

Video shows Russian jet colliding with US drone

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Video footage released Thursday by U.S. European Command shows a Russian fighter jet buzzing past a U.S. Reaper drone above the Black Sea multiple times, before colliding with the aircraft.

The 42-second video depicts a Russian Su-27 aircraft trailing an unmanned MQ-9 aircraft that was operating within international airspace. The incident, which occurred Tuesday morning, involved two Russian Su-27s, one of which struck the propeller of the MQ-9, causing U.S. forces to bring the drone down in international waters.

The video was recorded by a camera angled at the rear of the surveillance aircraft, which captured the incoming Russian fighters dumping fuel on the drone as it passed on two occasions. The video then goes grainy after the second pass, indicating some kind of collision.

While intercepts between U.S.

and Russian military aircraft have happened repeatedly in recent years, the incident marked the first known collision. It set off a diplomatic firestorm between two countries already deeply at odds over Moscow's war in Ukraine.

Following the crash of the MQ-9, the United States summoned Russia's ambassador in Washington. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also spoke with Russia's defense chief, Sergei Shoigu, about the issue.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that the downed drone was likely unrecoverable. But he didn't rule out trying to get the wreckage back.

"It's probably about maybe 4,000 or 5,000 feet of water, something like that. So any recovery operation is very difficult at that depth by anyone," Milley said.

Still, Milley said steps were taken to ensure that any sensitive intelligence aboard the aircraft was "no longer of value" should the Russians recover it.

Austin called the encounter that involved two Russian jets "dangerous" and "reckless," and Milley labeled the actions of the Russians as "unprofessional" and "unsafe."

Austin said he spoke with Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu on Wednesday about the ordeal and underscored U.S. aircraft will not be deterred from flying over international waters. The Associated Press reported they were the first calls involving the Russian and Americans defense leaders since October.

"It is incumbent upon Russia to operate its military aircraft in a safe and professional manner," Austin said. "We take any potential for escalation very seriously, and that's why I believe it's important to keep the lines of communication [with Russia] open. That will help [avoid] miscalculation going forward."

The Russian Defense Ministry said in its report of the call with Austin that Shoigu accused the U.S. of provoking the incident by ignoring flight restrictions the

Kremlin had imposed because of its military operations in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has argued that by providing weapons to Ukraine and sharing intelligence information with Kyiv, the U.S. and its allies have effectively become engaged in the war.

Russia also blamed "the intensification of intelligence activities against the interests of the Russian Federation," the Defense Ministry said.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Tuesday blamed the incident on the U.S., saying the drone maneuvered sharply and crashed after Russian fighters scrambled to intercept it near Crimea.

But EUCOM, following the collision, said the incident followed a pattern of dangerous actions by Russian pilots in international airspace, including over the Black Sea.

"These aggressive actions by Russian air crew are dangerous and could lead to miscalculation and unintended escalation," a EUCOM statement said.

Poland plans to provide Ukraine with fighter jets

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — Poland's president said Thursday that his country plans to give Ukraine around a dozen MiG-29 fighter jets, which would make it the first NATO member to fulfill the Ukrainian government's increasingly urgent requests for warplanes.

President Andrzej Duda said Poland would hand over four of the Soviet-made warplanes "within the next few days" and that the rest needed servicing and would be supplied later. The Polish word he used to describe their number can mean between 11 and 19.

"They are in the last years of their functioning but they are in good working condition," Duda said of the aircraft.

Duda did not say whether other countries

would be making the same move, although Slovakia has said it would send its disused MiGs to Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Polish government spokesman Piotr Mueller said some other countries with MiGs also had pledged them to Kyiv, but he did not name them.

While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pleaded for Western allies to share fighter jets, NATO allies have been hesitant.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine had several dozen MiG-29s it inherited in the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it's unclear how many of them remain in service after more than a year of fighting.

The debate over whether to provide non-NATO country Ukraine with fighter jets was

initiated over a year ago, but NATO has been wary of making the war escalate.

Duda made the announcement during a joint news conference in Warsaw with the visiting Czech president, Petr Pavel.

Duda said Poland's air force would replace the planes it gives to Ukraine with South Korean-made FA-50 fighters and American-made F-35s.

Poland was also the first NATO nation to hand German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, last month.

Poland is a crucial ally in the Ukraine crisis. It is hosting thousands of American troops and is taking in more people fleeing the war in Ukraine than any other nation, in the midst of the largest European refugee crisis in decades.

N. Korea tests long-range ballistic missile

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea fired a long-range ballistic missile off its eastern coast Thursday morning, its third such launch this week, and just ahead of a rare summit between the South Korean and Japanese leaders, according to the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Joint Chiefs detected a long-range ballistic missile launched at a high angle from Pyongyang's Sunan area at 7:10 a.m., they said in a message to news agencies. The missile was said to have landed in the East Sea, or Sea of Japan, after flying more than 620 miles.

The missile is a "serious provocation that undermines peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the international community," the message said.

North Korea last fired two short-range

ballistic missiles Tuesday.

