

Senator's hold on promotions draws ire

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville, of Alabama, refused to release his hold on the Senate's consideration of military promotions Tuesday even as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin warned senators a continued hold-up would have a "ripple effect" across the armed forces.

Tuberville is blocking the full Senate from swiftly confirming about 160 nominees for promotions until the Defense Department rescinds new abortion policies that provide leave and stipends for service members and family members traveling across state lines to access abortion care.

Senators typically approve batches of nominations by voice vote, and Tuberville's hold would force the Senate to find time for lengthy roll call votes. During a hearing Tuesday on the Defense Department's 2024 budget, the

senator reiterated his objections to the abortion policies amid intensifying criticism from Democrats and a plea by Austin to end the obstruction.

"I really implore you to reconsider and allow our nominations to move forward," Austin told Tuberville during the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. "It will make a significant difference for our force."

Austin said the Defense Department is feeling the effects of the pileup, which continues to grow as the DOD sends more nominees to the Senate for approval.

He said the promotions are "absolutely critical" as the military contends with the largest European conflict since World War II in Ukraine, an aggressive China in the Indo-Pacific region and Iran-backed militias targeting U.S. troops in the Middle East.

"There are a number of things happening globally that indicate

that we could be in a contest on any one given day," Austin said. "Not approving the recommendation for promotions actually creates a ripple effect through the force that makes us far less ready than we need to be."

The stalled nominations for general and flag officers include commanders for U.S. naval forces in the Pacific and the Middle East as well as the U.S. military representative to the NATO Military Committee. Five three-star generals are among the pending confirmations.

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., the chairman of the Senate committee, said the backlog is slated to rapidly increase in the coming months due to a spate of upcoming retirements, including the mandatory end in September of Army Gen. Mark Milley's term as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"If we cannot resolve this situation, we will be, in many respects,

leaderless at a time of great conflict," Reed said.

Austin said the paralysis in the Senate will cause more damage the longer it goes on, affecting military families and the schools their children attend.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., on Tuesday lashed out against Tuberville on the Senate floor and called his actions unprecedented.

"This level of obstruction — of routine military promotions — is a reckless departure from Senate norm. None of us want to live in a world where military appointments get routinely politicized, and that's just what the senator from Alabama is doing," Schumer said.

Tuberville, unfazed by the backlash, told Austin that the new policies amounted to the Pentagon paying for elective abortions with taxpayer money and said defense officials overstepped their authority in crafting the rules.

Russia stops sharing missile test information with US

Associated Press

MOSCOW — A senior Russian diplomat said Wednesday that Moscow will no longer inform the United States about its missile tests, an announcement that came as the Russian military deployed mobile launchers in Siberia in a show of the country's massive nuclear capability amid the fighting in Ukraine.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies that Moscow has halted all information exchanges with Washington after previously suspending its participation in the last remaining nuclear arms pact with the U.S.

Last month, Russian Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin suspended the New START treaty, charging that Russia can't accept U.S. inspections of its nuclear sites under the agreement at a time when Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Russia's defeat in Ukraine as their goal.

Moscow emphasized that it wasn't withdrawing from the pact altogether and would continue to respect the caps on nuclear weapons the treaty set.

The Russian Foreign Ministry initially said Moscow would keep notifying the U.S. about planned test launches of its ballistic missiles, but Ryabkov's statement reflected a change of course.

"There will be no notifications

at all," Ryabkov said when asked if Moscow would also stop issuing notices about planned missile tests. "All notifications, all kinds of notifications, all activities under the treaty, will be suspended and will not be conducted regardless of what position the U.S. may take."

As part of the Russian drills that began Wednesday, Yars mobile missile launchers will maneuver across three regions of Siberia, Russia's Defense Ministry said. The movements will involve measures to conceal the deployment from foreign satellites and other intelligence assets, the ministry said.

The Defense Ministry didn't say how long the drills would last

or mention plans for any practice launches. The Yars is a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile with a range of about 6,800 miles. It forms the backbone of Russia's strategic missile forces.

The Defense Ministry released a video showing massive trucks carrying the missiles driving out from a base to go on patrol. The maneuvers involve about 300 vehicles and 3,000 troops in eastern Siberia, according to the ministry.

The massive exercise took place days after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a plan to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, Russia's neighbor and ally.

US, S. Korea marines resume training after five-year lull

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

POHANG, South Korea — Dozens of U.S. Marines and their South Korean counterparts stormed a beachhead Wednesday near this port city on South Korea's southeastern coast for a military exercise on a scale not seen in five years.

The amphibious landing drill on a Pohang beach roughly 150 miles from Seoul brought together over 30 ships, including the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island and the two dock ships of its amphibious ready group. About 70 aircraft and over 50 South Korean amphibious assault vehicles also took part, according to a statement from the South Korean marine corps headquarters. South Korean marines in their assault vehicles landed first and set up a perimeter. Next came U.S. Marines of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit in Navy air-cushioned landing craft that sprayed sand into the air as they made landfall.

