

Russia warns US not to fly over Black Sea

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

WASHINGTON — The Russian military on Wednesday warned the United States not to fly more drones over the Black Sea, where an American unmanned aircraft was harassed and damaged by Russian fighter jets and forced to crash.

Russian deputy foreign minister Sergey Ryabkov cautioned the U.S. against conducting flights similar to the one that resulted in the MQ-9 Reaper crash into the sea more than a week ago. Moscow has claimed the American drone was flying through airspace now restricted because of the Russian war in Ukraine.

“The Americans demonstratively, cynically and in outright public form deny the legitimacy of [restricted Russian airspace] and state their intentions to continue actions of this kind,” Ryabkov said, according to Moscow’s state-run TASS news agency. “They are, as the saying goes, ‘asking for’ our countermeasures and we warn them against the attempts to play on nerves and test our patience. Russia’s security will be 100% ensured by all means available to us. And no American drones ... can shake our determination.”

However, Pentagon officials have said the Reaper was not in Russian airspace and routine drone flights are ongoing despite

the recent incident.

“We are continuing to conduct operations over the Black Sea, flying in international airspace in accordance with international law wherever it will allow us to do so,” Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon’s top spokesman, told reporters Tuesday.

The Russian warning came the same day that state honors were bestowed to two fighter pilots for their actions on March 14, when they encountered the U.S. Reaper drone as it was on a reconnaissance mission.

Russian defense minister Sergey Shoigu gave Gold Star medals and Orders of Courage to the pilots during a ceremony Wednesday in Moscow, still claiming the U.S. drone made an “abrupt maneuver” that caused it to crash into the sea.

Russian officials also claim the U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone was flying in airspace declared as restricted by Moscow as part of its war in Ukraine, which it refers to as a “special military operation.”

“The Orders of Courage were bestowed on the pilots of Su-27 planes who prevented an American MQ-9 unmanned aerial vehicle from violating the airspace temporarily restricted for flights for the purposes of the special military operation,” the Russian defense ministry said in a statement Wednesday.

“I don’t know of another air force in the world that would award a pilot for smashing into a drone,” John Kirby, the White House’s top National Security Council spokesman, told reporters Wednesday. “If that’s bravery, I guess they have a different definition of it. ... I have no clue why they would give a bravery award to a pilot who was, at worst, maliciously putting himself and property at great risk — and, at best, is just an idiot.”

The incident happened about a week ago as the American drone was flying a reconnaissance mission through the sky above international waters.

The Pentagon said the Russian pilots initially dumped fuel on the drone and harassed it for almost an hour. One of the Russian jets clipped the drone’s rear propeller and severely damaged its ability to stay in the air.

U.S. officials said the drone’s operators were forced to bring it down into the sea and take measures to prevent another country from gleaning any information from the wreckage.

Top Pentagon officials — including Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — have said the downed drone broke into many pieces and most of the debris is likely deep on the Black Sea floor.

US denies Chinese claim it drove away ship

Associated Press

BANGKOK — The United States denied Chinese claims Thursday that its military had driven away an American guided-missile destroyer from operating around disputed islands in the South China Sea as tensions rise in the region between the two powers. The U.S. Navy’s 7th Fleet said that a statement from China’s Southern Theatre Command that it had forced the USS Milius away from waters around the Paracel Islands — called Xisha by China — was “false.”

“USS Milius is conducting routine operations in the South China Sea and was not expelled,” said Lt. j.g. Luka Bakic to The Associated Press.

“The United States will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows,” Bakic added.

Bakic would not comment on whether the ship had been operating in immediate proximity of the Paracel Islands, which are in the South China Sea a few hundred miles off the coast of Vietnam and the Chinese province of Hainan, or whether there had been any sort of a confrontation.

China occupies the Paracel Islands, but they are also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam. Col. Tian Junli, a spokesperson for China’s Southern Theatre Command, said earlier that the Chinese navy had followed and monitored the USS Milius after it “illegally entered China’s Xisha territorial wa-

ters without approval from the Chinese government, undermining peace and stability in the South China Sea.”

He said that the Chinese navy and air force then forced away “the U.S. warship in accordance with the law.”

“The theatre troops will maintain a state of high alert at all times and take all necessary measures to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security as well as peace and stability in the South China Sea,” he said.

The incident comes amid growing tensions between China and the United States in the region, as Washington pushes back at Beijing’s growingly assertive posture in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

Navy official defends low recruit test requirements

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy's second-highest civilian leader on Wednesday defended the service's recent decision to accept lower scores on its entrance exam as lawmakers worried the move would hurt Navy readiness.