It also launched two cruise missiles from a submarine on Sunday, according to the regime's state-run Korean Central News Agency.

The North has fired eight ballistic missiles so far this year.

The U.N. Security Council in 2006 barred North Korea from conducting ballistic missile tests.

Thursday's launch comes the same day as South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's trip to Tokyo, where he will meet with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to discuss issues ranging from North Korean threats to economic supply chains.

Yoon's visit marks the first time in 12 years a South Korean president has visited Japan for a bilateral meeting. Then-President Lee Myung-bak traveled to Tokyo in 2011 for a summit with then-Prime Minister

Yoshihiko Noda.

Yoon pledged to build ties with neighboring Japan during his presidency, and on March 6 announced a decision to resolve its forced-labor victim dispute with Tokyo.

North Korea still views Japan as a colonial-era enemy and has repeatedly threatened the country in statements carried by KCNA.

The launches also come as the United States and South Korea conduct their largest joint military drills in five years. The allies kicked off the 11-day Freedom Shield exercise on Monday, which Seoul has described as a defensive drill.

North Korea has frequently described the joint military drills as a declaration of war and a rehearsal of an invasion of its country.

South Korea's Ministry of National Defense will conduct the joint drills regardless of additional "provocations" from the North, it said in a statement Tuesday.

Pentagon seeking more money for recruitment ads

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department wants to spend \$40 million to promote military service to young people as lawmakers warn the Army, Navy and Air Force are on track to miss their enlistment goals this year amid persistent recruitment struggles.

Pentagon officials pitched the investment to members of a Senate Armed Services Committee subpanel on Wednesday as a pivotal tool for reversing enlistment shortfalls and selling a positive image of the military to a young population with little inclination to serve.

"We need to do a better job of telling our story, the benefits of military service and what it can provide," said Gilbert Cisneros, the undersecretary of defense of personnel and readiness.

The funding request for the Defense Department's joint military advertising, market research and studies program is included in the department's budget request for fiscal 2024, which begins Oct. 1. The individual services have their own additional budgets for marketing, Cisneros said.

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., cautioned Wednesday that the Army, Navy and Air Force will likely miss their recruiting goals by tens of thousands of recruits this year if

current trends hold. He urged the military to make "effective use of marketing" a priority.

The Army, which fell short of its recruiting goal last year by 15,000 recruits, debuted a \$117 million advertisement campaign last week with two new commercials inspired by the 1980s-era Army slogan, "Be All You Can Be." The clips feature actor Jonathan Majors, who starred in "Creed III" and "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" and is the son and grandson of veterans.

The Navy launched a "Forged by the Sea" ad campaign on its 247th birthday in October targeting Generation Z on social media. The service only met its active-duty enlistment goal last year by heavily dipping into its delayed entry pool, according to the Navy. It failed to reach the desired recruitment for active duty and Reserve officers.

The Air Force is expected to miss its active-duty enlistment target this year for the first time since 1999, said Alex Wagner, the assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs. He named several factors contributing to the military's recruitment woes, including historically low unemployment and a lack of recruiter access to schools that limited campus visits during the coronavirus pandemic.

But the largest problem is propensity to serve, Wagner said. A mere 9% of Americans aged 17 to 24 who are eligible to serve have shown an interest in serving in the military, the lowest since the height of the Iraq War in 2007, according to the Pentagon. Only about 23% of young Americans meet the physical and academic standards required for service.

Wagner linked low interest to the growing lack of familiarity with the military. In 1995, 40% of Americans had a parent who served compared to less than 13% of Americans today, he said. An inflection point in the widening divide between civilians and service members came after 9/11, when military installations became more hardened and secure and closed themselves off from the communities around them, Wagner said.

"That lack of familiarity has been filled in by a public narrative that emphasizes the risks of service while missing the benefits," he said.

Pentagon officials said they intend to devote more resources to making the public more aware of military service and specifically reaching "influencers" such as teachers, parents, grandparents and other adults who young people might admire and respect.

Yellen reassures banking system ‘remains sound’

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A week after the second-largest bank collapse in U.S. history, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told the Senate Finance Committee on Thursday that the nation’s banking system “remains sound” and Americans “can feel confident” about their deposits.

Yellen is the first Biden administration official to face lawmakers over the decision to protect uninsured money at two failed regional banks, a move that some Republicans have criticized as a bank “bailout.”

“The government took decisive and forceful actions to strengthen public confidence” in the U.S. banking system, Yellen said in testimony before the committee. “I can reassure the members of the Committee that our banking system remains sound, and that Americans can feel confident that their deposits will be there when they need them.”

In less than a week, Silicon Valley Bank, based in Santa Clara, Calif., failed after depositors rushed to withdraw money amid anxiety over the bank’s health. Then, regulators con-

vened over the weekend and announced that New York-based Signature Bank also failed. They ensured all depositors, including those holding uninsured funds exceeding \$250,000, were protected by federal deposit insurance.

The Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission have since launched investigations into the Silicon Valley Bank collapse.

