

Marines shut down sniper platoons

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps has phased out its elite scout sniper platoons as part of a large-scale redesign of the service's infantry battalions to adapt to future warfare, service officials said Wednesday.

Scout sniper platoons have been part of Marine Corps infantry battalions since the 1940s and their exploits as the service's elite marksman units were seen during every major U.S.-involved conflict since World War II. The platoons were responsible for carrying out various operations, such as targeting enemies from a distance and aiding with reconnaissance.

However, as the Marine Corps modernizes and adapts for future warfare, giving infantry battalions more information-gathering capability is more necessary than giving them standalone scout sniper platoons, service officials said.

The legacy platoons are being replaced by units that specialize more in all-weather reconnaissance — a need revealed by warfighter tests and experiments.

"The Marine Corps is constantly evaluat-

ing our organizational structure and capabilities to ensure we are prepared for the future fight," said Capt. Ryan Bruce, a Marine spokesman.

But the Marines emphasized they are not getting rid of snipers. Officials said commanders will still have long-range rifle capabilities available in the field, when needed.

"Precision rifle capability will remain within the infantry company and the Marine Corps will continue to maintain school-trained snipers within Marine reconnaissance and Marine special operations units," Bruce said.

The new scout platoons will have roughly two dozen troops — including a first lieutenant and infantry gunnery sergeant — and will be part of reconnaissance battalions rather than infantry battalions. With the transition, the Marine Corps is also creating a reconnaissance sniper specialty and maintaining "designated marksmen" and sniper weapons in rifle companies.

The scout sniper platoons were introduced in 1943 during World War II. The first steps away from dedicated scout sniper pla-

toons began in 2020, but the Marine Corps this week directed the full transition to happen immediately, Bruce said.

The move has drawn criticism from some retired Marine snipers.

"We hoped against hope that this day would never come," retired Marine Tim Parkhurst, president of the USMC Scout Sniper Association, wrote in a letter to the group's members this week. "Marine scout snipers have at all times since World War II been a tremendously cost-effective force multiplier and agent of change on the battlefield."

He wrote the decision weakens the Marine Corps' warfighting capability.

"Replacing an 18-man scout sniper platoon with a 26-man scout platoon will not solve the 'all-weather, information-gathering' problem," Parkhurst wrote. "Retaining the skill set and the combat capability of scout snipers by offering a viable career path to scout snipers and providing them with more engaged leadership might. We urge the commandant of the Marine Corps to reconsider this ill-advised policy decision."

Russia claims Ukraine crossborder sabotage raid

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian officials accused Ukrainian saboteurs of crossing into western Russia and firing on civilians in local villages Thursday. Ukraine denied the claim and warned that Moscow could use it to justify stepping up its own attacks in the ongoing war.

The exact circumstances of the incident reported in the Bryansk region were unclear, including what the strategic purpose of such an attack might be.

If confirmed, it would be another indication following drone attacks earlier this week that Kyiv could be stepping up pressure against Moscow by

exposing Russian defensive weaknesses, embarrassing the Kremlin and sowing unease among Russian civilians.

Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Ukrainian "terrorists" for an incursion, claiming that they deliberately targeted civilians, including children in "yet another terror attack, another crime."

"They infiltrated the area near the border and opened fire on civilians," Putin said during a video call. "They saw a civilian vehicle with civilians, with children in it and they fired on them."

The alleged incursion came just days after Putin ordered the Federal Security Service,

the main KGB successor agency, to tighten controls on Russia's border with Ukraine.

While Russian war hawks have expressed dismay about what they have seen as Putin's reluctance to declare martial law and a sweeping mobilization of soldiers, the Russian leader's comments Thursday didn't appear to signal any such moves.

Putin blamed the attack on "neo-Nazis" and said it confirmed that Russia did the right thing by launching its "special military operation" in Ukraine. "I repeat again: They will not succeed and we will finish pushing them out," he said.

When he ordered the invasion, the Russian leader vowed to "denazify" Ukraine, alleging that radical neo-Nazi groups dominate the country led by a Jewish president.

Kyiv and its Western allies dismissed his assertion as a bogus cover for an unprovoked act of aggression.

Ukraine's military intelligence representative, Andrii Cherniak, saw the Russian claims as evidence that Moscow is facing what Kyiv alleges is an uprising among its own disgruntled people.

"This was done by the Russians; Ukraine has nothing to do with it," he told The Associated Press.

Navy gives leaders mental health ‘playbook’

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has mapped out a mental health strategy in a new manual that’s designed to spot potential problems among sailors and address them as soon as possible.

The Navy announced “The Mental Health Playbook” on Tuesday and said the manual aims to help Navy leaders in “preventing, mitigating or addressing mental health issues within their commands.”

“This work begins well before a mental health issue occurs,” the service said in a statement. “It starts with the climate our leaders create and how they lead the people in their care.”