Erik Raven, the undersecretary of the Navy, explained to the Senate Armed Services Committee that widening the pool of potential sailors to those who score within the 10th and 30th percentile on the Armed Forces Qualification Test would help the service address serious recruiting challenges. But he emphasized that standards for becoming a machinist mate, fire controlman or other Navy occupation would remain the same.

"We're trying to increase the pool, but the standards for performing the job are what is key and what we need to perform our mission, and we have not changed that," Raven said.

The Navy announced the new guidelines in December after struggling, like the Army and Air Force, to meet its recruitment goals. The loosened require-

ments will allow the service to accept up to 20% of prospective sailors who receive a category 4 score, the second-lowest score level, on an entrance test that measures cognitive ability. The military has traditionally accepted very low numbers of category 4 scorers, and candidates with category 5 scores are ineligible to serve.

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the committee, said he was concerned the lowering of minimum test scores could lead to a repeat of the quality challenges that the U.S. military faced in the past.

About half of the Army's recruits at the beginning of the 1980s had finished high school and half had scored in the lowest third on the armed forces aptitude test, according to a 1986 article in *The Atlantic* magazine.

"There are no easy solutions to this problem, but we know what does not work. Lowering recruitment standards today leads to morale, discipline and readiness problems tomorrow," Wicker said. "The Navy seems intent on reducing standards to increase recruiting."

Chinese diplomats oppose US military's presence in Philippines

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Chinese diplomats expressed their strong opposition to an expanded U.S. military presence in the Philippines in closed-door talks with their Filipino counterparts in Manila on Thursday, a Filipino official said, underscoring the intense U.S.-China rivalry in the region.

The Philippine official, who attended the meeting, told *The Associated Press* about China's intense objections on the condition of anonymity for lack of authority to discuss what transpired at the start of the two-day talks.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and Philippine Foreign Undersecretary Theresa Lazaro led the talks aimed at assessing overall relations between the two

sides amid thorny issues, including Beijing's alarm over a Philippine decision to allow the U.S. military to expand its presence to a northern region facing the Taiwan Strait and escalating spats in the South China Sea.

The discussions will focus on the long-seething territorial spats in the disputed waterway on Friday, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila.

The back-to-back meetings are the first under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in June last year. He met Chinese President Xi Jinping in a state visit to Beijing in January where both agreed to expand ties, pursue talks on potential joint oil and gas explorations and manage territorial disputes amicably.

Hawaii, Guam troops facing big cutback in COLA

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Troops stationed in Hawaii and Guam stand to lose more than half of their cost-of-living allowances — hundreds of dollars per month in many cases — that could dent their paychecks as early as April 1.

Hawaii Sen. Mazie Hirono lambasted Defense Department officials last week over the coming 50% to 66% cuts during a subcommittee hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"As we continue to combat inflation, the thought of slashing the cost-of-living allowance for service members in Hawaii is absurd," Hirono said. She told the Defense Department officials that her office had fielded numerous complaints from Hawaii service members about the impending cuts.

"Today, the cost of a gallon of gas in Hawaii is \$4.85, more than a dollar above the national average of \$3.46," Hirono said at the March 15 hearing. "A gallon of milk in Honolulu is \$7.25 compared to the national average of \$4.41. The cost of housing in Hawaii is higher than any other state — I could go on."

The looming cuts are the result of two separate surveys last year.

The Defense Department conducted a living-pattern survey in Hawaii from February through mid-March in 2022 and collected data for the Retail Price Schedule from March through June 2022.

Unit commanders in Hawaii were briefed in early fall on proposed cuts to cost-of-living allowances based on the survey's findings.

In November, the Defense Department announced it would conduct a second "do-over" survey. According to a Feb. 15 Defense Department memo, the results of the second survey changed little from the original one.

On Monday, Joint Region Marianas, which oversees support of U.S. installations on Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, said in a Facebook post that it was "working closely with Indo-Pacific Command to advocate for an appeal of the new Overseas Cost of Living Allowance (OCOLA) Adjustment Policy for Guam."

The Defense Department did not respond to questions posed by *Stars and Stripes*.

Zelenskyy visits Kherson; new phase nears

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's president on Thursday made his third visit in two days to areas that have felt the brunt of Russia's war, with a trip to the southern Kherson region that was retaken from the Kremlin's forces, and as a senior Kyiv commander hinted that a brewing Ukrainian counteroffensive could come "very soon."

Ukraine took back control of the Kherson region's capital, also called Kherson, at the end of last year, pushing out the Russian occupiers who had captured the city in the weeks following the start of Moscow full-scale invasion more than a year ago. The Dnieper River now marks the front line in the region, which is still partially occupied.

While in Kherson on Thursday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with local security officials and inspected infrastructure damaged by Russian strikes, his office said.

