obtain an abortion. The Texas law bans abortion after roughly six weeks of pregnancy and makes no exceptions in cases of rape or incest.

In December, the U.S. Supreme Court decided to keep the law in place and allowed only a narrow challenge against the restrictions to proceed. The decision by the Texas Supreme Court turned on whether medical licensing officials had an enforcement role under the law, and therefore, could be sued by clinics that are reaching for any possible way to halt the restrictions.

But writing for the court, Justice Jeffrey Boyd said those state officials have no enforcement authority, “either directly or indirectly.”

N. Korean tests prompt more sanctions

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The U.S. Treasury Department announced new sanctions Friday after North Korea had tested parts of its biggest intercontinental ballistic missile in two recent launches, a sign it is likely to fire that weapon soon to put a spy satellite into orbit in what would be its most significant provocation in years.

The Treasury Department noted a March 4 ballistic missile launch in unveiling restrictions against three Russian-based enti-

ties that aided ongoing development of North Korea's military capabilities.

The companies are Apollon, Zeel—M and RK Briz; two individuals tied to those companies will also be sanctioned. The sanctions block access to any U.S. assets held by these companies, as well as Apollon director Aleksandr Andreyevich Gayevoy and Zeel—M director Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Chasovnikov, who also controls RK Briz.

North Korea's neighbors detected two ballistic launches ear-

lier this month. North Korea later said it was testing cameras and other systems to be installed on a spy satellite but didn't disclose what missiles or rockets it used.

After analyzing the launches, the U.S. and South Korean militaries concluded they involved an ICBM system under development that North Korea first unveiled during a military parade in October 2020.

"The purpose of these tests, which did not demonstrate ICBM range, was likely to evaluate this new system before conducting a

test at full range in the future, potentially disguised as a space launch," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in a statement Thursday.

South Korea released a similar assessment and said North Korea must immediately stop any act that raises tensions and regional security concerns.

The ICBM in focus is the Hwasong-17, North Korea's biggest missile, which could potentially fly up to 9,320 miles, far enough to strike anywhere in the U.S. and beyond.

Croatia criticizes NATO after drone crash

Associated Press

ZAGREB, Croatia — Croatian officials criticized NATO on Saturday for what they said was its slow reaction to a military drone that apparently flew all the way from the Ukrainian war zone over several NATO member states, before crashing in an urban zone of the Croatian capital.

The Russian-made unmanned aircraft crossed Romania and Hungary before entering Croatia and slamming late Thursday into a field near a student dormitory. Some 40 parked cars were damaged but no one was injured after a loud blast.

NATO said the alliance's integrated air

and missile defense had tracked the object's flight path. But the Croatian prime minister said the country's authorities were not informed and that NATO reacted only after questions were posed by journalists.

"We cannot tolerate this situation, nor should it have ever happened," Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said while visiting the crash site.

"This was a pure and clear threat and both NATO and the EU should have reacted," he said. "We will work to raise the readiness not only of us but of others as well."

Plenkovic said a Soviet-era Tu-141

"Strizh" reconnaissance drone flew for over 40 minutes over Hungary and six to seven minutes over Croatia before crashing. Earlier, the Romanian defense authorities said the flying object was in Romania's airspace for only three minutes after crossing from Ukraine, making it hard to intercept.

Plenkovic called on the Hungarian authorities to launch an investigation into why its defenses apparently did not notice the unmanned drone as both Croatia and Romania had little time to react to the fast-moving object.

Both Russia and Ukraine have denied they launched the drone.

Saudi Arabia puts 81 to death in mass execution

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia executed 81 people Saturday convicted of crimes ranging from killings to belonging to militant groups, the largest known mass execution carried out in the kingdom in its modern history.

The executions carried out surpassed even the toll of a January 1980 mass execution for the 63 militants convicted of seizing the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, the worst-ever militant attack to target the kingdom and Islam's holiest site.