The Navy’s mental health manual comes days after the Defense Department released a report examining the suicide crisis in the military. According to Pentagon data, deaths by suicide across the U.S. military have been on an upward trend for the past 15 years, prompting the Defense Department to introduce programs and tools to provide help to reduce suicides. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has pledged to invest millions of dollars in military suicide prevention efforts.

The playbook notes that mental health troubles have been a concern in the U.S. military throughout its history, and such emotional crises sometimes lead to suicides. Compounding the problem

are various obstacles that can make it difficult for sailors to find help and commanders to provide help.

“Sailors may feel more comfortable talking to peers and may be more willing to seek support when it is delivered by a friend,” according to the 28-page manual.

The playbook emphasizes the importance of leaders showing compassion, positive reinforcement and support to sailors who might be struggling with mental health.

“Critical to establishing the right type of preventative climate is eliminating stigma for talking about issues and seeking mental health care,” the manual reads. “There is no better way to do this

than for leaders to be transparent and vulnerable, role modeling the behavior they need all hands to practice.”

The playbook identifies three roles for Navy leaders: setting conditions, identifying problems and helping sailors get treatment with minimum interruption.

In setting conditions, leaders should build a climate of trust and respect and eliminate the negative stigma that often accompanies mental health situations, according to the manual. Leaders are then urged to look for behavioral changes and possibly consult experts, and finally help sailors get the treatment that they need while allowing them to remain part of the team.

3 hangman nooses found on Navy destroyer

New York Daily News

The U.S. Navy is investigating a trio of hangman nooses aboard the Virginia-based destroyer Laboon.

Those nooses targeted a specific service member whose name and race were not disclosed, according to Navy Times. They were reportedly found in separate instances near the same sailor’s sleeping rack last month.

Lt. Cmdr. Jason S. Fischer told Navy Times the individual targeted was offered a transfer, which was declined.

“The ship investigated this incident expeditiously after the rope was discovered,” he said, but provided no further details about the findings of the investigation.

This isn’t the first time a noose has been found aboard a Navy ship. Navy Times re-

ported that a noose was found on a Black seaman’s bunk on the Navy cruiser Lake Champlain in 2021 in San Diego. A naval investigation led officials to a sailor who reportedly confessed to the infraction.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin called on military officials to clamp down on racial extremism following the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol by right-wing extremists, according to Military Times.

Iranian missiles seized by US, British navies

Stars and Stripes

A British navy frigate aided by a U.S. Navy surveillance plane seized anti-tank missiles and other weapons aboard a vessel in the Gulf of Oman, officials from both countries said Thursday.

Iranian versions of Russian 9M133 Kornet anti-tank guided missiles and medium-range ballistic missile components were captured late last month, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet said in a statement.

The vessel was tracked traveling south at high speed in the dark by a Navy drone and a British helicopter on Feb. 23, according to the British Defense Ministry as cited by Reuters.

HMS Lancaster intercepted the vessel, which originated from Iran and was traveling along a route historically used for trafficking illegal weapons to Yemen, the U.S. statement said.

The frigate hailed the vessel, which then headed for Iranian territorial waters. It was

stopped while still in international waters by a team of Royal Marines, who boarded the vessel, the British Defense Ministry said.

U.S. officials have said Iran is providing training, weapons and money to Shiite Houthi rebels in their nearly nine-year war against Yemen’s Sunni-majority government.

“This is the seventh illegal weapon or drug interdiction in the last three months and yet another example of Iran’s increas-

ing malign maritime activity across the region,” Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of NAVCENT/5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, said in a statement.

Those busts have included more than 5,000 weapons, about 1.5 million rounds of ammunition and 30 anti-tank guided missiles, the U.S. Navy said.

The interdictions have also netted \$80 million in illegal drugs, such as methamphetamine and hashish.

Intel: No sign adversaries behind 'Havana syndrome'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence agencies cannot link a foreign adversary to any of the incidents associated with so-called “Havana syndrome,” the hundreds of cases of brain injuries and other symptoms reported by American personnel around the world.

The findings released Wednesday by U.S. intelligence officials cast doubt on the long-standing suspicions by many people who reported cases that Russia or another country may have been running a global campaign to harass or attack Americans using some form of directed energy. Most of the cases investigated appear to have different causes, from environmental factors to undiagnosed illnesses, said the officials, who say they have not found a single explanation for most or all of the reports.

Instead, officials say, there is evidence that foreign countries were not involved. In some cases, the U.S. detected among adversarial governments confusion about the allegations and suspicions that Havana syndrome was an American plot. And investigators found “no credible evidence” that any adversary had obtained a weapon that could cause the reported symptoms or a listening device that might inadvertently in-

jure people.

The Biden administration has been under pressure to respond to Havana syndrome cases from government personnel who have reported injuries and their advocates. President Joe Biden in 2021 signed into law the HAVANA Act, which provided compensation to people deemed to have sustained injuries consistent with what the government calls “anomalous health incidents.”