Thursday’s hearing, meant to address President Joe Biden’s budget proposal, comes after the sudden collapse of the nation’s 16th-biggest bank and go-to financial institution for tech entrepreneurs. While Yellen prepared to talk about spending proposals, the hearing inevitably turned to the government’s decision-making process to intervene in the bank failure.

“Nerves are certainly frayed at this moment,” said Sen. Ron Wyden, chairman of the committee. “One of the most important steps the Congress can take now is make sure there are no questions about the full faith and credit of the United States,” he said, referring to raising the debt ceiling.

Texas lawsuit puts abortion pill in jeopardy

Associated Press

AMARILLO, Texas — A federal judge in Texas raised questions Wednesday about a Christian group’s effort to overturn the decades-old U.S. approval of a leading abortion drug, in a case that could threaten the country’s most common method for ending pregnancies.

Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk heard more than four hours of debate over the Alliance Defending Freedom’s request to revoke or suspend the Food and Drug Administration’s approval of mifepristone. Such a step would be an unprecedented challenge to the FDA and its authority in deciding which drugs to permit on the market.

Kacsmaryk said he would rule “as soon as possible,” without giving any clear indication of how he might decide and leaving open the possibility that the standard regimen for medication abortions might soon be curtailed throughout the country.

Mifepristone, when combined with a second pill, was approved in 2000 and is used to end pregnancies until their 10th week. It has been increasingly prescribed since last summer’s U.S. Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

The Texas lawsuit has become the latest high-stakes legal battle over access to abortion since the question of its legality was returned to the states.

Kacsmaryk, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, saved some of his most pointed questions for attorneys representing the conservative group, which filed its lawsuit in Amarillo in anticipation of receiving a favorable ruling.

“Explain to me why this court has that sweeping authority?” Kacsmaryk asked, in reference to the group’s request for a preliminary order pulling mifepristone from the market.

The judge also questioned whether the group had the legal standing to obtain a pretrial ruling on the drug, grilling both sides on U.S. Supreme Court cases that set out when such extraordinary relief is allowed.

Lawyers representing the FDA argued that pulling mifepristone would upend reproductive care for women across the United States.

“An injunction here would interfere with the interests of every state in the country” said Julie Straus Harris of the U.S. Justice Department, which represented the FDA.

Utah bans abortion clinics in wave of post-Roe restrictions

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah’s Republican Gov. Spencer Cox signed legislation Wednesday that will by next year ban clinics from providing abortions, setting off a rush of confusion among clinics, hospitals and prospective patients in the deeply Republican state.

Administrators from hospitals and clinics have not publicly detailed their plans to adapt to the new law, adding a layer of uncertainty on top of fear that, if clinics close, patients may not be able to access care at hospitals because of a variety of staffing and cost concerns.

With the law set to start taking effect as early as May 3, both the Planned Parenthood Association of Utah and the Utah Hospital Association declined to detail how the increasingly fraught legal landscape for providers in Utah will affect abortion access.

The turmoil mirrors developments in Republican strongholds throughout the United States that have taken shape since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the *Roe v. Wade* decision, transformed the legal landscape and prompted a raft of lawsuits in at least 21 states.

The Utah lawmakers have previously said the law would protect “the innocent” and “the unborn,” adding that they don’t think the state needs abortion clinics after the high court overturned the constitutional right to abortion.

Though Planned Parenthood previously warned the law could dramatically hamper its ability to provide abortions, Jason Stevenson, the association’s lobbyist, said Wednesday that it would now further examine the wording of other provisions of the law that could allow clinics to apply for new licenses to perform hospital-equivalent services.

Storms end water curbs for 7M in Calif.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — California's 11th atmospheric river left the storm-soaked state with a bang Wednesday, bringing flooded roadways, landslides and toppled trees to the southern part of the state as well as drought-busting rainfall that meant the end of water restrictions for nearly 7 million people.

Even as residents struggled to clean up before the next round of winter arrives in the coming days — with some 27,000 people still under evacuation orders statewide Wednesday — the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California's decision brought relief amid the state's historic drought.

The district supplies water for 19 million people in six counties. The board imposed the restrictions, which included limiting outdoor watering to one day a

week, in parts of Los Angeles, Ventura and San Bernardino counties last year during a severe shortage of state water supplies.

But weather woes remained Wednesday, as an additional 61,000 people remained under evacuation warnings and emergency shelters housed more than 650 people, according to the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

Meanwhile in Arizona, the city of Sedona urged people in a dozen areas to immediately evacuate Wednesday evening because of predicted flooding of Oak Creek. The churning waters had submerged a roadway near a mobile home park and forecasters said it could rise to 15 feet, a foot above flood stage.

In Southern California, flooding also closed several miles of the Pacific Coast Highway through Huntington Beach, south

of Los Angeles on the Orange County coast, and potholes disabled more than 30 cars on one Southern California freeway. More than 144,000 utility customers statewide remained without power Wednesday afternoon, according to poweroutage.us.