It wasn't clear why the kingdom choose Saturday for the executions, though they came as much of the world's attention remained focused on Russia's war on Ukraine. The number of death penalty cases being carried out in Saudi Arabia had dropped

during the coronavirus pandemic, though the kingdom continued to behead convicts under King Salman and his assertive son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The state-run Saudi Press Agency announced Saturday's executions, saying they included those "convicted of various crimes, including the murdering of innocent men, women and children." The kingdom also said some of those executed were members of al-Qaida, Islamic State and also backers of Yemen's Houthi rebels. A Saudi-led coalition has been battling the Iran-backed Houthis since 2015 in neighboring Yemen in an effort to restore the internationally recognized government to power.

The report provided no breakdown for those executed, and did not say where the executions took place.

"The accused were provided with the right to an attorney and were guaranteed their full rights under Saudi law during the judicial process, which found them guilty of committing multiple heinous crimes that left a large number of civilians and law enforcement officers dead," the Saudi Press Agency said.

"The kingdom will continue to take a strict and unwavering stance against terrorism and extremist ideologies that threaten the stability of the entire world," the report added. It did not say how the prisoners were executed, though death-row inmates typically are beheaded in Saudi Arabia.

An announcement by Saudi state television described those executed as having "followed the footsteps of Satan" in carrying out their crimes.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bear who danced at theme park dies at 32

NH LINCOLN — A 32-year-old trained black bear who was a featured performer at a New Hampshire theme park has died.

Victoria the bear was part of a show at Clark’s Trading Post in the White Mountains town of Lincoln. The show features bears rolling barrels and drums, and riding swings and scooters.

Victoria, who was acquired as a cub in 1990 and performed for nearly 20 years until her retirement, was described by the park on Facebook as “a true professional with an admirable work ethic” who enjoyed dancing.

Victoria was the oldest female bear owned by the Clark family; a male bear lived to be 38. She was one of the last bears trained by W. Murray Clark, who died in 2010. He and his brother, Edward, started training bears in 1949, expanding the roadside attraction their parents started in 1928 that featured purebred Eskimo sled dogs.

Man claiming wrongful murder conviction freed

MA BOSTON — Citing withheld evidence, a judge has freed a Boston man who spent 28 years in prison for a killing he says he did not commit, while the court weighs whether he deserves a new trial.

Stephen Pina, 54, hugged his son, 28, when he was released, The Boston Globe reported. Pina was convicted of the 1993 fatal shooting of a man in Boston’s Mission Hill neighborhood.

Judge Peter Krupp, in releasing Pina, cited new revelations that prosecutors and Boston police withheld evidence that could have pointed to another suspect, and buried compromising information about a key witness. The judge said there was a “fairly high” likelihood that Pina would win a new trial.

Pina has not been exonerated. First, the court will hold a hearing next month to take a closer look at the evidence.

Gator with remains in mouth prompts search

FL INDIANTOWN — Sheriff’s office divers searched a gator-infested canal in a Florida wilderness preserve after human remains were found in the mouth of a large alligator, officials said.

Divers for the Martin County Sheriff’s Office searched a large area of the Hungryland Wildlife and Environmental Area in Indiantown after the remains were found inside the park.

A sheriff’s officer sniper kept watch over the search in case any gators got too close to the divers, the sheriff’s office said in a Facebook post.

The park remained closed to visitors during the search.

2 jailed after fight with teens at hockey event

WI McFARLAND — Authorities say two men were jailed on accusations they punched a teenager in the face after a fight broke out among parents and fans at a youth hockey tournament in the Madison area.

Police were called to the McFarland Community Ice

Arena after reports of clashes between parents from Hayward, the visiting team, and teenage fans from McFarland, the home team.

The two men, ages 42 and 41, were arrested and booked into the Dane County Jail on counts of disorderly conduct and physical abuse to a child.

Animal heads possibly linked to sacrifice ritual

RI EAST GREENWICH — Several animal heads found in a plastic bag in East Greenwich last month appear to be related to some sort of religious animal sacrifice ritual, the Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty said.