South Korean F-35A Lightning II fighters and Marine Corps V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft roared overhead as the joint marine force established its beachhead.

Marine Corps Lt. Col. Eric Olson, the 13th MEU's executive officer, characterized the drill as a defensive exercise and thanked South Korea's military for its hospitality.

"This exercise is designed for the combined defense of the Korean Peninsula and that's important to us and it's important for regional stability," Olson said in brief remarks to reporters. "Equally important is the interaction that we have with the marines and sailors from [South Korea]."

South Korean marine Col. Yoo Chang Hoon told reporters the drill reaffirmed the "sturdy alliance" with U.S. Marines.

"Our marine forces will immediately punish enemies in the event of any provocations and establish a posture for decisive battles," Yoo said.

The amphibious landing drill is part of the wider Ssangyong Exercise and involved 2,500 U.S. Marines and sailors and 3,000 of their South Korean counterparts. Ssangyong translates to "double dragons," a reference to the U.S. and South Korea military alliance.

The two-week Ssangyong Exercise concludes Monday.

Navy doc pleads guilty to scheme

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy doctor decorated for his service in Iraq pleaded guilty this week for being part of a scheme that faked injuries to bilk the military out of money intended to help troops recovering from traumatic injuries.

Cmdr. Michael Villarroel, 51, admitted to taking \$180,000 in kickbacks in exchange for signing off on medical records he knew were fraudulent, a statement from the U.S. attorney in the Southern District of California said Tuesday. Villarroel is the 10th person to plead guilty as part of a scheme that obtained \$2 million in payments from the Traumatic Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program, which is funded by military personnel and the services, the statement said.

"These military health care dollars, which were intended to benefit injured and traumatized service members, instead funded a fraudulent windfall," U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman said in the statement.

Villarroel served for 19 years and was awarded a Bronze Star for his service in 2004 during combat operations in Fallujah, Iraq, his attorney Joseph McMullen told the San Diego Union-Tribune on Tuesday.

Villarroel served as a doctor in Explosive Ordnance Disposal Expeditionary Support Unit One, based in Coronado, Calif., from March 1, 2010, until May 31, 2013, an indictment filed in 2020 said.

Kendall: China nuke expansion disturbing

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall told lawmakers Tuesday that increased efforts by China to rapidly expand its inventories of nuclear weapons worries him more than anything he has seen in his long national security career.

"I don't think I've seen anything more disturbing in my career than the Chinese ongoing expansion of their nuclear force," Kendall, a former Army officer who has spent decades in Pentagon and other national security roles, told House appropriators during a hearing on Capitol Hill.

The Pentagon warned in a November report that China

was working to nearly quadruple its inventory of nuclear warheads by 2035.

China now holds about 400 nuclear warheads and seeks to grow that number to 700 within a few years and to 1,500 by 2035, according to the Pentagon.

The United States had about 3,750 active nuclear warheads as of 2020, the last time the federal government released such information to the public.

Russia is believed to hold about 4,500 nuclear weapons, according to the Arms Control Association, a Washington-based nonpartisan organization that publishes information about international arms control policy.

The Pentagon in recent years

has named China its "pacing challenge." Of all of China's efforts to boost its power, Kendall said Tuesday that its nuclear ambitions could have the greatest impact on global security.

"For decades, they were quite comfortable with an arsenal of a few hundred nuclear weapons, which was fairly clearly a second-strike capability to act as a deterrent," Kendall said during a hearing to defend the Air Force's roughly \$215 billion fiscal 2024 budget request. "That expansion that they're undertaking puts us into a new world that we've never lived in before, where you have three powers — three great powers, essentially — with large arsenals of nuclear weapons."

Senate repeals Iraq war powers; bill sent to House

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate voted Wednesday to end authorizations for the use of military force against Iraq as Congress moves to reassert its power over the launch of U.S. military campaigns.

Senators voted 66-30 to rescind a 2002 authorization that approved the 8-year Iraq War to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein and a 1991 authorization that sanctioned the U.S.-led Gulf War after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

The repeals coincided with the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and followed years of efforts by lawmakers to close the open-ended resolutions that allowed presidents to take military action against a country that the U.S. now considers a strategic partner. Congress last used its constitutional authority to declare war in World War II and has since passed resolutions authorizing the use of military force largely at the request of the president.

“We live with the possibility every day that our men and women in uniform could be called away to fight. ... We dread for that moment to come. But if it does, we must be certain that the American people are united behind the decisions we make here and that our intentions are clear to our military commanders,” said Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., who led the drive to repeal the authorizations alongside Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. “By

reclaiming our war powers, by restoring the open, civil but passionate debates about matters of war and peace we’ll do exactly that.”

The White House has endorsed the termination of the Iraq War authorizations and said it would have no impact on current military operations. About 2,500 U.S. service members remain stationed in Iraq to help battle the remnants of the Islamic State terrorist group and provide support for American troops in Syria.