Some Southern California beaches were closed as heavy rain overwhelmed sewage systems and sent thousands of gallons of raw sewage to the sea.

In Los Angeles, a man who clung to a concrete wall of the rushing, rain-swollen Los Angeles River was saved from being swept away when a Fire Department rescuer, dangling from a helicopter, reached him and he was hauled up to safety.

Gov. Gavin Newsom surveyed flood damage in an agricultural region on the central coast, noting that California could potentially see a 12th atmospheric river next

week. Officials have not yet determined the extent of the winter storms' damage, both structurally and financially.

"Look back — last few years in this state, it's been fire to ice with no warm bath in between," the Democrat said, describing "weather whiplash" in a state that has quickly gone from extreme drought and wildfires to overwhelming snow and rain.

California's latest atmospheric river was one of two storm systems that bookended the U.S. this week. Parts of New England and New York were digging out of a nor'easter Wednesday that caused tens of thousands of power outages, numerous school cancellations and whiteout conditions on roads.

The weather service said California will see minor precipitation this weekend, then another substantial storm next week.

San Francisco supervisors receptive to reparations

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Payments of \$5 million to every eligible Black adult, the elimination of personal debt and tax burdens, guaranteed annual incomes of at least \$97,000 for 250 years and homes in San Francisco for just \$1 a family.

These were some of the more than 100 recommendations made by a city-appointed reparations committee tasked with the thorny question of how to atone for centuries of slavery and systemic racism. And the San Francisco Board of Supervisors hearing the report for the first time Tuesday voiced enthusiastic support for the ideas listed, with some saying money should not stop the city from doing the right thing.

Several supervisors said they were surprised to hear pushback from politically liberal San Franciscans apparently unaware that the legacy of slavery and racist

policies continues to keep Black Americans on the bottom rungs of health, education and economic prosperity, and overrepresented in prisons and homeless populations.

The draft reparations plan, released in December, is unmatched nationwide in its specificity and breadth. The committee hasn't done an analysis of the cost of the proposals, but critics have slammed the plan as financially and politically impossible. An estimate from Stanford University's Hoover Institution, which leans conservative, has said it would cost each non-Black family in the city at least \$600,000.

Tuesday's unanimous expressions of support for reparations by the board do not mean all the recommendations will ultimately be adopted, as the body can vote to approve, reject or change any or all of them. A final committee report is due in June.

French bulldog ousts Lab as top dog breed in US

Associated Press

NEW YORK — For the first time in three decades, the U.S. has a new favorite dog breed, according to the American Kennel Club.

Adorable in some eyes, deplorable in others, the sturdy, push-faced, perky-eared, world-weary-looking and distinctively droll French bulldog became the nation's most prevalent purebred dog last year, the club announced Wednesday. Frenchies ousted Labrador retrievers from the top spot after a record 31 years.

Why? "They're comical, friendly, loving little dogs," says French Bull Dog Club of America spokesperson Patty Sosa. City-friendly, with modest grooming and exercise needs, she says, "they offer a lot in a small package."

Yet the Frenchie's dizzying rise — it wasn't even a top-75

breed a quarter-century ago — worries its fans, to say nothing of its critics.

The buzzy little bulldogs have been targeted in thefts, including last month's fatal shooting of a 76-year-old South Carolina breeder and the 2021 shooting of a California dog walker who was squiring singer Lady Gaga's pets.

There's concern that demand, plus the premium that some buyers will pay for "exotic" coat colors and textures, is engendering quick-buck breeders and unhealthy dogs. The breed's popularity is sharpening debate over whether there's anything healthy about propagating dogs prone to breathing, spinal, eye and skin conditions.

The AKC's popularity rankings cover about 200 breeds in the nation's oldest canine registry. The stats are based on nearly 716,500 puppies and other dogs newly registered last year.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

FBI: 50 items stolen from museums returned

PA PHILADELPHIA — Federal authorities say dozens of artifacts stolen in the 1970s from museums in several states and dating back as far as the French and Indian War have been returned to the institutions.

The FBI announced Monday at a ceremony at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia that 50 items had been repatriated to 17 institutions in five states. The artifacts returned Monday included an 1847 Mississippi rifle stolen from a Mississippi museum, a World War II battlefield pickup pistol belonging to Gen. Omar Bradley — stolen from the U.S. Army War College Museum — and 19th-century Pennsylvania rifles stolen from Pennsylvania museums, officials said.

Authorities said Michael Corbett of Newark, Del., was indicted in December 2021 for possession of items stolen from museums in the 1970s. In August, he pleaded guilty to possession of stolen items transported interstate and turned over additional stolen items, authorities said.

Do-not-eat listing draws suit from lobster industry

ME PORTLAND — A coalition representing the Maine lobster industry is suing an aquarium on the other side of the country for recommending that seafood customers avoid buying a variety of lobster mostly harvested in their state.

Industry groups including Maine Lobstermen's Association are suing the Monterey Bay

Aquarium in California for defamation, arguing in a lawsuit filed Monday that their prized catch shouldn't be on a "red list" published by Seafood Watch, a conservation program it operates.