The bag, originally brought to the attention of police on Feb. 25 near a boat launch, contained a calf’s head, several rooster heads, a lamb head and a kid goat head, the animal welfare group said in a statement.

The bag also contained grains and colored cloth material “associated with previous animal sacrifice investigations,” and two hand-drawn pictures, the organization said. One looked like a letter D with an arrow through it and one looked like a smiling theater mask.

The group asked anyone with information about the bag or the significance of the drawings to contact their investigators.

Man charged after stabbing of woman

ND FARGO — A Fargo man accused of stabbing a woman at least 10 times was charged with attempted murder, aggravated assault and robbery.

The incident happened after Fabian Henderson, 56, and another man went to the woman’s apartment to drink, according to court documents.

The complaint said an argument started when Henderson urinated on the floor of the woman’s bathroom, then became upset when the woman raised her voice.

Henderson began punching the woman before pulling out a knife and stabbing her in the face, shoulder, chest, arm, abdomen and back. Officers found blood on the couch, floor, walls and other parts of the apartment. Henderson is also accused of stealing her phone, KFGO radio reported.

Crews rescue people after zoo ride fails

AL MONTGOMERY — Firefighters had to use a ladder to rescue riders on a skylift ride at the Montgomery Zoo after the attraction broke down.

The Zoofari Skylift Adventure Ride quit operating, leaving people suspended in the air, news outlets reported.

Montgomery Fire/Rescue said an emergency release on the ride was broken so fire crews extended a ladder from a fire engine and used it to pluck six people off the ride. Zoo workers got to four other people using another piece of equipment.

No one was hurt, and the zoo’s program service manager, Steven Pierce, told WSFA-TV that the ride was operating again. The safety mechanism was replaced, inspected and tested, he said.

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Popovich sets regular-season wins mark

Associated Press

Gregg Popovich's name is on top of the NBA regular-season victory list. He thinks of it more as a group accomplishment.

"All of us share in this record," Popovich said Friday night in San Antonio after getting his record-breaking 1,336th victory when the San Antonio Spurs rallied to beat the Utah Jazz 104-102. "It's not mine. It's ours, here in the city."

Popovich broke a tie with Don Nelson, the friend and mentor he served as an assistant under while with Golden State for two seasons. The milestone came in Popovich's 2,030th game and 26th season with the Spurs, the only franchise he has served as head coach for.

"It's just a testament to a whole lot of people," Popovich said. "Something like this does not belong to one individual. Basketball's a team sport. You preach to your players that they have to do it together and that's certainly been the case in my life with all the wonderful players and coaches, the staff that I've been blessed with, the support of this wonderful city. The fans support us no matter what."

Unsurprisingly, the evening was met with zero fanfare. That is, until the end — players mobbed the 73-year-old Popovich when the game was over, jumping around and hugging him until he could break free and headed to the locker room. Popovich was doused with a cooler of water as huge roars could be heard from the locker room as the Spurs celebrated along with Hall of Famer David Robinson.

"Tonight, he had to enjoy it," Spurs point

guard Dejounte Murray said. "He had no option."

Praise or celebration of any achievement is typically brusquely deflected or simply ignored by Popovich. To hear Popovich explain it, he simply shows up to work and rolls the ball onto the court.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

He's the fourth coach, going back to the end of the NBA's first season, to stand atop the wins list. Red Auerbach held the mark for about a half-century, followed by Lenny Wilkens, followed by Nelson — and now, Popovich.

"The ironic thing about this is Nellie gave me a job when I didn't have one back in '92," Popovich said. "He took me on. To be in this position, as the same breath as him, is in my opinion undeserving and quite awkward because he was so wonderful in saving my family's ass. So, it's ironic that I'm sitting here in this situation."

