

Platoon tests robots, drones for combat

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT MOORE, Ga. — A grenade exploded off in the distance, launched from a small drone hovering just over a cluster of trees on a hilly live-fire range during training last week at the Army post.

The 50-pound drone continued hovering, firing three more grenades before a ground robot outfitted with a .50-caliber machine gun moved forward, unloading automatic fire toward the direction the drone had shot. The weapons continued shooting in a scenario designed to mimic the opening salvos of a battle, as the soldiers controlling the machines remained hidden, safely out of the reach of return fire.

The drill conducted Tuesday during Fort Moore's annual Army Expeditionary Warrior Experiment, or AEWE, demonstration is one long envisioned by military planners who hope to integrate soldier-operated machines into infantry and armor formations to keep troops safer in battle.

Infantrymen with Fort Moore's Experimental Company have spent months conducting AEWE operations, working with aerial drones and ground robots to lead the Army's effort of incorporating machines directly into infantry formations. They tested nearly 50 different technologies including small drones that collect intelligence or jam radio frequencies, near-silent electric motorbikes, signal-blocking camouflage materials and robots that can fire weapons or sneak up on enemy positions.

The main takeaway from the unit's work, said Capt. Timothy Young, the Experimental Company's commander, is the concept is sound, and at least some of the technology is nearly ready to deploy into the broader Army.

"This formation increases the lethality of infantry formations and allows commanders to have greater situational awareness early on, on the battlefield," Young said after his soldiers conducted the live-fire demonstration. "Ground robotics ...

have the potential to provide direct fire and effects on the enemy beyond the [forward line of troops]. And today ground robotics are proving to be a high-payoff target for the enemy to draw indirect and direct fire away from our troops, allowing us to trade blood for machinery."

AEWE has tested emerging Army technology at Fort Moore for nearly two decades, said Justin Strayer, the chief of persistent experimentation for the installation's Maneuver Battle Lab, which oversees the annual testing event. This year, Army Futures Command tasked AEWE with focusing on robotics that could be integrated into light infantry formations, Strayer said. The experiment will have similar orders next year, as the Army looks to integrate at least some of the tech being tested there into Army platoons by 2030.

AEWE is one of dozens of experimental events throughout the Army that is feeding technology into the service's primary experimentation program, known as Project Conver-

gence. The service will host a high-level Project Convergence demonstration this week in California at the Marines' Camp Pendleton and the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, where it will show how some of the latest emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence capabilities, can come together to conduct major combat operations, according to the Pentagon.

Strayer said some of the work that Fort Moore's Experimental Company has done in recent months will be tested at Project Convergence, which will also include the Defense Department's other military services, and troops and technology from several allied countries.

While the experiments proved fruitful, they did not go without issue. During the demonstration, one drone fell out of the air and crashed and TheMIS experienced firing issues. Young said such things are to be expected. What is clear, the captain added, is the aerial drone technology is much farther along than the ground robotics.

Thousands of US Marines join huge NATO Nordic drill

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Thousands of U.S. Marines and other allied forces are taking up positions in the High North, where major war games have begun amid the imminent addition of Sweden as NATO's 32nd member state.

Some 20,000 troops are taking part in Nordic Response, which started Sunday and pulls together ground forces, warships and fighter planes to rehearse

collective battle against a potential Russian attack.

The Marine Corps' II Marine Expeditionary Force will serve as the land component headquarters for Nordic Response, operating out of Bardufoss Air Station in Norway.

"Nothing is easy when you're operating in several feet of snow, at negative 40 degrees Fahrenheit, surrounded by 5,000-foot mountain peaks," Lt. Gen. David Ottignon, IIMEF's commander, said in a statement.

About 2,500 Marines will take part in the exercise, and Marine fighter squadrons will fly the fifth-generation F-35B Lightning II aircraft and F/A-18 Hornets. The goal is to strengthen coordination across air, ground and maritime domains, the Marines said.

"The Arctic is a fluid, strategic place," Ottignon said. "It's important for our allies to know that we're here today and we'll be here when needed to respond swiftly to any threat."

The two-week exercise in Norway, Finland and Sweden falls under the banner of NATO's Steadfast Defender, the alliance's largest exercise in decades.

For NATO, adding Finland last year and soon-to-be member Sweden brings militaries with experience operating in the Arctic, where melting sea ice brings the prospect of new shipping lanes and greater access to undersea natural resources.

Senate confirms Paparo to lead US Pacific Fleet

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Adm. Samuel Paparo was confirmed by the Senate on Wednesday evening to be the next leader of Indo-Pacific Command.

Paparo, who now commands the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was approved along with 25 other military promotions in a unanimous consent vote.

The upper chamber also confirmed Aprille Joy Ericsson as assistant secretary of defense within the Defense Department's research office.

Paparo will succeed Adm. John Aquilino, who has been in charge of INDOPACOM since April 2021.

In a 37-year military career, Paparo has served as a sailor, naval officer and a fighter pilot.

He has commanded the U.S. Pacific Fleet since 2021 and previously served as the operations chief for U.S. Central Command, which controls U.S. military operations in the Middle East.

Paparo's experience includes stints flying F-15 and F/A-18 fighter jets and leading a provincial reconstruction team in Afghanistan.

He has served in 15 duty stations around the world.

During his confirmation hearing Feb. 1, Paparo said the United States remains equipped to handle the rising dominance of China and its larger Navy fleet, but the pace of the country's warship-building raises alarm.