It is unclear whether the House will bring the bill repealing the authorizations to a vote. The lower chamber approved the rescindment of the 2002 authorization in 2021 but the House is now under Republican control and could be more reluctant to take up the legislation.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said last week that there were signs members of the House’s senior leadership feel “very strongly” in support of the bill even though House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., voted against the legislation two years ago. Republican opponents of nullifying the authorizations have argued it would make the U.S. look weak to its enemies, particularly Iran and the militias it backs throughout the Middle East. They also note former President Donald Trump’s administration cited the 2002 authorization when carrying out a 2020 drone strike in Baghdad that killed Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

Judge: Pence must testify before 1/6 jury

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge has ruled that former Vice President Mike Pence will have to testify before a grand jury in the Justice Department’s investigation into efforts by former President Donald Trump and his allies to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

That’s according to two people familiar with the decision, who spoke Tuesday on the condition of anonymity because the ruling remains under seal.

The ruling says Pence will not have to answer questions about his actions on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump’s supporters stormed the Capitol building as Pence was presiding over a joint session of Congress to certify Democrat Joe Biden’s victory, according to one of the people.

He would, however, have to testify about any potential illegal acts committed by the former president, the person said.

Pence and his attorneys had cited constitutional grounds in challenging a grand jury subpoena issued weeks ago.

They argued that, because he was serving in his capacity as president of the Senate that day, he was protected from being forced to testify under the Constitution’s “speech or debate” clause, which is intended to protect members of Congress from questioning about official legislative acts.

Trump’s lawyers had also objected to Pence complying, citing executive privilege.

A Trump spokesman criticized the decision in a statement, accusing the Justice Department of “continuously stepping far outside the standard norms in attempting to destroy the long accepted, long held, constitutionally based standards of attorney-client privilege and executive privilege.”

“There is no factual or legal basis or substance to any case against President Trump,” they added, but did not respond to questions about how Trump’s legal team might respond.

Pence said Tuesday evening that his team was evaluating the judge’s ruling and would make a decision whether to appeal.

The sealed ruling from U.S. District Judge James “Jeb” Boasberg sets up the unprecedented scenario of a former vice president being compelled to give potentially damaging testimony against the president he once served.

Biden starts democracy summit with \$690M pledge for programs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is opening his second Summit for Democracy with a pledge for the United States to spend \$690 million bolstering democracy programs around the globe.

The Biden administration wants to use the two-day summit beginning Wednesday to zero in on making “technology work for and not against democracy,” according to a senior administration official. Some 120 global leaders have been invited to participate.

Biden frequently speaks of the U.S. and like-minded allies being at a critical mo-

ment in which democracies need to demonstrate they can out-deliver autocracies. The summits, something Biden promised as a Democratic 2020 presidential candidate, have become an important piece of his administration’s effort to try to build deeper alliances and nudge autocratic-leaning nations toward at least modest reforms.

“Strengthening transparent, accountable governance rooted in the consent of the governed is a fundamental imperative of our time,” Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said in a joint statement at the opening of the summit.

Reparations in Calif. could pass \$800B

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — It could cost California more than \$800 billion to compensate Black residents for generations of over-policing, disproportionate incarceration and housing discrimination, economists have told a state panel considering reparations.

The preliminary estimate is more than 2.5 times California's \$300 billion annual budget, and does not include a recommended \$1 million per older Black resident for health disparities that have shortened their average life span. Nor does the figure count compensating people for property unjustly taken by the government or devaluing Black businesses, two other harms the task force has said the state perpetuated.

Black residents may not receive cash payments anytime soon, if ever, because the state may never adopt the economists' calculations.

The reparations task force was scheduled to discuss the numbers Wednesday and can vote to adopt the suggestions or come up with its own figures. The proposed number comes from a consulting team of five economists and policy experts.

"We've got to go in with an open mind and come up with some creative ways to deal with this," said Assembly member Reggie Jones-Sawyer, one of two lawmakers on the task force responsible for mustering support from state legislators and Gov. Gavin Newsom before any reparations could become reality.

In an interview prior to the meeting, Jones-Sawyer said he needed to consult budget analysts, other legislators and the governor's office before deciding whether the scale of payments is feasible.

The estimates for policing and disproportionate incarceration and housing discrimina-

tion are not new. The figures came up in a September presentation as the consulting team sought guidance on whether to use a national or California-specific model to calculate damages.

But the task force must now settle on a cash amount as it nears a July 1 deadline to recommend to lawmakers how California can atone for its role in perpetuating racist systems that continue to undermine Black people.

For those who support reparations, the staggering \$800 billion amount economists suggest underscores the long-lasting harm Black Americans have endured, even in a state that never officially endorsed slavery. Critics have pinned their opposition partly on the fact that California was never a slave state and have said current taxpayers should not be responsible for damage linked to events that germinated hundreds of years ago.

Hawaii authorities say swimmers harassed dolphins

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Hawaii authorities on Tuesday said they have referred 33 people to U.S. law enforcement after the group allegedly harassed a pod of wild dolphins in waters off the Big Island.