Popovich's first stint in San Antonio ended in 1992, working for Larry Brown — until the whole coaching staff got fired. That's when Popovich got a job as an assistant in Golden State, working for Nelson for two seasons. He returned to the Spurs in 1994, and took over as coach in 1996.

The Spurs released a video from Nelson after the game, congratulating Popovich — one of his best friends — and telling him how proud he is of his former assistant's accomplishments "and all the wonderful things you've done for basketball, worldwide."

"I'm so proud of you for doing it," Nelson said. "I couldn't wait for this day to happen."

Popovich has won five NBA championships, 13 division titles and was recently named one of the 15 greatest coaches in league history.

"Gregg Popovich's success with the Spurs is unprecedented in our league so it's only fitting that he now holds the record for most career wins," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement.

San Antonio won 50 games for a league-record 18 straight seasons from 2000-2017 under Popovich. The Spurs matched a league record with 22 straight playoff appearances but have missed two straight postseasons since their streak ended in 2017.

While the glory days seem distant, Popovich continues plugging along.

Popovich joked that coaching Duncan, Parker and Ginobili had grown "boring" because they knew everything. The current roster is the antithesis of that.

This year's team is the youngest of Popovich's career. The Spurs have fully embraced a rebuild expedited by Kawhi Leonard's forced departure from San Antonio along with the retirement of the Big Three.

Murray, who has emerged as the team's newest star, had 27 points and nine rebounds to lead the Spurs past the Jazz. Murray made two free throws with 4.8 seconds and 1 of 2 with a second remaining to seal the victory.

"We did it for Pop," Murray said. "(We wanted Popovich to) really take this in and be grateful for it. This doesn't happen. It's rare. He deserves it. He's a great man. A great coach."

James scores 50 to rally Lakers past Wizards

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James continues to put on age-defying performances.

The 37-year old Lakers superstar had 50 points Friday night and became the oldest player to have multiple 50-point games in a season in Los Angeles' 122-109 victory over the Washington Wizards.

James surpassed Bernard King, who was 34 when he did it in 1990-91 with Washington.

"He's really good at basketball, that LeBron James," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "Just an incredible, unbelievable, epic performance."

It was the 15th 50-point game in James' 19-year career, including the postseason.

Raptors 117, Suns 112: Gary Trent Jr. scored 42 points and visiting Toronto held off NBA-leading Phoenix.

Grizzlies 118, Knicks 114: Ja Morant keyed a fourth-quarter rally by scoring 15 of his 37 points in the period to lead host Memphis past New York.

Celtics 114, Pistons 103: Jayson Tatum had 31 points and eight rebounds, Jaylen Brown added 22 points and eight rebounds and Boston beat visiting Detroit for its fifth victory in a row.

Heat 117, Cavaliers 105: Bam Adebayo had 30 points and 17 rebounds, Jimmy Butler added 24 points and a pair of big third-quarter runs helped host Miami beat Cleveland.

Mavericks 113, Rockets 100: Luka

Doncic scored 30 points, Dwight Powell had 26 and visiting Dallas built a big lead and coasted past Houston.

Hawks 112, Clippers 106: Trae Young scored 27 points to lead six Atlanta scorers in double figures and the host Hawks held off Los Angeles.

Hornets 142, Pelicans 120: Miles Bridges had 27 points and nine assists, Terry Rozier highlighted his 27-point performance with seven three-pointers and visiting Charlotte routed undermanned New Orleans.

Magic 118, Timberwolves 110: Mo Bamba scored 27 points and host Orlando overcame an 18-point deficit to end Minnesota's winning streak at six games.

Camps open, players ready for opener

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Arizona Diamondbacks catcher Carson Kelly and manager Torey Lovullo shared a hug, a grin and a few slaps on the back under the bright blue sky that the Cactus League is known for providing.

The bickering is over. Baseball is back.

A day after owners and players reached agreement to end a 99-day lockout, all 30 spring training camps opened across Arizona and Florida. Now the four-week sprint begins in earnest to get ready for an April 7 opening day.