Last year, Seafood Watch put lobster from the U.S. and Canada on its list of seafood to avoid due to the threat posed to rare whales by entanglement in fishing gear used to harvest American lobster, the species that makes up most of the U.S. lobster market. Endangered North American right whales number only about 340 and they've declined in recent years.

But the lobster industry is arguing to the U.S. District Court in Maine that the aquarium's recommendation relies on bad science and incorrectly portrays lobster fishing as a threat to the whales.

Remains of 160 people found in warehouse

CA HAYWARD — San Francisco Bay Area officials were working Tuesday to identify the families of 160 people whose remains were found in a warehouse used by a cremation business whose license was suspended.

Six bodies and the ash remains of 154 other people were found earlier this month at a warehouse in Hayward after the California Cemetery and Funeral Bureau received several complaints from customers saying Oceanview Cremations had stopped responding to them, Alameda County Sheriff Lt. Tya Modeste said.

Oceanview Cremations had a corporate license that was suspended in 2018 and an individual license under the same name

that was suspended last year and was not supposed to be operating or keeping remains in a warehouse, Modeste said.

Modeste said the business owner, Robert Smith, was not cooperating with officials.

The Alameda County Coroner's Bureau has identified five of the bodies and has a tentative identification of the other one, Modeste said. The ash remains have tags with names and the county where the person died, she said.

Another house collapses into ocean on Outer Banks

NC RODANTHE — A house collapsed into the ocean Monday on the string of islands just off the coast of North Carolina, according to U.S. National Park Service officials.

Officials warned visitors to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore on the state's Outer Banks to watch out for debris from a collapsed one-story house along the beach and in the ocean in Rodanthe. The site of the collapse on Monday is about a mile north of where other homes collapsed last year, including two that collapsed on the same day in May.

Lawyer: Verdict a strong anti-hazing message

LA NEW ORLEANS — A jury's decision that a Louisiana State University fraternity pledge's family is entitled to \$6.1 million for his hazing-related alcohol death in 2017 sends a powerful message, the family's attorney said Monday.

Max Gruver, from the Atlanta suburb of Roswell, Ga., had been at LSU for only a month when he died of alcohol poisoning and aspiration after a

hazing ritual at the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house in 2017.

One of the family's attorneys, Don Cazayoux, said last week's verdict in Baton Rouge bolsters the family's campaign against hazing.

"The first message is, don't do it because you could hurt someone, you could kill someone," Cazayoux said in a phone interview. The legal exposure, he said, adds to the points parents should make in warning their college-bound students about the dangers of hazing.

Phi Delta Theta was banned from the LSU campus until at least 2033 as a result of the events leading to Gruver's death.

Railroad: Broken wheel likely caused derailment

KS MCPHERSON — Union Pacific officials believe that a broken wheel likely caused a derailment that spilled denatured alcohol inside a Kansas refinery.

Railroad spokeswoman Kristen South said crews continued to clean up the site of the derailment inside the CHS refinery in McPherson on Monday, one day after 13 cars came off the tracks.

Two of the derailed cars leaked alcohol into a ditch after the Sunday morning crash. But South said the McPherson fire department and staff at the refinery were able to quickly contain the spill.

South said Union Pacific will report what it found about the broken wheel to the Federal Railroad Administration. She said none of the trackside detectors in the area near the derailment identified any problems beforehand.

— From wire reports

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Purdue's supporting cast relishes roles

Associated Press

Purdue stuck to a simple game plan this season: Feed the ball to All-American Zach Edey and let the 7-foot-4 center feast in the post.

The old-school philosophy defied today's trendy, small-ball style heavy on the three-pointer attack but it allowed the Boilermakers to ascend to No. 1 in the AP Top 25 twice this season.

Coach Matt Painter's squad needed more than just Edey to claim its first Big Ten Tournament title since 2009. If the East Region's top seed wants to avoid another earlier-than-expected NCAA tourney exit, Purdue's supporting cast must supplement Edey's medley in the middle.

"We have a lot of guys who could go to a different team and average a lot of points, be on all-Big Ten teams or whatever, but they're happy we're here," Edey said Sunday. "We have a lot of guys who love winning. That's what Purdue is."

The regular-season Big Ten champions are no one-man

band. At No. 3 Purdue (29-5), the talent pool runs deep — and everybody has a role.

Freshman guards Braden Smith and Fletcher Loyer have started all season after finishing first and second in last year's IndyStar Mr. Basketball Award voting, just like teammates Caleb Furst and Trey Kaufman-Renn did in 2021.

Loyer is the smooth, polished shooter, the son of an NBA coach who averages 10.9 points per game. Smith is the confident, gritty guy who basks in driving opponents and their fans bonkers. He's also scores 9.8 per game.

"We all can shoot. We knew that coming into the season," Smith said last weekend. "Early on, we haven't shot it well but we're starting to figure it out."

The Boilermakers' rotation has a flavor for everyone.