Mark Zaid, a lawyer for more than two dozen people who have reported injuries, said the new assessment lacked transparency and left key questions unanswered.

“Until the shrouds of secrecy are lifted and the analysis that led to today’s assertions are available and subject to proper challenge, the alleged conclusions are substantively worthless,” he said in a statement. “But the damage it has caused to the morale of the victims, particularly by deflecting from the government’s failure to evaluate all the evidence, is real and must be condemned.”

Authorities in Havana said the findings reflect what Cuba has repeatedly stated: that no attacks occurred.

“We’re not surprised,” Johana Tablada, deputy director of the U.S. division of Cuba’s Foreign Ministry, said.

New cybersecurity strategy in US includes preemptive action, liability

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government plans to expand minimum cybersecurity requirements for critical sectors and to be faster and more aggressive in preventing cyberattacks before they can occur, including by using military, law enforcement and diplomatic tools, according to a Biden administration strategy document released Thursday.

The Democratic administration also intends to work with Congress on legislation that would impose legal liability on software makers whose products fail to meet basic cybersecurity safeguards, officials said.

The strategy largely codifies work that has already been underway during the last two years over a spate of high-profile ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure. An attack on a major fuel pipeline that caused pan-

ic at the pump and resulted in an East Coast fuel shortage as well as other attacks focused fresh attention on cybersecurity. But officials hope the new strategy lays the groundwork for countering an increasingly challenging cyber environment.

“This strategy will position the United States and its allies and partners to build that digital ecosystem together, making it more easily and inherently defensible, resilient, and aligned with our values,” the document states.

President Joe Biden’s administration has already taken steps to impose cybersecurity regulations on certain critical industry sectors, such as electric utilities and nuclear facilities, and the strategy calls for minimum requirements to be expanded to other vital sectors.

SpaceX launches astronauts from US, Russia, UAE

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — SpaceX launched four astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA on Thursday, including the first person from the United Arab Emirates going up for an extended monthslong stay.

The Falcon rocket bolted from Kennedy Space Center shortly after midnight, illuminating the night sky as it headed up the East Coast.

Nearly 80 spectators from the United Arab Emirates watched from the launch site as astronaut Sultan al-Neyadi — only the second Emirati to fly to space — blasted off on his six-month mission.

Half a world away in Dubai and elsewhere across the UAE, schools and offices broadcast the launch live.

Also riding the Dragon capsule that’s due at the space station on Friday: NASA’s Stephen Bowen, a retired Navy submariner who logged three space shuttle flights, and Warren “Woody” Hoburg, a former research scientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and space newbie, and Andrei Fedyaev, a space rookie who’s retired from the Russian Air Force.

“Welcome to orbit,” SpaceX Launch Control radioed, noting liftoff occurred four years to the day after the capsule’s first orbital test flight. “If you enjoyed your ride, please don’t forget to give us five stars.”

The first attempt to launch them was called off Monday at the last minute because of a clogged filter in the engine ignition system.

“It may have taken two times, but it was worth the trip,” Bowen said.

NASA’s space operations mission chief, Kathy Lueders, said Thursday’s launch enhanced a night sky already showcasing a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter. The two planets have appeared side by side all week, seeming to grow ever closer.

The space station newcomers will replace a U.S.-Russian-Japanese crew that has been up there since October. The other station residents are two Russians and an American whose six-month stay was doubled, until September, after their Soyuz capsule sprang a leak. A replacement Soyuz arrived last weekend.

Al-Neyadi, a communications engineer, thanked everyone in Arabic and then English once reaching orbit. “Launch was incredible. Amazing,” he said.

Applications for jobless claims fall to 190K

Associated Press

The number of people applying for unemployment benefits in the U.S. fell for a third straight week. That's good news for American workers, but potentially bad news in the fight against inflation by the Federal Reserve, which has been ratcheting up its benchmark interest rate for a year in an effort to cool the economy, loosen the labor market and tame inflation.

Applications for jobless claims in the U.S. for the week ending Feb. 25 fell to 190,000 from 192,000 the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday. It's the seventh straight week claims were under 200,000.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly volatility, rose by 1,750 to 193,000, remaining be-

low the 200,000 threshold for the sixth straight week.

Applications for unemployment benefits are considered a proxy for the number layoffs in the U.S.

In February, the Fed raised its main lending rate by 25 basis points, its eighth rate hike in less than a year. The central bank's benchmark rate is now in a range of 4.5% to 4.75%, its highest level in 15 years.

The Fed's hawkish interest rate policy appeared to be slowing inflation, but recent data has suggested otherwise. Some economists now expect the Fed to raise its benchmark rate by a substantial half-percentage point when it meets later this month.

The Fed's rate hikes have done little to cool a red-hot U.S. job market, which has

put upward pressure on wages, and as a result, prices.

Last month, the government reported that employers added a better-than-expected 517,000 jobs in January and that the unemployment rate dipped to 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969. Fed policymakers have forecast that the unemployment rate would rise to 4.6% by the end of this year, a sizable increase historically associated with recessions.