“We’ve been waiting for this for a while,” D-backs infielder Josh Rojas said before Friday’s workout. “It’s good

we got everything done. I did my best to stay ready for this day, whenever it came.”

Cleveland ace Shane Bieber limbered up in Guardians gear, Toronto Blue Jays star Vladimir Guerrero Jr. began taking grounders and new St. Louis Cardinals manager Oliver Marmol signed autographs as spring training for major leaguers finally began.

At the complex in Goodyear that Cleveland shares with the Cincinnati Reds, some big names got loose.

Bieber, the 2020 AL Cy Young Award winner, and All-Star third baseman José Ramírez were among the players sporting Guardians garb who went through light workouts following check-in physicals. The team formally

changed its name from Indians following last season.

Bo Bichette and José Berríos were among those joining Guerrero in getting busy at the Blue Jays’ camp in Dunedin, Fla. Sunday is the mandatory reporting date for players, but many were eager to get to work early.

Rojas was among a large contingent of Diamondbacks players who reported to camp in Scottsdale. Like many players, he had been attending informal workouts at various fields in Arizona while labor talks intensified. The union had even set up a makeshift base in Mesa, Arizona, at a multi-purpose sports facility, but that was starting to clear out on Friday as players reported to their regular camps.

“We did a really good job staying ready,” Rojas said. “There were lots of places where 15, 20, 30 guys were meeting up, running our own practices. Groundballs, live bullpens, live at-bats, hitting on the field.”

In Tampa, Fla., New York Yankees star DJ LeMahieu was among a multiteam group working out for the last time at a high school field less than a mile from New York’s complex. Boston’s Rafael Devers and Philadelphia’s J.T. Realmuto, Didi Gregorius and Andrew McCutchen also have been taking part over the last month. LeMahieu hugged and shook hands with the other players after the session.

“For sure, officially the last unofficial workout,” he said.

Bailey, Nelson pace Isles past Jets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Josh Bailey scored twice and Brock Nelson added a goal and an assist as the New York Islanders beat the Winnipeg Jets 5-2 Friday night.

Anders Lee and Cal Clutterbuck also scored, Anthony Beauvillier and Jean-Gabriel Pageau each had two assists and Semyon Varlamov stopped 27 shots in the Islanders’ second win in two nights.

New York’s Barry Trotz became the third coach in NHL history reach 900 wins, joining Scotty Bowman and Joel Quenneville.

“That’s Hall of Fame career for a Hall of Fame person,” Bailey said of Trotz’s milestone. “It’s a big, big accomplishment and we’re happy for him no question.”

Despite the win, the Islanders are 18 points behind Washington for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

“Everything’s obviously better and feels right when you’re winning,” Nelson said. “Nobody is content or happy with where we’re at. You can look back and reflect but it’s not going to change anything. You just have to move forward and try to string some together and see what happens.”

Kyle Connor and Blake Wheeler each scored for Winnipeg, which lost for the third time in five games (2-2-1). Connor Helle-

buyck made 33 saves in his league leading 49th start.

Bailey, who had a goal and an assist Thursday night in a 6-0 win over Columbus, scored his second of the game and restored a two-goal advantage for New York at 7:14 of the third period. He controlled a rebound from Adam Pelech’s slap shot and deposited a backhand into the back of the net to give the Islanders a 4-2 lead.

“He deserved to get the two goals,” Trotz said of Bailey. “His mind is in the right spot. He’s shooting the puck, he’s moving his feet and he’s got that little edge right now.”

Clutterbuck had an empty-netter with 4:44 remaining to seal the win.

Wheeler had cut the Jets’ deficit to 3-2 with his eighth of the season 20 seconds into the third. The puck took a funky bounce and deflected off New York defenseman Scott Mayfield before fluttering across the goal line.

The Islanders took a 3-1 lead after scoring twice in 40 seconds early in the second.

“Obviously very frustrating starting the second period like that,” Ehlers said. “We were watching the puck, it’s as simple as that.”