On Wednesday, Zelenskyy visited Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city in northeastern Ukraine. Kyiv's troops recaptured Kharkiv from the Russians last September as part of the same monthslong counteroffensive that won back Kherson.

Also Wednesday, Zelenskyy met with troops in the eastern Donetsk region, stopping by a hospital to see wounded soldiers and giving state awards to the defenders of Bakhmut,

a wrecked city that is now a symbol of Ukraine's dogged resistance against Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambitions.

Zelenskyy's 48 hours of visits far from Kyiv — and close to the front line — came as improving weather sets the stage for possible new offensives by both sides. The biting winter weather, followed by mud as the ground thawed out, have prevented major changes on the battlefield, and the war has largely been deadlocked in recent months. Ukraine is now starting to receive modern weapons, including tanks, from its Western allies, who are also training Ukrainian troops to use them.

Russian forces have been digging in where they hold territory in the four provinces that Moscow illegally annexed in September — Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia. Putin has made it clear he wants to have control there.

Ukraine's ground forces commander said Thursday that Russian forces are "exhausting themselves" in their grinding push to take Bakhmut, giving Kyiv a window of opportunity for a counterstrike. Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi said in a Telegram post that the Russian assault on Bakhmut was causing Russian forces to "lose considerable strength."

"Very soon, we will take advantage of this opportunity, as we once did near Kyiv, Kharkiv, Balakliia and Kupiansk," Syrskyi added,

referencing Ukraine's counteroffensive last year that pushed Russia back from the country's capital and large swaths of the northeast.

Russia has kept up its long-range attacks using artillery, missiles and drones, meanwhile.

The death toll from a Russian drone attack Wednesday on a high school and dormitories south of Kyiv rose to nine, Ukrainian emergency services reported.

Russia on Wednesday also struck a nine-story apartment building in the southern city of Zaporizhzhia where at least one person was killed.

In other developments:

■ The first four of 13 Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets that Slovakia decided to give Ukraine have been handed over to the Ukrainian air force. The Slovak Defense Ministry said Thursday that the remaining MiG-29s will be handed over to the Ukrainian side in the coming weeks.

■ European Union leaders endorsed a plan to send Ukraine 1 million rounds of artillery ammunition within the next 12 months. The EU said at a summit Thursday they would also deliver missiles if Kyiv requests them.

■ The Ukraine General Staff said Thursday on Facebook that units of the Russian army have left Nova Kakhovka, a city in the occupied part of the Kherson region on the eastern side of the Dnieper.

Trump's lawyer must turn over Mar-a-Lago records, court rules

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal appeals court in a sealed order Wednesday directed a lawyer for Donald Trump to turn over to prosecutors documents in the investigation into the former president's retention of classified records at his Florida estate.

The ruling is a significant win for the Justice Department, which has focused for months not only on the hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago but also on why Trump and his representatives resisted demands to return them to the government. It suggests the court has sided with prosecutors who have argued behind closed doors that Trump was using his legal representation to further a crime.

The order was reflected in a brief online notice by a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. The case is sealed, and none of the parties in the dispute is mentioned by name.

But the details appear to correspond with a

secret fight before a lower court judge over whether Trump lawyer M. Evan Corcoran could be forced to provide documents or give grand jury testimony in the Justice Department special counsel probe into whether Trump mishandled top-secret information at Mar-a-Lago. Corcoran is regarded as relevant to the investigation in part because last year he drafted a statement to the Justice Department asserting that a "diligent search" for classified documents had been conducted at Mar-a-Lago in response to a subpoena. That claim proved untrue as FBI agents weeks later searched the home with a warrant and found roughly 100 additional documents with classified markings.

A Justice Department investigation is examining whether Trump or anyone in his orbit obstructed its efforts to recover all the classified documents, which included top-secret material, from his home. No charges have yet been filed.

US jobless claims slowly inch down

Associated Press

The labor market continues to defy Federal Reserve attempts at loosening it, with U.S. applications for unemployment benefits down again last week and remaining at historically low levels.

Jobless claims in the U.S. for the week ending March 18 fell by 1,000 to 191,000 from the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which flattens out some of week-to-week volatility, fell by 250 to 196,250, remaining below the 200,000 threshold for the ninth straight week.

Applications for unemployment benefits are seen as a barometer for layoffs in the U.S.

About 1.69 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended March 11, an increase of 14,000 from the week before. That number is close to pre-pandemic levels.

TikTok CEO testifies before Congress

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. lawmakers grilled the CEO of TikTok over data security and harmful content Thursday, responding skeptically during a tense committee hearing to his assurances that the hugely popular video-sharing app prioritizes user safety and should not be banned.

Shou Zi Chew's testimony came at a crucial time for the company, which has acquired 150 million American users but is under increasing pressure from U.S. officials. TikTok and its parent company ByteDance have been swept up in a wider geopolitical battle between Beijing and Washington over trade and technology.