Ethan Morton earned a starting job this year because he's a defensive stopper though he previously seemed comfortable being the high-scoring Pennsylvania prep star who earned

the state's Mr. Basketball and Gatorade Player of the Year awards in 2019-20.

Guard David Jenkins Jr., a 24-year-old veteran, compiled more than 1,800 points at three schools, earning all-conference honors in two leagues before coming to Purdue. He is 11 points shy of 2,000.

Beefy forward Mason Gillis was an Indiana Junior All-Star and one of the state's top baseball players before a knee injury cost him his senior high school season. He helps Purdue play physical, but he's also a skilled shooter as Rutgers discovered when he went 7-for-8 in last week's quarterfinal win and Penn State learned when he made a career-high nine three-pointers in February.

"You've got to do something, right?" perplexed Nittany Lions coach Micah Shrewsberry said after that 20-point loss. "But Zach beat us up in the paint so badly the last time ... it's also about how you construct the team. You have the most dominant player in college basketball, and you put guys around

him that fit perfectly."

Few have devised a solution this season and now Purdue has its first No. 1 seed since 1996.

Perhaps nobody appreciates the contributions or sacrifices Edey's teammates have made better than Painter, who grew up in Indiana a fan of the rival Hoosiers but was never recruited by Bob Knight even after making the 1989 Indiana All-Star team.

Instead, Painter was overshadowed by others at Purdue — Steve Scheffler, Woody Austin and Glenn "Big Dog" Robinson, the focal point of the 1992-93 team many also dubbed a one-man show.

Clearly, Painter didn't construct this roster by happenstance.

"In recruiting I just tell them, if you become one of our top two or three scorers, here's how we'll use you. If you don't, you're going to play a role," Painter said. "But you've got to have people that will play roles, and that's really a tip of the hat to those guys."

Rodgers, other NFL QBs move to open free agency

Associated Press

After a flurry of moves in the two days ahead of the official start of the NFL free agency period, Aaron Rodgers made the biggest news Wednesday by announcing his intention to play for the New York Jets.

Several more players switched teams, others are staying put and a few stars, including Ezekiel Elliott, will be looking for new homes in 2023.

But Rodgers is the dominant story of the offseason, and the four-time AP NFL MVP cleared things up during an appearance on "The Pat McAfee Show" on YouTube and Sirius XM a few hours before the league year started at 4 p.m. EDT.

Rodgers said the Packers assured him after the season that they wanted him to return, but things changed after he emerged from a five-day darkness retreat. He said he was told by people, mostly players on other teams, that the Packers shopped him around because they want to move on and make 2020 first-round draft pick Jordan Love their starting quarterback.

Rodgers said he entered the retreat "90% retiring, 10% playing" but he has since made a decision to play this season.

"At this point, as I sit here, I think since Friday, I've made it clear that my intention was to play and my intention was to play for the New York Jets,"

Rodgers said. "I haven't been holding anything up at this point. It's been compensation the Packers are trying to get for me, kind of digging their heels in."

Former No. 1 overall pick Baker Mayfield was among other players on the move Wednesday, agreeing to an \$8.5 million, one-year contract with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press.

Mayfield, the top pick by Cleveland in 2018, joins his third team since last July. He gets an opportunity to compete with Kyle Trask to replace Tom Brady, who retired after three seasons with the Buccaneers.

Mayfield was 2-8 in 10 starts

last season with the Panthers and Rams.

Jacoby Brissett, who replaced Mayfield in Cleveland while Deshaun Watson served a suspension, agreed to terms with the Washington Commanders on a one-year contract worth \$10 million with \$8 million guaranteed, according to a person with knowledge of the deal.

Brissett will compete with projected starter Sam Howell, a second-year pro. Brissett threw for 2,608 yards, 12 touchdowns and six interceptions last season for the Browns in 11 starts.

The New England Patriots made their first big pickup of free agency, adding wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster.

Getting NBA play-in spots in West will be tough

Associated Press

Let's go ahead and put Denver and Sacramento into the Western Conference playoffs. It's hard to imagine Memphis and Phoenix falling out of the mix, even with Ja Morant away from the Grizzlies and Kevin Durant still not able to make his home debut for the Suns because of ankle trouble. Put them on the bracket as well.

And from there, it's anyone's guess.

The West is an absolute mess, and the middle of the pack — the race for the last two guaranteed playoff spots and the four berths into the play-in tournament — is as muddled and murky as possible.

"Hope," Utah coach Will Hardy said, "is a good motivator."

True. There's plenty of hope still out there, too.

The West has, more often than not in recent years, been the power-broker side of the NBA. Not this year. The shinier records are at the top of the Eastern Conference, which is on pace to finish with three of the best four records this season — something that hasn't happened since 2008-09.

The West has become a log-

jam this year, and the standings change nightly. A single win or loss can change everything: Utah was ninth in the West entering Monday, and a four-point loss at Miami left the Jazz tumbling three spots to 12th. The Los Angeles Lakers, meanwhile, went from 11th to ninth — from out of the play-in to back in — without even playing. They are 10th after losing Wednesday.