Bailey buried his own rebound and scored for the second straight game at 1:09.

Pens pull away, defeat Knights

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Pittsburgh Penguins general manager Ron Hextall began the day by saying he believes the pieces are in place for a long playoff run even if he opts not to be a major player at the trade deadline.

Hextall’s team ended it by showing flashes that their boss might be right.

Mark Friedman’s first goal in 10 months early in the third period broke open a tie game and Bryan Rust’s 20th goal of the season provided some late cushion as the Penguins beat the Vegas Golden Knights 5-2 on Friday night.

Blue Jackets 3, Wild 2 (SO): Yegor Chinakhov scored the shootout winner after Zach Werenski tied the game with 30.4 seconds left in regulation to rally host Columbus past Minnesota and snap a four-game losing streak. Chinakhov also scored in the first period, and Elvis Merzlikins stopped 36 shots in the win for the Blue Jackets.

Capitals 4, Canucks 3 (OT): Lars Eller scored 42 seconds into overtime to lift Washington to a win at Vancouver.

Evgeny Kuznetsov scored three goals for his second career hat trick and Alex Ovechkin had two assists for the Capitals, who are 4-0-1 in their last five.

Aggies stun No. 4 Tigers for likely bid

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Tyrece Radford scored 19 points and Quenton Jackson made five throws in the final minute Friday as Texas A&M beat fourth-ranked Auburn 67-62 in the quarterfinals of the Southeastern Conference Tournament, a loss that could wind up costing the Tigers a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

Jackson also had a dunk and a key block late, finishing with 17 points to help the Aggies (22-11) follow up an 83-80 overtime victory over Florida with another strong outing that enhanced the surging team's chances of landing at least an at-large berth in the NCAA field.

Jabari Smith led Auburn (27-5) with 17 points. Walker Kessler had 16 points, while Wendell Green Jr. made four long threes to fuel a late comeback that fell short when Jackson delivered a dunk out of a timeout and went 5 of 6 from the foul line down the stretch.

Auburn, ranked No. 1 much of the winter and the SEC regular-season champion, fell to 3-3 over its last six games.

Texas A&M won its sixth straight and seventh of eight since a midseason tailspin.

No. 2 Arizona 82, Colorado 72: Azoulas Tubelis had 20 points and 11 rebounds and the Wildcats pulled away late to beat the Buffaloes in the Pac-12 Tournament semifinals in Las Vegas.

Arizona played without point guard Kerr Kriisa, who sprained his right ankle in the closing seconds of an 84-80 win over Stanford in the quarterfinals.

The top-seeded Wildcats (30-3) used a 7-0 run to go up 78-65 with just over a minute left. The Wildcats will play No. 13 UCLA in the title game Saturday night.

No. 4 seed Colorado (21-11) set a Pac-12 record with 16 3-pointers, but went 8 for 30 on two-pointers to miss out on a chance to play in consecutive Pac-12 title games. Jabari Walker led Colorado with 19 points, but had just two in the second half.

No. 5 Kentucky 77, Vanderbilt 71: TyTy Washington scored 25 points, Oscar Tshiebwe tied a half-century-old school record and the Wildcats beat the Commodores in the quarterfinals of the SEC Tournament in Tampa, Fla.

Washington was at his best during a second-half spurt, scoring eight straight points that helped third-seeded Kentucky (26-6) create a little breathing room in a back-and-forth game. He added four free throws in the final 19 seconds to seal the victory.

Jordan Wright led Vandy (17-16) with 27 points and Scottie Pippen Jr. cooled off with 10.

The Wildcats play No. 9 Tennessee in the semifinals.

No. 6 Kansas 75, TCU 62: Ochai Agbaji scored 22 points, two of them coming on a jaw-dropping alley-oop dunk midway through the second half, and the Jayhawks cruised over the Horned Frogs and into the Big 12 Tournament title game in Kansas City, Mo.