Though the U.S. labor market remains strong, layoffs have been mounting in the technology sector, where many companies overhired after a pandemic boom. IBM, Microsoft, Amazon, Salesforce, Facebook parent Meta, Twitter and DoorDash have all announced layoffs in recent months.

Tennessee advances measure to restrict drag shows

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee lawmakers advanced legislation Thursday that would severely limit where certain drag shows can take place, a proposal Republican Gov. Bill Lee has vowed to sign into law.

No other state has acted as fast as Tennessee to ensure that drag shows cannot take place in public or in front of children. And the move lines up with Tennessee being among the states passing the most anti-LGBTQ legislation in the past few years.

Under the Tennessee bill, the words "drag show" are not explicitly stated. Instead, the legislation changes the definition of adult cabaret in Tennessee's law to mean "adult-oriented performances that are harmful to minors." The bill also says that "male or female impersonators" now fall under adult cabaret among topless dancers, go-go danc-

ers, exotic dancers and strippers.

The proposal then bans adult cabaret from taking place on public property or any place where minors might be present. It threatens performers with a misdemeanor charge, or a felony if it's a repeat offense.

Lee has 10 days to sign the bill into law, but that countdown doesn't start until top legislative leaders send him the legislation, which can take a few days.

Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson, the Republican bill sponsor, has said the bill would address "sexually suggestive drag shows" that are inappropriate for children.

In Tennessee and across the country, drag has been cast in a misleading light by right-wing activists and politicians who complain about the "sexualization" or "grooming" of children.

Tennessee's action follows a recent bill

signing by Arkansas' governor of new restrictions on "adult-oriented" performances. That bill originally targeted drag shows but was scaled back following complaints it discriminated against the LGBTQ community.

Drag does not typically involve nudity or stripping, which are more common in the separate art of burlesque. Explicitly sexual and profane language is common in drag performances, but such language is typically toned down when children are present, or else venues or performers alert parents beforehand that they should reconsider whether to bring their kids along.

"Drag is a longstanding, celebratory form of entertainment and a meaningful source of employment for many across the state," Human Rights Campaign Legal Director Sarah Warbelow said in a statement last week.

Tesla to cut costs of next generation of cars in half

Associated Press

DETROIT — Tesla says it will cut the cost of its next generation of vehicles in half, largely by using innovative manufacturing techniques and smaller factories.

CEO Elon Musk and other executives outlined the goals during a 3½-hour investor day presentation at Tesla's Austin, Texas, headquarters Wednesday as they presented the company's third master plan.

The changes could bring the cost of a new generation of vehicles to around \$25,000.

Many investors were hoping to catch a glimpse of the next generation vehicles, but Musk said they wouldn't be shown until a proper product unveiling.

"We'd be jumping the gun if we answer your question," about the new vehicles, he told an analyst.

Shares of Tesla fell nearly 6% in after-hours trading during the presentation that ended just after 8 p.m. Eastern time.

Musk announced that Tesla plans to build a new factory in Mexico near Monterrey.

Company executives said it will not take production from any other factories, where Tesla expects to expand production. They said the Mexican plant would build the next generation of vehicles, which also will be built at other factories.

It's likely that the next generation vehicles will be smaller than the current ones to bring the prices down, but that wasn't clear from the presentation. Many automakers build smaller vehicles in Mexico to save on labor costs and preserve profit margins.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bryant family OKs \$28M photo lawsuit settlement

CA LOS ANGELES — The family of the late Kobe Bryant has agreed to a \$28.5 million settlement with Los Angeles County to resolve the remaining claims in a lawsuit over deputies and firefighters sharing grisly photos of the NBA star, his 13-year-old daughter and other victims killed in a 2020 helicopter crash, attorneys and court filings said Tuesday.

The figure includes a newly agreed upon payment from the county of \$13.5 million along with the \$15 million a federal jury awarded Bryant's widow, Vanessa Bryant, at a trial in August.

A proposed settlement order, which a judge must approve, was filed Tuesday in federal court.

Kobe Bryant, the former Lakers star, five-time NBA champion and member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, was traveling with Gianna and seven others to a youth basketball game when the helicopter they were aboard crashed into hills in Calabasas west of Los Angeles on Jan. 26, 2020.

Deputies and firefighters took phone photos of the bodies and the wreckage that were shared, mostly between employees of the county sheriff's and fire departments.

Ex-lawmaker sentenced for fraud schemes

MO SPRINGFIELD — A former state lawmaker was sentenced Tuesday to six years and three months in federal prison for fraud

schemes committed while she ran several medical clinics in southwest Missouri.

Tricia Derges, a Republican from Nixa, was also ordered to pay \$500,600 in restitution, federal prosecutors said. She was convicted in June 2022 on 22 counts.