In a rare bipartisan effort to reign in the power of a major social media platform, Republican and Democratic lawmakers pressed Chew on a host of topics, ranging from TikTok's content moderation practices,

how the company plans to secure American data from Beijing, and its spying on journalists.

"Mr. Chew, you are here because the American people need the truth about the threat TikTok poses to our national and personal security," Committee Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican, said in her opening statement. "TikTok has repeatedly chosen a path for more control, more surveillance and more manipulation."

Chew, a 40-year-old Singapore native, told the House Committee on Energy and Commerce that TikTok prioritizes the safety of its young users and denied allegations that it's a national security risk. He reiterated the company's plan to protect U.S. user data by storing all such information on servers maintained and owned by the software giant Oracle.

"Let me state this unequivocally: Byte-

Dance is not an agent of China or any other country," Chew said.

On Wednesday, the company sent dozens of popular TikTokers to Capitol Hill to lobby lawmakers to preserve the platform. It has also been putting up ads all over Washington that promise to secure users' data and privacy, and create a safe platform for its young users.

TikTok has been dogged by claims that its Chinese ownership means user data could end up in the hands of the Chinese government or that it could be used to promote narratives favorable to the country's Communist leaders.

In 2019, the Guardian reported that TikTok was instructing its moderators to censor videos that mention Tiananmen Square and other images unfavorable to the Chinese government. The platform says it has since changed its moderation practices.

Rare tornado near Los Angeles rips building roofs

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A rare tornado touched down in a Los Angeles suburb, ripping roofs off a line of commercial buildings and sending the debris twisting into the sky and across a city block, injuring one person.

The National Weather Service sent teams to assess damage in Montebello and later confirmed that a tornado had touched down at about 11:20 a.m. Wednesday.

The weather service said that the tornado was an EF1, a measurement on the Enhanced Fujita Scale that indicates it had winds of 86 mph to 110 mph. That made it the strongest tornado to hit the Los Angeles metropolitan area since March 1983, the

weather service said.

"It's definitely not something that's common for the region," said meteorologist Rose Schoenfeld with the weather service.

One person was injured and was taken to a hospital in Montebello, said Alex Gillman, a city spokesman. He didn't know the severity of the injury.

Michael Turner could hear the winds get stronger from inside his office at the 33,000-square-foot warehouse he owns just south of downtown Montebello. When the lights started flickering, he went outside to find his employees gazing up at the ominous sky. He brought everyone inside.

"It got very loud. Things were flying all over the place," Turner said. "The whole

factory became a big dustbowl for a minute. Then when the dust settled, the place was just a mess."

Nobody was hurt, but the gas line was severed, fire sprinklers broke, all the skylights shattered and a 5,000-square-foot section of roof was "just gone," Turner said. He said his polyester fiber business, Turner Fiberfill, could be closed for months.

"I've been in California since 1965. Never seen anything like this," Turner said. "Earthquakes — we're used to that."

Debris was spread over more than one city block. Inspectors checked 17 buildings in the area, and 11 of them were red-tagged as uninhabitable, according to the fire department. Several cars were also damaged.

Debut of 3D-printed rocket ends in failure, no orbit

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A rocket made almost entirely of 3D-printed parts made its launch debut Wednesday night, lifting off amid fanfare but failing three minutes into the flight — far short of orbit.

There was nothing aboard Relativity Space's test flight except for the company's first metal 3D print made six years ago.

The startup wanted to put the souvenir into a 125-mile-high orbit for several days before

having it plunge through the atmosphere and burn up along with the upper stage of the rocket.

As it turned out, the first stage did its job following liftoff from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station and separated as planned. But the upper stage appeared to ignite and then shut down, sending it crashing into the Atlantic.

It was the third launch attempt from what once was a missile site. Relativity Space came within a half-second of blasting off earlier this

month, with the rocket's engines igniting before abruptly shutting down.

Although the upper stage malfunctioned and the mission did not reach orbit, "maiden launches are always exciting and today's flight was no exception," Relativity Space launch commentator Arwa Tizani Kelly said after Wednesday's launch.

Most of the 110-foot rocket, including its engines, came out of the company's huge 3D printers in Long Beach, Calif.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Dentist killed wife by poisoning her shakes

CO DENVER — Police believe a Colorado dentist laced his wife’s pre-workout protein shakes with arsenic and cyanide, eventually killing his spouse so he could be with a woman he was having an affair with, according to court documents.

James Craig, 45, was arrested on suspicion of first-degree murder, shortly after his wife died after being taken off life support during her third trip to the hospital.