It's against federal law to swim within 50 yards of spinner dolphins in Hawaii's near-shore waters. The prohibition went into effect in 2021 amid concerns that so many tourists were swimming with dolphins that the nocturnal animals weren't getting the rest they need during the day to be able to forage for food at night.

The rule applies to areas within 2 nautical miles of the Hawaiian Islands and in desig-

nated waters surrounded by the islands of Lanai, Maui and Kahoolawe.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources said in a news release that its enforcement officers came upon the 33 swimmers in Honaunau Bay on Sunday during a routine patrol.

Aerial footage shot by drone shows snorkelers following dolphins as they swim away. The department said its video and photos showed swimmers "who appear to be aggressively pursuing, corralling and harassing the pod."

Enforcement officers contacted the group while they were in the water, and told them about the violation. Uniformed offi-

cers met the swimmers on land where state and federal officials launched a joint investigation.

Hawaii's spinner dolphins feast on fish and small crustaceans that surface from the ocean's depths at night. When the sun rises, they head for shallow bays to hide from tiger sharks and other predators.

To the untrained eye, the dolphins appear to be awake during the day because they're swimming.

But because they sleep by resting half of their brains and keeping the other half awake to surface and breathe, they may be sleeping even when they're maneuvering through the water.

Man is charged with firebombing anti-abortion office

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — After nearly a year of searching, investigators used DNA pulled from a half-eaten burrito to capture the man they believe firebombed a prominent Wisconsin anti-abortion lobbying group's office.

The U.S. attorney's office in Madison announced that police arrested 29-year-old Hridindu Sankar Roychowdhury at Boston's Logan International Airport on Tuesday. He was charged via the complaint with one count of attempting to cause damage by means of fire or an explosive.

He made an initial appearance in federal court in Boston on Tuesday. U.S. Magistrate Judge Donald L. Cabell set a detention hearing for Thursday. Roychowdhury's attorney, Brendan O. Kelley, who is listed in online court records as a federal public defender, declined comment when reached by phone after Tuesday's hearing.

Federal agents have been searching for almost a year for whoever tossed a pair of Molotov cocktails into the Wisconsin Family Action office in Madison on May 6. One of the firebombs failed to ignite; the other set a bookcase on fire. The message "If abortions

aren't safe then you aren't either" was spray-painted on the building's exterior. No one was in the office at the time.

The attack came about a week after a draft opinion suggesting the Supreme Court would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the decision that legalized abortion, leaked. The release sparked abortion rights supporters to mount protests across the country. Two Catholic churches in Colorado were vandalized in the days leading up to the Madison firebombing. And someone threw Molotov cocktails into an anti-abortion organization's office in a suburb of Salem, Ore., several days later.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

African elephant, 46, euthanized at zoo

CA OAKLAND — A 46-year-old African elephant has been euthanized at the Oakland Zoo after suffering arthritis and other age-related problems, the zoo announced Monday.

Lisa was euthanized on Sunday after years of chronic and degenerative health issues that had irreversibly worsened, a zoo statement said.

“We are heartbroken,” Alex Herman, vice president of veterinary services, said in the statement. “Her disease progressed to a point where we didn’t want her last day to be her worst day, and it was time to do the most humane thing and to let her go.”

Lisa had been in the zoo since 1979.

The zoo said her ailments included eye ulcers, progressive arthritis, foot and nail lesions and recently ventral edema, or swelling of her body caused by fluid retention.

New bill exempts military pay from income taxes

ND BISMARCK — Republican Gov. Doug Burgum signed a bill Monday that exempts military pay from state income taxes for active duty, National Guard and reserve members.

Under this bill, North Dakota service members’ income taxes are estimated to drop by \$4 million between 2023 and 2025, the governor’s office said. Military pay includes federal costs for training, education, mobilization and bonuses as well as state pay when called to support an emergency on state active duty.

Burgum’s office said military

service members often live in states with exemptions for military pay or no income tax as their official state of residence.

He said by taking this action, “North Dakota is recognizing the sacrifice of military service and building on the momentum of our ongoing efforts to make ours the most military-friendly state in the nation.”

Supreme Court won’t review GOP map

KS TOPEKA — The U.S. Supreme Court won’t review a congressional redistricting law enacted by the Republican-controlled Kansas Legislature that some voters and Democrats saw as political gerrymandering.

The nation’s highest court said Monday without explanation that it won’t hear an appeal of a Kansas Supreme Court ruling from May 2022 that partisan gerrymandering does not violate the state constitution. Eleven voters had challenged the redistricting law. The GOP map had appeared to hurt the chances of reelection last year for the only Democrat in the state’s congressional delegation, U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids, in her Kansas City-area district. But Davids still won her race in November by 12 percentage points.

The law also moved the liberal northeastern Kansas city of Lawrence into a district with heavily Republican western Kansas.

Professor suspended over threatening post

MI DETROIT — Wayne State University suspended a professor Monday over a social media post that advocat-

ed killing people instead of “shouting down” those with whom one disagrees.