Derges was elected to the Missouri House in 2020 and resigned days after she was convicted. Prosecutors said Derges, an assistant physician, falsely told patients she was treating them with stem cells and fraudulently tried to obtain nearly \$900,000 in COVID-19 related funds.

Head of college retracts praise for Epstein pal

ME AUGUSTA — The Bowdoin College president who described a trustee who was friends with Jeffrey Epstein as representing "all that is great about Bowdoin" now says he was "clearly wrong" since new details have come to light in a lawsuit.

Newly unredacted portions of a lawsuit against JPMorgan Chase show that some of the emails traded between former Bowdoin Trustee James "Jes" Staley and Epstein include sexual content and photos of young women.

Staley, a trustee from 2007 to 2021, led the liberal arts college's presidential search, resulting in the hiring of current President Clayton Rose.

Bowdoin investigated Staley's relationship with Epstein after Epstein's arrest for federal sex trafficking charges in 2019, and decided Staley should remain on the college Board of Trustees.

That same year, about a month before Epstein's arrest, Rose had introduced Staley at an event, saying he "represents all that is great about Bowdoin and the culture and values here."

In 2021, Staley resigned from Bowdoin's board the same day he stepped down as CEO of London-based Barclays Bank.

In a letter to the Bowdoin community, Rose described those emails as "deeply disturbing" and said that he didn't understand the depth of Staley's relationship with Epstein. "I was clearly wrong," he said.

Evasive action: Pilot pulls up with Learjet in view

MA BOSTON — A JetBlue pilot had to take "evasive action" while landing at Boston's Logan International Airport when another aircraft crossed an intersecting runway, the Federal Aviation Administration said.

The "close call" occurred at about 7 p.m. Monday when the pilot of a Learjet 60 took off without clearance as a JetBlue flight was preparing to land on an intersecting runway, according to the FAA's preliminary review.

An air traffic controller instructed the pilot of the Learjet to line up and wait on one runway while the JetBlue flight landed on another runway, the FAA said in a statement.

"The Learjet pilot read back the instructions clearly but began a takeoff roll instead," the FAA said. "The pilot of the JetBlue aircraft took evasive action and initiated a climb-out as the Learjet crossed the intersection."

19 wild cows killed in aerial shooting operation

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A specialized team of wildlife managers has killed 19 wild cows in the Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico as part of a contested project to rid the area of the unauthorized animals.

The three-day operation used a helicopter and high powered rifles to take out the cows in a rugged area where federal officials and environmentalists say the animals have been trampling stream banks, damaging habitat for other species and ruining water quality.

The U.S. Forest Service had estimated there were as many as 150 of the unauthorized cows in an area along the Gila River.

Lawmakers OK legalizing pot for medical use

NC RALEIGH — The North Carolina Senate voted on Tuesday to legalize marijuana use for medical purposes, giving strong bipartisan support for the second year in a row to an idea that its supporters say would give relief to those with debilitating or life-ending illnesses.

After little debate, the chamber voted 36-10 to give initial support to legislation that would create a structure by which physicians could essentially prescribe marijuana to their patients if they believe the health benefits outweigh the risks.

The proposal is almost identical to a bill the Senate passed last June by a similar margin, which then stalled in the House.

— From wire reports

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Reporting
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and Military News

IndyCar spotlights stars, sustainability

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — IndyCar finally has its own television program, a refocused marketing plan, aggressive sustainability efforts and a whopping 27 full-time entrants as the season begins this weekend on the streets of downtown St. Petersburg, Fla.

Is it enough to finally give IndyCar the respect its drivers have been demanding?

That's the hope as IndyCar attempts to showcase some of the closest racing in motorsports. The series boasted nine different winners last year and the championship race came down to the season finale for the 15th consecutive year, a five-driver fight won by Will Power.

IndyCar has three former Formula One drivers in its field, including reigning Indianapolis 500 winner Marcus Ericsson, and continues to be a destination series for drivers frustrated by the European ladder system. This year's field features three drivers who advanced to F2 — the series right below F1 — including rookie Marcus Armstrong, who becomes the third New Zealander on the grid.

In an effort to prove IndyCar

is just as sexy as F1 but more competitive and has personalities that outshine the superstars of NASCAR, Penske Entertainment and VICE Media Group partnered on programming designed to showcase the series the same way "Drive to Survive" on Netflix has worked for F1.

The six-part "100 Days to Indy" will air on The CW Network and chronicle the 100-day window ahead of the Indianapolis 500 on May 28. Cameras will be prevalent all weekend in St. Petersburg, where the 17-race season officially opens.

"When you talk about a real television production, that's something that is hopefully going to make a difference for all of our jobs," said Conor Daly, fresh off his first career start in NASCAR's Daytona 500. "Hopefully it takes everything to a higher level and it takes all the recognition and everything that we do to a higher level."

The players

Team Penske returns with its lineup intact: Reigning champion Power and Josef Newgarden, both two-time IndyCar champions, and Scott McLaughlin, who in his second

season last year found his groove and accounted for three of Penske's nine wins.