As Angela Craig languished in the hospital, with doctors unable to figure out what was wrong with her, police in the Denver suburb of Aurora allege her husband was meeting with a fellow dentist who flew in for visits with him. Police began investigating Craig after his dental practice partner and friend, Ryan Redfean, told a nurse that Craig had ordered potassium cyanide even though they did not need it for their work, according to an arrest warrant laying out evidence gathered by investigators.

Snap! Venus fly trap fans ask state to honor plant

SC COLUMBIA — Conservationists are pushing for the Venus fly trap to be South Carolina’s official carnivorous plant, joining other official items such as the state bird (Carolina Wren), state opera (“Porgy and Bess”) and the state snack (boiled peanuts).

In all, South Carolina has about five dozen official state

things. There are already five different plants including yellow jasmine, which is the official flower, to the official fruit — the peach — to Indian Grass, which is, unsurprisingly, South Carolina’s official grass.

But supporters said honoring the Venus fly trap isn’t about one extra thing students see on an elementary school worksheet.

Instead, it’s about protecting and increasing awareness of an interesting species found only in this spot on the globe: the upper part of the South Carolina coast and a small sliver of southeast North Carolina.

Bill to honor fallen ‘Old Man’ passes House

NH CONCORD — New Hampshire’s fallen Old Man of the Mountain would be honored annually under a bill passed by the House on Wednesday.

The massive, naturally formed granite profile attracted tourists to Franconia Notch for about 200 years before it crumbled in 2003.

The bipartisan bill, which now goes to the Senate, would designate “Old Man of the Mountain Day” on May 3 — the date the formation collapsed.

The House passed the bill on a voice vote, although Rep. Tim Cahill, R-Raymond, elicited groans when he compared the rock formation’s collapse to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which killed thousands of people.

“The Old Man falling was akin to the twin towers for many in the Granite State and around the world,” he said.

First noted by white settlers in 1805, the stone profile was

named the official state symbol in 1945, attracting generations of tourists and appearing on the state quarter, highway signs and license plates.

2 escape jail and go to IHOP; patrons call cops

VA NEWPORT NEWS — Two inmates in a Virginia jail used primitively made tools to create a hole in the wall of their cell and escape, only to be found hours later at an IHOP restaurant nearby, a sheriff said.

Authorities discovered the two men, ages 37 and 43, missing from their cell in the Newport News jail annex during a routine head count, according to a statement from the Newport News Sheriff’s Office.

A preliminary investigation found the men exploited a weakness in the jail’s construction design and used tools made from a toothbrush and a metal object to access rebar between the walls — and then used the rebar to further their escape, the statement said. After escaping their cell, they scaled a containment wall around the jail.

Police superintendent resigns amid probe

WV CHARLESTON — West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice ordered a sweeping investigation of the State Police after he accepted the resignation of the agency’s superintendent and revealed allegations of wrongdoing, including that a video camera was placed inside a women’s locker room.

Justice said he has appointed Jack Chambers, the deputy

director of the Capitol police, as interim superintendent to replace Superintendent Jan Cahill.

One focus of the investigation will be an allegation that a State Police employee hid a video camera in the women’s locker room at a State Police facility in Kanawha County.

A separate incident that will be investigated involved money allegedly stolen by a trooper from a man at a casino in the Charleston suburb of Nitro. The governor also said the investigation will look into an unspecified “loss of life” on Interstate 81 in the Eastern Panhandle.

State lawmaker moves to strip library funding

MO JEFFERSON CITY — A powerful Missouri state lawmaker moved to strip state funding for public libraries over a fight about books.

Republican House Budget Committee Chairman Cody Smith’s budget proposal would cut all \$4.5 million in state funding that libraries were slated to get next fiscal year.

Smith said he’s upset that state and school libraries are suing to overturn a new Missouri law that bans sexually explicit material in school libraries.

The ACLU, the Missouri Association of School Librarians and the Missouri Library Association in February asked the Circuit Court in Kansas City to find the law unconstitutional or clarify how and when it applies.

— From wire reports

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Princeton can write post-COVID NCAA story

Associated Press

Princeton forward Tosan Ebuomwan spent his first three college seasons enduring one disappointment after another.

Reaching the NCAA Tournament and advancing to the Sweet 16 made it all worthwhile.

After the 2020 Ivy League Tournament was canceled, after the entire 2020-21 season was canceled, after losing by two points in the conference's 2022 tourney title game and after watching three friends transfer just to keep playing in 2022-23, this resilient 6-foot-8 Brit has taken the Tigers on their deepest NCAA Tournament run since 1967 and has emerged as survivor of one of college basketball's strangest journeys.

"I think it did start with that COVID year," Ebuomwan said. "There was a togetherness with that group. One of my favorite things about that time was the Zooms with one another, the FaceTimes, just talking about what we wanted the next season. We wanted a championship."