The professor in the English Department wasn’t identified in a university’s news release that said he was suspended with pay.

University President M. Roy Wilson said in a statement “we feel this post far exceeds the bounds of reasonable or protected speech. It is, at best, morally reprehensible and, at worst, criminal.”

Senate passes ban on gender-affirming care

ID BOISE — The Idaho Senate on Monday voted 22-12 to pass a bill criminalizing gender-affirming health care for minors, one month after the state House passed similar legislation.

The measure bars transgender and transitioning children, or children with gender dysphoria, from receiving hormones or puberty blockers to alleviate their symptoms or help them with transitioning, KTVB reported Monday. Doctors prescribing these hormones or blockers could be charged with a felony and face prison time.

The Senate will send the measure back to the House for consideration of the Senate amendments. If the House agrees, the bill will go to Gov. Brad Little.

Dolphin thrives year after arriving in Florida Keys

FL MARATHON — A rescued juvenile dolphin that was airlifted from Texas to the Florida Keys about one year ago is thriving and interacting with other dolphins at a Keys-based marine mammal facility, officials said Monday.

The orphaned male calf

dubbed Ranger was discovered in June 2021. He was stranded near Goose Island State Park and suffering from a respiratory infection and dehydration. Rescued near his dead mother, the young bottlenose dolphin was deemed too young to forage and survive in the wild.

The National Marine Fisheries Service chose the Dolphin Research Center in Grassy Key, Fla., as Ranger’s permanent home after he was temporarily cared for at the Texas State Aquarium in Corpus Christi.

7 hurt when wind picks up inflatable rides

NC BREVARD — At least seven people were hurt when wind gusts picked up two inflatable rides, throwing children from the structures and striking several people who were nearby as they flew across a North Carolina sports complex during a little league opening day, officials said.

Firefighters and EMS workers were called to the City/County Sports Complex at about 4:30 p.m. Saturday, the Brevard Fire Department said in a news release. Two large inflatable rides were blown across the complex, one came to rest about 150 feet from where it had been anchored and the other stopped about 450 feet away, the fire department said.

When rescuers arrived, there were four people injured, and they found three more as they treated the crowd, the department said. Three of the injured were taken to a hospital with injuries that weren’t considered critical and a fourth was taken to a hospital as a precaution..

— From wire reports



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Rules changes to have major effect on MLB

Associated Press

Baseball has transformed in the 145 days since Dusty Baker and the Houston Astros sealed the franchise's second title in six seasons.

As New York Mets owner Steve Cohen dominated an off-season that saw billions spent, the sport braced for a new world that includes pitch clocks, bigger bases, limits on defensive shifts and pickoff throws, and an overarching attempt to reverse decades of lengthening games and the Analytics Era domination of the Three True Outcomes — strikeouts, walks and home runs.

“Late-inning relievers more than anyone will have to figure some things out and make some adjustments,” Minnesota Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. “Left-handed hitters, it’s going to help them, period.”

Last year’s average game time was 3 hours, 4 minutes after the introduction of the Pitch-Com electronic device to signal pitches, down from a record 3:10 in 2021. MLB’s average was

2:46 in 2005 and 2:33 in 1981. A pitch clock of 15 seconds with no runners on base and 20 seconds with runners is designed to cut game times considerably.

Higher pitch velocity and increased shifts led to the major league batting average dropping to .243, its lowest since 1968. The only seasons with lower averages were the record bottom of .237 in 1968 along with 1967, and the dead-ball era seasons of 1884, 1888 and 1908.

Over the objections of players, the sport’s 11-man competition committee adopted a rule that two infielders are required to be on either side of second and all infielders to be within the outer boundary of the infield when the pitcher is on the rubber. Bases were increased from 15-inch squares to 18-by-18, which shorten the distance between them by 4½ inches and may lead to increased stolen bases.

No player will be watched more closely this season than Shohei Ohtani, a two-way megastar in the final year under con-

tract with the Los Angeles Angels. He and three-time MVP teammate Mike Trout never have played in a postseason game together. Ohtani has made it clear he wants to win. A taste of October might be needed to persuade the Japanese sensation to remain with the franchise.

Other storylines to watch include Aaron Judge’s ascent to Yankees captaincy — the first since Derek Jeter — after his 62-homer season; Fernando Tatis Jr., set to return from a drug suspension on April 20, teaming with Manny Machado to try leading the Padres to their first World Series title; and can Carlos Correa remain healthy with Minnesota after San Francisco and the Mets backed out of deals with the All-Star shortstop?

Areas to focus on as the 2023 season starts Thursday:

Left-handed hitters

Batting average for left-handed hitters was .236 last year, down from .254 in 2016, when lefties were one point below the

big league average.

An early focus will be on which left-handed hitters benefit most from the new shift restrictions. Among those who could be helped are Corey Seager, Kyle Schwarber, Anthony Rizzo, Cody Bellinger, Rowdy Tellez and Yordan Álvarez.

Teams are still allowed to position outfielders as they wish, so some managers may experiment with moving the left fielder into short right with certain lefties at the plate.