McLaughlin won the season-opener at St. Pete to kickstart a campaign in which the Kiwi and three-time Australian V8 Supercars champion should challenge for the title.

He knows his competition is intense internally, particularly with Newgarden, who has grown into one of McLaughlin's closest friends.

Power is overcoming a rocky few months since his championship. He broke some ribs in a karting crash and his wife, Liz, fell seriously ill in January and faces a long recovery from a staph infection. The Australian, who turns 42 this week, used a new, calm approach last season and now will be juggling the start of the year with his support system recovering at home in North Carolina.

Chip Ganassi Racing won the Indy 500 last year with Swedish driver Ericsson but was a distant challenger for the title. Seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson has departed and been replaced by Armstrong, a 22-year-old rookie who grew up idolizing fellow countryman Scott Dixon.

Dixon is now teammates with his one-time biggest fan as "The Iceman" seeks an IndyCar record-tying seventh series championship. Alex Palou returns to the team for his final season before making a full-time move in 2024 to McLaren Racing.

Palou, the 2021 champion for Ganassi, had a messy contract dispute with the team last season that was resolved in arbitration. He will get to test McLaren's F1 car this year and be its reserve driver when it doesn't interfere with IndyCar, but will have to wait a year to join the new-look McLaren IndyCar team.

McLaren has added 2016 Indy 500 winner Alexander Rossi to its team in an expanded third car. He will be teammates with Pato O'Ward and Felix Rosenqvist for a team on the rise.

Andretti Autosport will have 22-year-old Colton Herta leading the four-car organization. Romain Grosjean enters his second season with the team, as does Devlin DeFrancesco, who was a rookie last year. Kyle Kirkwood rejoins the Andretti organization after a rookie season driving for A.J. Foyt Racing.

Sargeant first American on Formula 1 grid since 2015

Associated Press

A Formula One rookie walked into a South Florida bar and the bouncer wished him luck for his upcoming season.

Over at a Florida Panthers game, a pair of girls in the crowd spotted the driver and couldn't help but ask: "Are you Logan Sargeant?"

Indeed, the 22-year-old from Ft. Lauderdale has surged ahead of all the other American drivers hoping to be the next one to race under the red, white and blue on the global stage. With only 20 seats on the F1 grid, the road to

the top series in motorsports is cutthroat, expensive, political and often soul-crushing.

Sargeant, who moved to Europe as a teenager to pursue his dream, has beaten all the odds and will debut for Williams in this weekend's season-opening race in Bahrain. He will be the first American on the F1 grid since Alexander Rossi in 2015, when Rossi made five starts with a career-best finish of 12th at Circuit of the Americas.

The next American to make it to F1 was expected to be Colton Herta, the 22-year-old IndyCar

driver at Andretti Autosport. But not even seven victories and four starts in the Indianapolis 500 could get the Californian the Super License needed to compete in F1, something Sargeant earned from his years climbing the European ladder system.

"I think everyone was so focused on Colton and overlooked how close Logan has been to reaching this level, through F3 and F2 and being under Williams' wing," said Kyle Kirkwood, a fellow Ft. Lauderdale driver who has been friends with Sargeant since childhood. "The reality is,

Logan is probably the most ready and the best candidate at this time."

When Sargeant is in Florida, he and Kirkwood can most often be found together surfing, boating or deep-sea fishing.

"He's getting recognized a lot more than me, it's insane. We went to this place in Delray Beach and the bouncer stopped us," Kirkwood recalled. "Girls at the Panthers' game are telling him 'We can't wait to see you on Netflix,' and I'm just mind-blown that this kid is already a superstar."

More NHL trades made ahead of deadline

Associated Press

After a furious rush to beat the clock in 2022, NHL general managers are acting early and often to jockey for the top players available or stockpile future assets in advance of the trade deadline this year.

Following nearly a dozen trades getting done Tuesday, several more with playoff implications were completed Wednesday. Defending Stanley Cup champion Colorado filled a void, while Metropolitan division-leading Carolina made another low-risk move in bracing for a tough road through the loaded Eastern Conference. Pittsburgh refused to stand pat, and Ottawa won the Jakob Chychrun sweepstakes by landing a player who has been on the block for more than a year.

"There's been a lot of phone calls, not a lot of sleep and a lot of activity the last few days," Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekalainen said Wednesday after trading defenseman Vladislav Gavrikov and goaltender Joonas Korpisalo to Los Angeles. "I expect that to continue until Friday at 3 p.m."

Columbus got two high draft

picks from the Kings, along with veteran goaltender Jonathan Quick, the top candidate to be on the move again — flipped to a contender, and there are plenty in need of help in net. Vegas, with starter Logan Thompson on the shelf with a long-term injury, would fit the bill after Kekalainen said he's "going to try to do the right thing" for Quick, a respected veteran who has won the Cup twice.