Mitch Lightfoot added 15 points while playing extended minutes in place of injured big man David McCormack, and Remy Martin finished with 10 as top-seeded Kansas advanced to play Texas Tech or Oklahoma on Saturday night.

The Jayhawks (27-6) will be going for their 16th conference tournament title and 12th in the Big 12 era.

Chuck O'Bannon had 15 points to lead TCU (20-12). Mike Miles shook off a shooting slump to add 14.

No. 7 Duke 80, Miami 76: Paolo Banchero had 18 points and 11 rebounds and the Blue Devils held off the Hurricanes with free throws in the final minute as Duke and retiring coach Mike Krzyzewski — advanced to the ACC championship in New York.

Top-seeded Duke (28-5) will face the winner of the second semifinal between third-seeded North Carolina and seventh-seeded Virginia Tech on Saturday night.

AJ Griffin scored 21 points, including three free throws in the final 20 seconds to seal Coach K's 22nd appearance in the ACC title game. Krzyzewski has won a conference-record 15 ACC championships.

Kameron McGusty scored 24 points to lead the Hurricanes (23-10), who beat the Blue Devils on the road earlier this season and appear to be in solid shape for an NCAA Tournament bid.

No. 8 Villanova 63, No. 20 Connecticut 60: Jermaine Samuels had 21 points and 12 rebounds and Brandon Slater had 15 points and a highlight-reel block to help the second-seeded Wildcats beat the Huskies and reach the Big East Tournament championship game in New York.

Second-seeded Villanova (25-7) plays Creighton on Saturday.

No. 9 Tennessee 72, Mississippi St. 59: Josiah-Jordan James led five players in double figures 16 points and scored 14 of them during a six-minute stretch in which the Vols pulled away for the win over the

Bulldogs in the quarterfinals of the SEC tournament in Tampa, Fla.

No. 9 Purdue 69, Penn State 61: Jaden Ivey scored 17 points and Zach Edey had 15 to lead the Boilermakers past the Nittany Lions in the Big Ten Tournament Quarterfinals in Indianapolis.

Creighton 85, No. 11 Providence 58: Arthur Kaluma scored 17 points and keyed an overwhelming blitz that sent the Bluejays to a stunning rout of the Friars and into the Big East championship game.

Michigan State 69, No. 12 Wisconsin 63: Tyson Walker scored nine of his 11 points in the final minute and a half to send the Spartans to a win in the Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 13 UCLA 69, No. 21 Southern California 59: Jaime Jaquez Jr. scored 19 points, Jules Bernard added 15 and the Bruins won in the Pac-12 semifinals.

No. 14 Texas Tech 56, Oklahoma 55: Clarence Nagolny made his only points of the night on go-ahead foul shots with less than a minute left and the Red Raiders escaped with a win in the Big 12 Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 15 Arkansas 79, LSU 67: Au'Diese Toney scored 22 points, JD Notae added 19 and the Razorbacks advanced to the SEC Tournament semis.

Indiana 65, No. 16 Illinois 63: Trayce Jackson-Davis scored 21 points, including three free throws in the closing seconds, and the Hoosiers beat the top-seeded Illini in the Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 18 Houston 69, Cincinnati 56: Fabian White Jr. had 18 points with eight rebounds and the Cougars overcame a 10-point deficit in the second half in an American Athletic Conference tournament quarterfinal in Fort Worth, Texas.

San Diego St. 63, No. 23 Colorado St. 58: Trey Pulliam had 11 points and six assists to lead the Aztecs in the semifinals of the Mountain West Tournament.

No. 24 Iowa 84, Rutgers 74: Keegan Murray had 26 points and eight rebounds to lead the Hawkeyes in the Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals.

Virginia Tech 72, No. 25 North Carolina 59: Darius Maddox, Keve Aluma and the Hokies dominated the Tar Heels to advance to the Atlantic Coast Conference championship game for the first time — and prevent another matchup between North Carolina and rival Duke.