Old faces in new places

Verlander left the champion Astros for the Mets after winning his third Cy Young Award.

Others on new teams include deGrom (Texas), Trea Turner (Phillies), Xander Bogaerts (Padres), Carlos Rodón (Yankees), Dansby Swanson (Cubs) and Willson Contreras (St. Louis).

“The goal is to make 30-plus starts and I truly believe that I will be able to do that,” said deGrom, limited by injuries to 26 starts during the past two years.

Braves, Phillies, Mets set to fight for NL East again

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The National League East made a strong argument as the majors’ toughest division in 2022 and lines up as perhaps even better this season.

The NL East boasted two 101-win teams — the Atlanta Braves, who won their fifth consecutive division title, and the New York Mets. A third playoff team from the division, the Philadelphia Phillies, advanced to the World Series.

The NL East is poised for another strong run. FanDuel Sportsbook lists the Braves, Mets and Phillies among its top eight picks to win the World Series. The AL East, which also sent three teams to the playoffs last season, has three of the betting site’s top nine World Series

picks as the next strongest division.

“Now there’s three big-headed monsters in this division, and it’ll be a battle to the end like it always is,” said Braves catcher Travis d’Arnaud.

How they project

1. Atlanta Braves: The 2021 World Series champions must adjust to losing a team leader and fan favorite to free agency for the second straight season. Swanson signed with the Cubs one year after Freddie Freeman joined the Dodgers. With Vaughn Grissom sent to the minors, Orlando Arcia will open as the starting shortstop, leaving an offensive drop-off from Swanson.

2. New York Mets: Owner Steve Cohen spent nearly \$500

million on free agents. Verlander and Scherzer give the Mets a pair of three-time Cy Young Award winners. Age is a concern, as Verlander is 40 and Scherzer is 38. All-Star closer Edwin Díaz injured his knee celebrating a victory with Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic and is expected to miss the entire season.

3. Philadelphia Phillies: Bryce Harper still has nine years left on his \$330 million, 11-year free-agent deal, but he could miss at least two months as he recovers from elbow surgery. Turner will help keep the offense moving. He gave Phillies fans a preview of his power potential when he hit a clutch grand slam for Team USA in the World Baseball Classic.

4. Miami Marlins: Looking for offensive help, Miami added AL batting champion Luis Arraez and two-time All-Star Jean Segura. The Marlins traded away longtime starting pitcher Pablo López to get Arraez. They still boast one of the deepest rotations in the division, led by 2022 NL Cy Young Award winner Sandy Alcántara.

5. Washington Nationals: The Nationals have finished last in the division each year since their World Series title in 2019. Such stars from that championship team as Turner, Scherzer and Juan Soto are long gone. It’s unclear whether the one star who stuck around, right-hander Stephen Strasburg, will ever be healthy enough to pitch in the majors again.

Cards seek division repeat minus Pujols, Molina

Associated Press

Two familiar faces from St. Louis' run to the NL Central title last season aren't around anymore as the Cardinals attempt to become the division's first repeat champion in six years.

The retirements of Yadier Molina and Albert Pujols leave the Cardinals having to replace two likely Hall of Famers. Second-year manager Oliver Marmol said Molina and Pujols did much to assure the club's winning culture would endure even after their departures.

The Cardinals still have plenty of star power, returning NL MVP Paul Goldschmidt at first base and third baseman Nolan Arenado, who finished third in the vote.

How they project

1. St. Louis Cardinals: Goldschmidt and Arenado bolster the division's most formidable lineup, which ranked third in the NL in runs last season. The Cardinals replaced Molina by signing three-time All-Star catch-

er Willson Contreras away from the Cubs. Contreras lacks Molina's catching acumen and all-around game, but is a better hitter. Ryan Helsley and Jordan Hicks lead a quality bullpen. The Cardinals' biggest concern is a starting rotation that lacks depth, with Steven Matz and Jack Flaherty trying to bounce back from injury-spoiled seasons. The Cardinals could use one more age-defying season from 41-year-old Adam Wainwright, who will open the year on the injured list with a groin issue.

2. Milwaukee Brewers: The Brewers' franchise-record string of four straight playoff appearances ended last season when they finished a game behind the eventual NL champion Philadelphia Phillies in the race for the third and final wild card. Milwaukee's chances of regaining the NL Central crown depend in part on whether its rotation can produce the way it did in 2021, when Corbin Burnes won the Cy Young Award and Brandon Woodruff

and Freddy Peralta joined him on the All-Star team. Injuries limited the rotation's effectiveness last year, however.

3. Chicago Cubs: The Cubs spent big on veterans to boost their lineup as they attempt to bounce back from two straight losing seasons. They signed shortstop Dansby Swanson to a \$177 million, seven-year deal. They also added Cody Bellinger on a \$17.5 million, one-year contract in hopes the 2019 NL MVP can regain his form after slumping the last couple of seasons with the Dodgers. Other newcomers to the lineup include Trey Mancini, Tucker Barnhart and Eric Hosmer. Jameson Taillon received a four-year contract worth \$68 million and could head the rotation.