Now, the Ivy League tourney

champions are the talk of the nation and an illustration of the impact two pivotal COVID years have had on the college basketball world.

Nobody outside the Princeton locker room expected this run — especially when three of last year's top five scorers left to take advantage of the NCAA's extra season. League rules allowed them only to use that season at a non-conference school.

But these Tigers pride themselves on perseverance. So instead of allowing the obstacles to derail their dreams or steal their spirit, they dug in, stuck around, forged a bond and finished the job.

"We missed out on a whole year. That hurt, watching essentially every other team in the country play," Princeton guard Matt Allocco said. "But I think it actually helped us in the long run. We were able to get together in the spring and practice, be with each other, build those relationships. It ended up being a great experience."

Not everyone remembers the COVID years fondly.

San Diego State and Dayton saw their 2020 title hopes

dashed by the NCAA's announcement. Michigan State coach Tom Izzo thought he had a Final Four team, too.

Northern Kentucky coach Darrin Horn's long-awaited return to March Madness was extended by three more years, prompting him to acknowledge two weeks ago that winning the 2020 Horizon League crown almost seemed like it never happened.

There's no way to replace what was lost — even for this year's 16 regional semifinalists.

Just ask San Diego State coach Brian Dutcher, whose team faces top-seeded Alabama on Friday in the Louisville Regional. The Aztecs were supposed to be a top-two seed three years ago.

"As I said all those years ago, as good as Malachi Flynn and KJ Feagin and Yanni Wetzell were, they never played in the NCAA Tournament one time in their careers. That's unbelievable," Dutcher said. "Sometimes we take for granted just going and losing in the first round. Just to have a chance to play would have meant the world to those guys so I feel bad for that,

that they never got a taste of March Madness."

Meanwhile, at Creighton, it was a different scenario.

In 2021, the tourney provided the Bluejays with a bittersweet memory: Celebrating their first Sweet 16 appearance since 1974 inside the lonely Indianapolis "bubble."

So when sixth-seeded Creighton knocked off third-seeded Baylor 85-76 last weekend to return to the Sweet 16, something suddenly felt far more satisfying about Friday's matchup against 15th-seeded Princeton in Louisville.

"We had a lot of fans there to celebrate at the end of the game with us (in Denver) and then you go back to the hotel with family and friends and have a chance to celebrate rather than go back to your room and eat another piece of rubber chicken out of a Styrofoam box, which is what we did in Indianapolis," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said. "To get to the Sweet 16 is a difficult thing to do, it was just a little more fun to celebrate that particular night."

But nobody is having more fun than Princeton.

Women hope new Sweet 16 leads to stand-alone TV deal

Associated Press

Women's college basketball believes it has the makings for a hit reality TV show with star power driving a marketable product that has a growing audience.

So they're taking the ensemble on the road for the Sweet 16.

The NCAA changed the format this year, featuring two regional sites instead of the traditional four. The games in Greenville, S.C., and Seattle are the latest step to grow the sport and show the ladies can stand on their own.

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley believes the question of whether women's hoops merits its own March Madness TV contract has already been answered, even though the women's tournament loses money under the current deal.

"Somebody's watching women's basket-

ball," Staley said. "Somebody feels like we're in high demand, and obviously the decision-makers that put us on now realize that they've got to keep putting us on."

"It's an exciting time. Year over year, we continue to demonstrate the value that women's basketball brings to that space," said Lynn Holzman, the NCAA vice president of women's basketball. "It'll be exciting to see what the results are of this for the sport itself, but also for the NCAA more broadly in our championships."

TV ratings have trended up over the past two years. This year's regular season was the most viewed on ESPN networks in eight years. The first round had a 27% ratings increase from last year.

"People enjoy watching close games. They like the fact that there's some semblance of uncertainty of who's going to win,"

UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "There's been so many changes in the top 10 all year long. ... Teams are in, they start out at the top they go out they come back in. I think all that creates a level of excitement."

The NCAA said the 2019 women's tournament lost \$2.8 million and those losses have multiplied the past two years since the sports governing body increased spending after disparities between the men's and women's tourneys were pointed out.

If the NCAA can get close to the numbers projected in the 2021 report, it might be able to offer revenue shares — known as financial units — to women's teams in the tournament in a structure similar to what the men receive from their March Madness tournament.

It's fair to say the women have a lot riding on this weekend at the two regional sites.

NWSL kicking off amid World Cup buzz

Associated Press

The National Women's Soccer League embarks on its 11th season this weekend with players looking to capitalize on the excitement building ahead of the Women's World Cup while also trying to move on from the turbulence of the past two seasons.