The reigning champion Avalanche acquired center Lars Eller from the Washington Capitals for a 2025 second-round pick. Eller scored two of the biggest goals on Washington's 2018 title run, including the game-winner in the clinching game of the final, and can win faceoffs and kill penalties and fill a void down the middle.

"Solid, big, strong third-line center," coach Jared Bednar told reporters in Denver. "That's what he is. Penalty killer, good on draws, lots of experience. This is a good pickup."

After buying low on underachieving winger Jesse Puljujarvi, the Hurricanes made another under-the-radar pickup by getting defenseman Shayne Gostisbe-

ere from Arizona for a 2026 third-round pick.

"Shayne is a smooth-skating, puck-moving defenseman," Carolina GM Don Waddell said. "We think his offensive skill set and veteran presence will help bolster our blueline."

He was not the only Coyotes defenseman on the move. They finally traded the 24-year-old Chychrun, with the Senators sending Arizona a conditional 2023 first-round pick, conditional 2024 second-rounder and a second-rounder in 2026.

"A defenseman we've coveted, Jakob is big and plays imposing," Ottawa GM Pierre Dorion said.

Logical landing spots for Chychrun dried up in recent days with the Oilers getting Mattias Ekholm from Nashville, the Maple Leafs trading for Jake McCabe, Luke Schenn and Erik Gustafsson and the Kings making the move for Gavrikov. The Senators beat others to the punch, notably after Detroit added a first-round pick by trading Filip Hronek to Vancouver.

The Penguins, fighting to extend their playoff streak to 17 straight seasons, made a handful

of moves to clear salary cap space and bolster an inconsistent bottom six forward group.

Pittsburgh sent center Teddy Blueger to Vegas for defenseman Peter DiLiberatore and a 2024 third-round pick. The team then assigned forward Brock McGinn and defenseman Mark Friedman to the minors to clear enough salary cap space to acquire veteran forward Mikael Granlund from Nashville.

The 31-year-old Granlund has nine goals and 27 assists this season for the Predators. He is signed through the 2024-25 season with an average annual value of \$5 million. Granlund has experience both on the power play and the penalty kill, a role he will likely be asked to play with Blueger now in Vegas.

In other moves, Tampa Bay and San Jose swapped forwards with Mikey Eyssimont going to the Lightning in exchange for Vladislav Namestnikov. Tampa Bay retained half of Namestnikov's \$2.5 million contract through the end of the season but still saved some room under the cap with Eyssimont owed only \$750,000 this season.

Baseball's new rules getting mixed reactions from fans

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — It took 2 hours, 19 minutes for the Miami Marlins to beat the Houston Astros 4-3 in a spring training game Monday — a game so fast that Ryan Murphy, a lifelong Houston fan, found himself lingering in the ballpark for a while after.

"I'm a baseball fan," said Murphy, wearing 2022 Astros World Series gear, "so if I stay here for four hours, for two hours, it doesn't matter to me."

Faced with criticism of dwindling cultural relevance and a laggardly product compared to other major sports, Major League Baseball introduced a set of new rules this year to speed up games and attract younger fans.

The bases are bigger to improve player safety and may also encourage more aggressive baserunning. Pitchers can only disengage from the pitching rubber twice per plate appearance. And there's a new pitch clock

that gives players 30 seconds to resume play between batters. Between pitches, pitchers have 15 seconds with nobody on and 20 seconds if there is a baserunner.

Less than a week into the spring training exhibition schedule, MLB seems to be getting what it wants, shaving about 20 minutes off the average length of games compared to last spring.

Players have been mostly pleased with the rollout.

"The game feels more exciting," Washington Nationals left-hander Patrick Corbin said. "Even some of the high-scoring games are under three hours."

Fans seeing the new-look sport for the first time this week have had mixed reviews. Some, like Murphy, are indifferent to the changes.

"It's irrelevant to us as fans, honestly," said Murphy, who traveled from Utah to West

Palm Beach for Houston's exhibition season. "Players might think something different of it, but for us it's all the same.

"How would I know the bases are bigger, honestly? I mean, we see a pitch clock out here, and we know it's there, but it doesn't matter to me."

Some fans like the idea of being in and out of a game in under three hours, which is about how long an average nine-inning baseball game lasted in 2022.

Others feel a nostalgic pull to how the sport has always been.

"I'm not a big fan of the pitch count," said Mark Mezzatesta, who traveled to Florida from Queens in New York. "I feel like that's rushing the game. I feel it was fine the way it was. Pitchers do take a while. And batters do take a while, too. Fifteen seconds with nobody on base and 20 seconds with somebody on base is too short."

'Nervous' Durant excels in Suns debut

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — New team, same Kevin Durant.

The Durant era in Phoenix got off to solid start Wednesday night with the 13-time NBA All-Star scoring 23 points on 10-for-15 shooting, adding an explosive offensive element to an already dangerous offense in his Suns debut.

Durant, playing for his fourth team in the last seven seasons, added six rebounds and two blocks as Phoenix beat the Charlotte Hornets 105-91.