4. Pittsburgh Pirates: The most interesting part of the Pirates' season will be measuring the progress of 6-foot-7 shortstop Oneil Cruz, who displayed a cannon arm and enormous potential as a rookie last year while also striking out in more than one-

third of his plate appearances. Bryan Reynolds, the Pirates' best player, has an uncertain future after requesting a trade in the off-season. The Pirates brought back 2013 NL MVP Andrew McCutchen, as the 35-year-old could help mentor a group seeking to take a step closer to relevance in 2023. The Pirates hope Mitch Keller builds on the momentum he established late last season and leads their rotation.

5. Cincinnati Reds: The Reds are coming off their first 100-loss season since 1982 and figure to struggle again as they're in the early stages of retooling their roster. In the short term, the Reds would love to get a bounce-back performance from 2021 NL Rookie of the Year Jonathan India, whose OPS dropped from .835 in 2021 to .705 last season. The progress of young pitchers Hunter Greene, Graham Ashcraft and Nick Lodolo also bears watching. They could be leading the rotation by the time the Reds are competitive again.

Padres eager to take NL West title from Dodgers

Associated Press

The San Diego Padres sure don't feel like a little brother anymore to the mighty Los Angeles Dodgers.

Buoyed by a stunning victory against the 111-win Dodgers in the NL Division Series and owner Peter Seidler's fearless offseason spending, the Padres are poised to make a run at the NL West title as well as a World Series crown that has always been out of reach.

How they project

1. San Diego Padres: With Xander Bogaerts playing shortstop, Fernando Tatis Jr., an All-Star at shortstop in 2021, will move to right field when he returns and Juan Soto will play left field. Shortly after beginning his 80-game PED suspension, Tatis had surgery on his troublesome left shoulder as well as a follow-up procedure on his left wrist, which he broke in a motorbike accident in December 2021. Blake Snell was tabbed to start opening day after Yu Darvish made only three appearances in Japan's run to the World Baseball Classic title and pitcher Joe Musgrove broke

his big left toe when he dropped a kettlebell on it.

2. Los Angeles Dodgers: The Dodgers will start the season with some notable injuries. SS Gavin Lux (torn right ACL) is out for the year. All-Star RHP Tony Gonsolin (16-1, 2.14 ERA, 199 Ks, all career bests) is on the 15-day injured list with a sprained left ankle. RHP Blake Treinen is on the 60-day IL recovering from right shoulder surgery. RHP Daniel Hudson (torn left ACL) is making progress. All-Star RHP Walker Buehler (Tommy John surgery) could possibly return late in the season. The team lost a big bat when Turner signed with Philadelphia.

3. Arizona Diamondbacks: The Diamondbacks appear to be on the upswing but will need a lot of improvement and a little luck to catch the free-spending Padres and Dodgers. They have a young, speedy outfield with Corbin Carroll, Alek Thomas and Jake McCarthy and a strong top of the rotation that includes Zac Gallen and Merrill Kelly. Carroll has played just 32 games in the big leagues but the D-backs felt comfortable signing him to a \$111

million, eight-year deal, and he's among the betting favorites to win NL Rookie of the Year.

4. San Francisco Giants: The Giants had some mighty big whiffs during free agency, failing to land Northern California native Aaron Judge and then having a deal with Carlos Correa fall apart over concerns with his physical. The Giants dropped by 26 wins from their surprising 107-win division title in 2021 and missed the playoffs last year. They are hoping that smaller additions like Mitch Haniger, Michael Conforto, Sean Manaea, Ross Stripling and Taylor Rogers can get them back into playoff position.

5. Colorado Rockies: The Rockies are counting on a return to form from Kris Bryant, who didn't hit a homer at Coors Field in an injury-marred season. But the Rockies are dealing with a number of other injuries and will try to avoid their first 100-loss season. Their projection is 64½ wins, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. Second baseman Brendan Rodgers is expected to miss the bulk of the season after hurting his shoulder diving for a grounder in a spring game.

Preds snap Bruins' win streak at 7

Associated Press

BOSTON — Juuse Saros stopped 35 shots, Cody Glass scored late in the second period and the Nashville Predators beat NHL-best Boston 2-1 on Tuesday night, halting the Bruins' seven-game winning streak.

Chasing the Western Conference's eighth and final playoff spot, the Predators won for just the third time in eight games. Cole Smith added an empty-netter late in the third.

"There's a lot of belief in this room," Glass said of the team's playoff chances.

"Just beating that first-place team gives you that much more belief."

Boston, which matched its franchise record of 1970-71 with its 57th victory on Sunday, is five away from tying the league record of victories in a regular season with eight games left.

The Bruins' David Pastrnak scored his 52nd with less than a second left in the game.

The Detroit Red Wings set the mark of 62 wins in 1995-96 and

Tampa Bay matched it in 2018-19.