"It's a big year of women's soccer with the World Cup and a really exciting NWSL schedule and NWSL teams this year, so hopefully it stays that way," OL Reign defender Alana Cook said. "And hopefully the narrative can just be about that."

The pro women's league has been rocked for the past two seasons by a series of allegations of misconduct and abuse by coaches. The fallout has been a reckoning for soccer in the United States, with U.S. Soccer and the NWSL both having launched investigations into the scandals.

The NWSL has put several programs in place to prevent abuse, including a reporting system and the professionalization of the league's human resource department, which visited every team in the presea-

son. All 12 teams must designate a player safety officer.

The Portland Thorns are the defending NWSL champions, having won their third league title with a 2-0 victory over the Kansas City Current last year.

Portland is also among the favorites this season because of a loaded roster that includes national team players like Sophia Smith, Crystal Dunn and Becky Sauerbrunn. Smith was the NWSL's Most Valuable Player and also the title game MVP.

Riding the wave

The San Diego Wave became the first expansion team to make the playoffs last season, paced by forward Alex Morgan with a league-leading 16 goals.

The Wave also set an NWSL record for attendance at a stand-alone match when the club drew a sellout crowd of 32,000 to Snapdragon Stadium for a match against rival Angel City in September.

Expansion

The NWSL this month announced its 13th team, a reboot of the Utah Royals.

The first Royals team played

from 2018-20 but folded when owner Dell Loy Hansen announced he was selling the Royals and Major League Soccer's Real Salt Lake amid scandal. That Royals then became the Kansas City Current.

As part of the deal to buy RSL, the new owners had rights for an NWSL expansion team. The new Royals will join the league next season.

The league is expected to announce another expansion club in the San Francisco Bay Area for 2024, while another franchise is expected to be awarded to Boston in the future.

New coaches

Mike Norris was promoted to head coach of the Thorns after Rhian Wilkinson parted ways with the team because of inappropriate communication with a player. Sam Laity, an OL Reign assistant, has taken over at the Houston Dash, and Juan Carlos Amoros is now coach at Gotham.

Seb Hines, an interim coach with the Orlando Pride for part of last season, earned the job outright in the offseason, and Mark Parsons, who coached

the Washington Spirit from 2013-15, has returned to the club after stints with the Thorns and the Dutch national team.

Youth movement

Teams are taking advantage of a new rule that opened the door for players younger than 18 to sign with league clubs.

The Wave on Tuesday signed the league's youngest-ever player, 15-year-old Melanie Barcenas. At 15 years and 138 days, Barcenas is younger than Chloe Ricketts, who was 15 years and 283 days old when she signed with the Washington Spirit earlier this month. Olivia Moultrie was 15 years and 286 days when she signed with the Thorns in June 2021.

Under the rule, young players must live with a parent or legal guardian until they're 18. They cannot be traded to another team without the consent of a parent or guardian.

VAR

The league is adding a video assistant referee this season to review certain plays, including goals and penalties.

Crosby most complete players in NHL players survey

Associated Press

Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby continues being regarded by his peers as the NHL's most complete player, though he takes a backseat to Edmonton's Connor McDavid in having the best chance to produce in the clutch.

Those are among the findings in the National Hockey League Players' Association releasing its sixth annual and eighth overall survey of players on Wednesday. Overall, 625 players participated in answering 14 questions.

Crosby, a two-time regular-season and two-time playoff

MVP, earned just over 30% of the vote in the most complete player category which he's now won or shared first place for a fourth consecutive year. Boston's Patrice Bergeron, with 18.8% of the vote, and Florida's Aleksander Barkov (17.1%), finished in the top three for a fourth straight year, with McDavid ranking fourth.

The tables turned when it came to McDavid — who is running away with the NHL points race — earning 59.3% of the vote in who players would want next to them in a must-win situation, with Crosby finishing second (11%).

In other categories, for the second straight year, Tampa Bay's Andrei Vasilevskiy gained 314 votes as being the preferred choice among players on who they would want in net in a must-win situation. Colorado's Cale Makar, last year's Norris Trophy winner, was the runaway leader as top defenseman, earning nearly 64% of the vote, with Tampa Bay's Victor Hedman second (11%).

Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl was regarded as the NHL's best passer. Newly acquired New York Rangers forward Patrick Kane finished second

in the best passer category, while being voted as the league's top stickhandler for a third straight year.

Dallas Stars veteran Joe Pavelski, with 21.4% of the vote, beat out the Rangers' Chris Kreider (14.6%) as the player who affects the game most around the net.

Barkov, a seven-time 20-goal scorer, was regarded as the league's most underrated player.

For a second straight year, Boston's Brad Marchand was voted as the person players least want to face, but want on their team.

NBA's Kings close to ending playoff drought

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The Sacramento Kings might just be riding the beam all the way to the NBA playoffs.