"I've played in almost a thousand basketball games, but today I was nervous," Durant said. "It's a new team, new group, and I want to play hard for them and be coachable. So I was thinking about all that today."

Durant said despite his success, he still feels like he has

something to prove to his teammates and coaches. New team, same Kevin Durant.

"I feel there is pressure on me and who I am every day," Durant said. "I put that on me."

Devin Booker seemed to feed off Durant, scoring 37 points in the win.

"He's just a pure basketball player," Durant said about Booker.

Coming off a knee injury that has kept him out of action since Jan. 8, Durant was limited to 27 minutes while on a playing-time restriction.

Wearing No. 35, Durant was greeted by a loud ovation as he was introduced at the Spectrum Center and fans held up cell phones straining to record video of him in his white jersey.

Durant missed a foul line jumper on his team's first possession, but scored his first bas-

ket with the Suns a few moments later on a driving left-handed layup. He followed with a block on Hornets rookie center Mark Williams and then knocked down a three-pointer from the left wing as Phoenix bolted to a 9-0 lead it would never surrender.

He wasn't perfect in his return, turning the ball over twice, including once when he dribbled off his own leg while driving to the left.

"We scripted a lot in practice, but when you get out on the floor it's a totally different deal," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "So there were some hiccups as to what play we were running and that kind of thing. But it's pretty cool to be able to give a guy the ball and he can get to a spot and get off a really good shot."

The 13-time All-Star was ac-

quired from the Brooklyn Nets in a blockbuster deal in which the Suns parted ways with Mikal Bridges, Cam Johnson, Jae Crowder and four first-round picks. He was the last of the big three to be traded away by Brooklyn, joining James Harden and Kyrie Irving before him.

Like Durant's previous stops in Seattle, Oklahoma City, Golden State and Brooklyn, the expectations are high — and there is a different level of excitement with his arrival.

"You feel it," Williams said. "You feel it at the (team) hotel when people are lined up outside. You feel it in the gym. ... Yeah, I feel it. I learned a long time ago that pressure and expectations are a privilege, and you have to embrace those things because that is where the good stuff is."

Arizona's Ballo finds balance on court and in life

Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Oumar Ballo always had the power to bull through smaller opponents, his 7-foot, 260-pound frame pretty much ensuring every opponent was smaller.

What the Arizona center needed was a better way to pull back on the reins; when you're that big, changing directions can take a little longer.

That's where balance enters into the picture.

Working with Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd and his staff over the summer, Ballo added balance to his brute strength, combining with Azuolas Tubelis to give the No. 8 Wildcats one of the nation's best frontcourts.

"I think that balance for him is everything," Arizona associate head coach Jack Murphy said. "Coach Lloyd always uses the term not getting in front of his skis and when he stays on balance, he's really hard to stop."

As Ballo has found equilibrium on the basketball court, he's also found balance in a journey that took him from West Africa to the Arizona desert.

Born in Mali, Ballo was an accomplished soccer player before he literally outgrew the sport. The large, athletic kid began attracting attention across the basketball world and, at 14, made the difficult decision to leave home to attend an academy in the Canary Islands.

"It was hard leaving your family when you're that young, coming to another whole continent where you don't speak any of the language," Ballo said. "It was not easy. I missed my family, but at the end of the day, I had a goal and I needed to look at the bigger picture."

Ballo's goal was to play in the NBA, so when FC Barcelona Basquet of the EuroLeague offered him a contract, he opted instead to play at the NBA Acad-

emy Latin America. Ballo generated more attention in Mexico City, this time from American college coaches, and ended up getting a scholarship offer to play at Gonzaga.

Ballo's athleticism and size were a huge upside, yet he was still raw during his time in Spokane, Wash.. He redshirted as a freshman and saw limited time during Gonzaga's run to the 2021 national championship game.

When Lloyd, a longtime assistant under Mark Few at Gonzaga, got the job in Tucson two years ago, Ballo followed.

It was a bit of an adjustment. "He was a beast in the low block, but he couldn't get up and down the court three times," Murphy said.

Playing behind fellow 7-footer Christian Koloko last season, Ballo averaged 6.8 points and 4.4 rebounds on a team that reached the NCAA Tourna-

ment's Sweet 16.

With Koloko off to the NBA, Ballo spent the summer working on his body, lifting weights, doing extra cardio and boxing. It paid dividends with a leaner, stronger body that allowed him to withstand the rigors of playing in the paint and handle Lloyd's demands that his big men get out and run.

Ballo was named MVP of the Maui Invitational and is averaging 14.3 points and 8.8 rebounds while shooting 65% from the floor on a team ranked eighth in the country. He and Tubelis also have become the nation's best big-man running tandem, a pair of locomotives chugging down the track right to the rim.

"Ballo is a beast," Colorado coach Tad Boyle said after Ballo had 18 points and a career-high 16 rebounds in a win over the Buffaloes on Feb. 18.

A beast with balance and patience.