Lightning 4, Hurricanes 0: Brayden Point had two goals and an assist and visiting Tampa Bay snapped a four-game losing streak.

Steven Stamkos added a goal and an assist as the Lightning wrapped up a four-game road stretch with a much-needed result to stay in good position to reach the playoffs.

Flames 2, Kings 1: Jacob Markstrom made 32 saves to backstop host Calgary to a critical victory over red-hot Los Angeles.

Andrew Mangiapane and Walker Duehr scored for the Flames, who moved within two points of the Winnipeg Jets, who occupy the final wild-card berth in the Western Conference.

Oilers 7, Golden Knights 4: Ryan Nugent-Hopkins tied a career high with five points, and visiting Edmonton's top-ranked power play scored three goals to beat Vegas and tighten the Pacific Division race.

Edmonton, which extended

its point streak to eight games, has 95 points and is three behind the first-place Golden Knights.

Rangers 6, Blue Jackets 2: Filip Chytil, Vladimir Tarasenko and Patrick Kane scored early as host New York beat hapless Columbus.

Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Vincent Trocheck also had goals for the Rangers, who won for the seventh time in eight games.

Stars 4, Blackhawks 1: Tyler Seguin, Colin Miller, Joe Pavelski and Luke Glendening scored as visiting Dallas topped skidding Chicago.

The Stars climbed into a second-place tie with idle Colorado in the tight Central Division, one point behind first-place Minnesota.

Red Wings 7, Penguins 4: David Perron had a hat trick in the third period and host Detroit overcame the ejection of coach Derek Lalonde to beat Pittsburgh.

Lalonde was assessed a game misconduct during the second period. He profanely argued af-

ter unsuccessfully challenging the Penguins' third goal on a claim of goalie interference.

Sharks 3, Jets 0: James Reimer earned his third shutout of the season as host San Jose blanked Winnipeg to halt a nine-game losing streak.

The Jets hold the second wild-card spot in the Western Conference by two points over Calgary and three over Nashville, which has two games in hand.

Blues 6, Canucks 5 (OT): Jakub Vrana scored two goals, including the game-winner 28 seconds into overtime, and host St. Louis improved to 5-1-1 in its past seven.

Pavel Buchnevich, Alexey Toropchenko, Justin Faulk and Robert Thomas also scored for the Blues.

Flyers 3, Canadiens 2: Morgan Frost scored his second goal of the game with 2:15 left in the third period and host Philadelphia wrapped up a seven-game homestand at 5-1-1.

The Canadiens were eliminated from playoff contention with the loss.

Hawks hold off Cavs despite Mitchell's 44 points

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Dejounte Murray and Trae Young displayed what Atlanta coach Quin Snyder called a "connectivity" in the backcourt against the Cleveland Cavaliers that could be important for the Hawks' postseason hopes.

Murray sank three free throws with 2:14 remaining to give Atlanta the lead and added a fall-away jumper with less than a minute left to lead the Hawks to a 120-118 win over the short-handed Cavaliers on Tuesday night.

Murray led Atlanta with 29 points and Onyeka Okongwu added a season-high 21. Young, usually Atlanta's top scorer, had 16 points with 10 assists and only one second-half turnover.

"I thought they played off each other and there was a connectivity there that was important to the team," Snyder said.

The Hawks remained tied with Toronto, which beat Miami 106-92 on Tuesday night, for the eighth-best record in the Eastern Conference.

The Cavaliers were led by Donovan Mitchell's 44 points. He tied LeBron James' Cavaliers record of 10 games of 40-or-more points in a season.

Warriors 120, Pelicans 109: Stephen Curry had 39 points with eight three-pointers, eight rebounds and eight assists, Jordan Poole added 21 points and host Golden State rallied past New Orleans.

Klay Thompson scored 17 and

hit five threes to set a single-season career high of 278, which leads the NBA.

The Warriors moved up a spot into sixth place in the crowded Western Conference standings.

Grizzlies 113, Magic 108: Desmond Bane scored 31 points and made 8 of 10 free throws down the stretch, leading host Memphis past Orlando.

Bane's free throws thwarted a last-minute rush by the Magic, led by Franz Wagner, who ended up with 25 points, including nine in the final 1:10.

Hornets 137, Thunder 134: P.J. Washington scored 22 of his career-high 43 points in the fourth quarter, and visiting Charlotte rallied to beat Oklahoma City.

Three Thunder players scored career highs — Isaiah Joe with 33 points and Josh Giddey and Jalen Williams with 31 each.

Raptors 106, Heat 92: Pascal Siakam scored 26 points, Scottie Barnes had 22 points and a career-high 12 assists and host Toronto beat Miami.

Tyler Herro scored 33 points and Bam Adebayo had 21 points and 12 rebounds for Miami.

Wizards 130, Celtics 111: Kristaps Porzingis had 32 points and 13 rebounds, and host Washington boosted its flickering postseason hopes with a victory over Boston.

The Wizards pulled within 2½ games of Chicago for the final play-in spot in the Eastern Conference.