The resurgent Kings are on the verge of ending the longest postseason drought in league history, with first-year coach Mike Brown employing a fast-paced offense led by the dynamic duo of De'Aaron Fox and Domantas Sabonis to put Sacramento in first place in the Pacific Division.

"It's a great feeling. It's great because it's my first time," Fox said of being in the playoff hunt. "This is something we want to make annual. We want to be contending for a title. ... It's great for the city and organization. We still want bigger things for ourselves."

The Kings (43-29) are in third place in the Western Conference and might be able to clinch the franchise's first playoff berth since 2006 during the final three games of a four-game homestand that ends Monday night against Minnesota.

The 16 seasons without a playoff berth are the longest in NBA history and the longest

active drought among any team in the NBA, NFL, NHL or Major League Baseball.

"I do feel that that group believes in themselves, not just because I'm telling them they're good, but because they've actually gone out and proven it time after time after time, whether it's individually in certain situations or collectively as a team," Brown said. "When you have a team that believes, they can be dangerous. You've got a connected team that believes they can be a very dangerous team and that's what our group is right now."

The Kings are also one of the best feel-good stories of the NBA this season with an entertaining style of basketball that leads the league in scoring at 120.9 points per game for the highest mark in the league since 1983-84.

Each win at home is punctuated with the lighting of the beam — a beam of light from purple lasers atop the Golden 1 Center — and fans have even chanted for the beam at road games around the country.

"There's like a playoff atmosphere every night," swingman

Kevin Huerter, one of the key offseason acquisitions, said after a recent home win. "The only thing that's missing is handing out the T-shirts and maybe some towels, whatever they're doing for the playoffs. But it really is this every night."

The Kings have been one of the most success-starved franchises since moving to Sacramento in 1985. They had a losing record in each of their first 14 seasons in California, winning just one playoff game.

That all changed in 1999 when general manager Geoff Petrie and coach Rick Adelman built a winner around players like Chris Webber, Vlade Divac and Peja Stojakovic that played an entertaining style in a grind-it-out era that nearly delivered a championship.

The Kings posted eight straight winning records and playoff berths under Adelman, but lost a heartbreaking seven-game series to the Los Angeles Lakers in 2002 and then saw their title hopes derailed the following year when Webber went down with a serious knee injury in the second round of the playoffs.

Adelman kept the team competitive through 2006 but was let go following a second straight first-round playoff exit.

Then the dark era began with 16 straight losing seasons under 11 coaches.

Vivek Ranadive bought the team from the Maloof family in 2013 and kept the team in Sacramento by building a downtown arena, but there was no on-court success until this year.

The Kings traded away star DeMarcus Cousins and botched several high draft picks. But they have been revived following last year's trade with Indiana that sent promising guard Tyrese Haliburton to Indiana for a playmaking big man in Sabonis and the decision to hire Brown as coach.

Sabonis proved to be the perfect piece to team with the speedy Fox, giving Sacramento a dynamic duo.

Fox is averaging 25.4 points per game and has been the best clutch scorer in the league this season, scoring double figures in the fourth quarter a league-high 25 times.

Umpires given leeway over when to start pitch clock

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball has clarified its new rules to allow umpires to delay the start of the pitch clock after big swings in which a hitter loses his footing or when a pitcher covers first base, third or home, in addition to other clarifications announced Wednesday.

The commissioner's office said in its memo that if a catcher ends an inning on base, at bat or on deck, an umpire may determine the catcher needs additional time and allow the pitcher another warmup throw and the catcher to throw to second base.

MLB also said whether a defensive team violated the new shift restrictions will be subject to a video review only involving the first player to touch a ball after a pitch.

The league also said that after a batter uses his one allowed timeout during a plate appearance, the clock shall start when the hitter indicates he is ready in addition to the previous specification when he returned to the batter's box.

The clarifications ahead of March 30 openers were contained in a four-page memo sent by MLB senior vice president Michael Hill to managers, gen-

eral managers and assistant general managers, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press.

"They're important in my mind because they're responsive to things players said to us," Commissioner Rob Manfred said Tuesday night before Japan beat the United States 3-2 in the World Baseball Classic championship game.

Baseball's 11-man competition committee, established in the labor agreement last March, adopted the pitch clock and shift limits last September over the opposition of the four players on the panel. MLB set

the pitch clock at 15 seconds with no runners and 20 seconds with runners.

The average time of spring training games through Monday was down 25 minutes to 2 hours, 36 minutes. Violations per game were 1.03 during the past week, down from 2.03 during spring training's first week, according to the memo.

MLB said it will issue guidance to teams Friday on use of PitchCom by pitchers. Catchers were allowed to use the device to call pitches last season, and pitchers were allowed to experiment with it during spring training.