Defending champion Golden State beat Phoenix and went from sixth to fifth. The Warriors then lost to the Clippers on Wednesday and the two flopped places. Minnesota and Dallas are tied for seventh, Oklahoma City is ninth, Utah and New Orleans tied for 11th.

Put another way, three games separated the fifth-place Clippers from the 10th-place Lakers entering Thursday's games. Only 2½ games separated the Warriors from the Jazz and Pelicans. It's hard to envision a scenario where at least some West races for seeding don't go down to the final day.

"No one's really out of it right now, at this point in the Western Conference," Hardy said. "There's a couple teams that

have fallen, I guess, out of the race, but 5 through 13 are so tight that every team is competing each night with that hope of like, 'Hey, if you string a few together, you can really vault in the standings.' We'd all be lying if we say we don't check the standings. We definitely do, but it can be a little distracting."

This is exactly what the NBA wanted when it added the play-in tournament — intrigue all the way to the end of the season. Only the top six teams in each conference are guaranteed playoff spots when the regular season ends on April 9; the next four from the East and West go to a play-in tournament to decide the No. 7 and No. 8 seeds on the respective brackets.

Only three teams — Houston, San Antonio and Detroit — have been eliminated. Charlotte isn't too far away from joining that trio. Everyone else still has a legitimate chance, at least at the play-in.

"You do have to embrace the competition," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said. "When you're dreaming about things in the middle of the summer, this is what you want. You want games with incredible pressure and

context. You don't want games to have no meaning, to play for lottery balls. You want to have this kind of context. And you want to see what this competition can bring out of you."

Teams will find out, whether they want to know or not.

There are no fewer than 24 matchups the rest of the way that will pit those teams vying for spots 5 through 8 on the West bracket against one another, meaning those nights could lead to a big swing in the standings.

It also might come down to which teams get somebody back in time to help the cause.

The Lakers may get LeBron James back at some point. The Warriors aren't sure when Andrew Wiggins — out for personal reasons — could return, or if he will. The Mavericks are dealing with Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving both having injuries. The Timberwolves hope Karl-Anthony Towns is close to a return from a calf injury. The Pelicans have remained in the race despite not having Zion Williamson, which they're probably used to by now.

"It's funny what a couple of wins can do right now," Clippers coach Tyronn Lue said.

Morant suspended 8 games for gun video in nightclub

Associated Press

MIAMI — Ja Morant will be back with the Memphis Grizzlies next week after the NBA handed the All-Star guard an eight-game suspension without pay Wednesday. His displaying a firearm at a club in suburban Denver earlier this month was "conduct detrimental to the league," according to an official statement.

Morant missed his sixth consecutive game when the Grizzlies played in Miami on Wednesday night. He will miss the next two games — at San Antonio on Friday and home against Golden State on Saturday — then be eligible to return on Monday when Memphis plays Dallas, though he is not expected to play that night.

The games he already missed will count toward the suspension, and Morant will forfeit

about \$669,000 in salary.

"Ja's conduct was irresponsible, reckless and potentially very dangerous," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement. "It also has serious consequences given his enormous following and influence, particularly among young fans who look up to him."

Silver met with Morant in New York before announcing the league's decision. Other league officials, as well as representatives from the National Basketball Players Association, were part of that meeting.

Grizzlies coach Taylor Jenkins said he doesn't expect Morant to play Monday, saying the team is "going to be respectful of the time off he's had."

"There will be a quick ramp-up period after that," Jenkins said. "Obviously, he hasn't been playing basketball for almost two weeks

now."

The league's investigation, which started almost immediately after the March 4 incident in which Morant livestreamed himself on Instagram, found that he was "holding a firearm in an intoxicated state" — but did not prove that the gun was owned by Morant "or was displayed by him beyond a brief period."

The league investigation also did not find that Morant had the gun with him on Memphis' flight to Denver, or that he possessed the gun while in any NBA facility. Police in Colorado said last week that they looked into the circumstances surrounding the video and concluded there was no reason to charge Morant with a crime.

Morant spoke with ESPN for an interview that was to air later Wednesday night, and said the gun was not his.

Bruins focusing on Cup over records

Associated Press

BOSTON — In a season full of extreme numbers, the Boston Bruins know exactly what value they put on winning the most games in NHL history.

“Zero,” defenseman Charlie McAvoy said last week, a day before Boston became the fastest team in history to 50 wins. “Bottom of anything I care about.”

The Bruins have been cruising through the regular season, and racking up milestones along the way. But even though they could amass the most wins ever — and most points, too — the players and brass have insisted they don’t have any interest in the biggest regular-season records of all.

“We play for the Stanley Cup,” Bruins President Cam Neely said flatly. “I tell everybody, ‘Enjoy the ride, but it’s all about the Stanley Cup.’”

The Bruins were coming off back-to-back 100-point seasons — and three straight early playoff exits — when they fired

coach Bruce Cassidy last summer and hired Jim Montgomery to replace him. Key players like McAvoy, a Norris Trophy contender, and Brad Marchand, the team’s No. 2 scorer, were recovering from surgery, but the Bruins didn’t wait until they were at full strength.

They won six of seven games before Marchand got back on the ice, moving to the top of the Eastern Conference in the second week of the season; McAvoy’s return helped boost them to the league’s No. 1 overall seed, where they have remained since Veteran’s Day. They didn’t lose at home in regulation until January.

They were the fastest team in NHL history to 100 points and 50 wins, and the first one to clinch a playoff berth this year. Still, after winning their 50th game, which also turned out to be the playoff clincher, goalie Linus Ullmark couldn’t be less enthusiastic.

“Congrats to us, then,” he said. “I guess.”

Boston has a chance to post the most wins in NHL history, surpassing the 62 by the 1995-96 Red Wings and tied by the 2018-19 Lightning. It also has a chance to surpass the record 132 points amassed by the 1976-77 Montreal Canadiens.

But for a team that has already won the Presidents’ Trophy twice since 2004 — and failed to win the Cup both times — a league-leading third top finish doesn’t hold much allure.

“To me, the regular season (record), it is nice,” captain Patrice Bergeron said. “But you’re working hard to get into the playoffs. And that’s where the main focus is.”

Montgomery said the team hasn’t talked about the records, instead concentrating on getting in shape for the playoffs. If the Bruins have only the records to play for in the final days or weeks, he said, they will instead try to make sure everyone is rested and healthy for what they hope will be a two-month postseason slog.

“Us preparing for the Stanley Cup playoffs is more important than anything in the regular season,” he said.

Defenseman Matt Grzelcyk allowed that the regular-season record “would be quite an accomplishment,” but one that is “pretty low on the list.” It hasn’t escaped his notice that neither the ’96 Red Wings nor the ’19 Lightning won the Cup.

“We’ve seen that it’s kind of bit teams in the past,” Grzelcyk said. “We’ll just go out there and compete and let the chips fall where they may.”

“It was an unbelievable season, ’18-19, but I think it was almost too easy for us to play great,” said former Lightning winger Ondrej Palat, whose team was swept by Columbus in the first playoff round.

“It was very frustrating after a year like that,” Palat said. “But I’m not saying it’s like the Bruins. The Bruins are playing unbelievable hockey, and they have a big chance in the playoffs.”

Mets’ Díaz injured as Puerto Rico tops Dominicans

Associated Press

MIAMI — New York Mets star closer Edwin Díaz injured his right knee celebrating a win Wednesday night that advanced Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic and eliminated the Dominican Republic.

Díaz was taken off the field in a wheelchair in Miami soon after pitching a perfect ninth inning to close out Puerto Rico’s 5-2 win over the Dominicans.

The Mets later tweeted that Díaz injured his knee and would undergo further tests Thursday.

The Puerto Rican players were jumping together in the infield when Díaz collapsed to the ground, and he quickly reached for his right leg. Díaz was in tears and did not put any weight on the leg.

Christian Vázquez homered in a four-run third inning as Puerto Rico advanced to the WBC quarterfinals to face Mexico on Friday in Miami.

United States 3, Colombia 2: Mike Trout had three hits and three RBIs, and the United States used a stellar night from its deep bullpen to beat Colombia in Phoenix and advance to a quarterfinal against Venezuela on Saturday.

Mexico and the U.S. both finished with 3-1 records in Group C to advance. Mexico gets the top seed because it beat the U.S. 11-5 on Sunday.

Trout singled in the third, bringing home Mookie Betts and giving the U.S. a 1-0 lead. Colombia bounced back quickly, taking a 2-1 lead in the bot-

tom of the third on Gio Urshela’s sacrifice fly and an RBI double from Reynaldo Rodriguez. Trout put the Americans ahead again in the fifth with a two-run single that scored Betts and Will Smith.

Merrill Kelly gave up two runs in three innings for the Americans. Kelly then gave way to a parade of hard throwing bullpen arms: Kendall Graveman, Daniel Bard, David Bednar, Jason Adam, Devin Williams and Ryan Pressly each threw a scoreless inning to finish the win.

Japan 9, Italy 3: Shohei Ohtani pitched shutout ball into the fifth inning and sparked a four-run third with a bunt single, leading Japan over Italy in Tokyo and into its fifth straight

World Baseball Classic semifinal.

Boston’s Masataka Yoshida homered and drove in the go-ahead run with a grounder, giving him a tournament-leading 10 RBIs. Kazuma Okamoto hit a three-run homer for Japan, which has outscored opponents 47-11 in five games.

Japan will travel to Miami for a semifinal on Monday against Puerto Rico or Mexico. Cuba will play the other semifinal against the United States or Venezuela.

Mexico 10, Canada 3: Randy Arozarena had two doubles and five RBIs, Rowdy Tellez added a two-run single and solo homer, and Mexico pulled away late from Canada in Phoenix to earn a spot in the quarterfinals.