The Defense Department considers China a "pacing threat" that has the capability to challenge America's military and spark a war over Taiwan, a

democratically governed island and U.S. partner that China considers its own territory.

"[China's] navy has been on a historic trajectory these last 25 years and while ... I am confident that we would prevail in combat, it is a concerning trajectory," Paparo said. "We are not overmatched, but I don't like the pace of the trajectory."

About 375,000 service members and civilian employees are assigned to the Indo-Pacific region, which comprises 38 nations, according to the command's website.

Navy destroyer back in Japan following 4 years of upgrades

By JENNESSA DAVEY
AND ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The guided-missile destroyer USS McCampbell returned to the 7th Fleet on Saturday after nearly four years of maintenance and upgrades in Oregon.

Taylor Pascual, wife of Chief John David Pascual, a hospital corpsman, was among the family members who stood in the cold and waited for the ship to dock.

"I'm very proud of him for being part of everything McCampbell is doing," she said.

The McCampbell becomes the 10th warship in Destroyer Squadron 15, the principal surface force for 7th Fleet which routinely escorts for the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group.

The ship was assigned to Yokosuka from 2007 to 2020. It left for Portland, Ore., in July 2020 for its mid-life modernization, including upgrades that fortified its "warfighting capability," according to a news release

Saturday from 7th Fleet.

"We are excited for the opportunity to rejoin 7th Fleet and the forward-deployed ships in Yokosuka," the McCampbell's skipper, Cmdr. James Pierce III, said in the release. "Our Sailors have trained diligently over the past four years since our departure to prepare for our return to Japan."

During its previous 13 years in Japan, the destroyer steamed through the Taiwan Strait and took part in freedom-of-navigation operations near the Parcel Islands in the South China Sea.

It also participated in disaster-relief efforts, including missions following a 2008 earthquake and tsunami off the coast of Indonesia and Operation Tomodachi after an earthquake and tsunami devastated northeastern Japan in 2011.

After a monthlong "acclimation period," the McCampbell will be fully capable of taking on missions in the Western Pacific, said Capt. Justin Harts, commander of Task Force 71 and Destroyer Squadron 15.

Cobra Gold military exercise kicks off with beach landing

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

HAT YAO BEACH, Thailand — U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcons making simulated airstrikes split the quiet on the Hat Yao Beach on Friday, signaling the start of a massive amphibious exercise by more than 2,000 U.S., Thai and South Korean troops.

Ahead of the F-16s, Thai marine special operators stormed ashore in rigid inflatable boats, while U.S. paratroopers carefully descended near smoke signals in the first wave. Within minutes, nearly 20 amphibious vehicles from all three countries lumbered onto the beach and unloaded hundreds of troops.

They advanced and fired blanks, but with no enemy to halt their advance, the mock battle ended swiftly.

The exercise marked a significant, early piece of Cobra Gold, one of the largest military exercises in Asia and now in its 43rd year, according to Rear Adm. Christopher Stone, commander of the U.S. Navy's Task

Force 76/3. The drills began Feb. 27 and conclude Thursday.

"This year we have seven full-participating countries, and we have three limited-participation navies, but broadly, we have 30 nations represented and working together in Cobra Gold," he told reporters before the drill. "It's truly impressive to see."

Friday's participants included 1,200 Thai troops, 330 South Korean troops and 730 U.S. Marines, sailors and soldiers, according to task force spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Andrew DeGarmo.

The combat drill provides training in communication and in working with allied forces despite language barriers and different technology, according to Col. Sean Dynan, commander of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

"We train as we operate, and the time to figure out when and how to do that, ideally, isn't at the time of crisis," he told reporters ahead of the drill. "It's here, as we exercise at Cobra Gold."

Difficult conditions worsen Texas wildfire

Associated Press

STINNETT, Texas — Firefighters in Texas faced rising temperatures, whipped-up winds and dry air Saturday in their battle to keep the largest wildfire in state history from turning more of the Panhandle into a parched wasteland.

Firefighters were focused on containing the fire along its northern and eastern perimeter, where aggressive gusts from the southwest threatened to spread the flames and consume more acreage, according to Jason Nedlo, a spokesperson with the team of firefighters battling the Smokehouse Creek Fire that began last Monday and

has claimed at least two lives.

“The main goal is to continue using dozers and fire engines to contain and patrol the fire,” Nedlo said. “We’re also focused on not losing any more structures, no more loss of life.”

The massive fire has left a charred landscape of scorched prairie, dead cattle and destroyed as many as 500 structures, including burned-out homes, in the Texas Panhandle. It has merged with another fire and crossed the state line into Oklahoma, burning more than 1,700 square miles and was 15% contained, the Texas A&M Forest Service said Saturday.

The National Weather Ser-

vice issued a red flag warning for the entire Panhandle through midnight Sunday after rain and snow on Thursday allowed firefighters to contain a portion of the fire.

Signs warning travelers of the critical fire danger are in place along Interstate 40 leading into Amarillo.

“New fires could also potentially start ... the relative humidities are very low, the wind gusts are high and so it doesn’t take much, all there needs to be is a spark” to ignite another fire, said meteorologist William Churchill with the National Weather Prediction Center.

Nedlo said because of the on-

going weather conditions, it is not possible yet to predict when the flames will be fully contained and brought under control.

“We’ll know more after the weekend ... we’re just not willing to speculate,” Nedlo said.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, although strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm weather fed the flames.

Two women were confirmed killed by the fires. But with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities haven’t yet thoroughly searched for victims or tallied homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Sierra Nevada to see more snow after blizzard

Associated Press

TRUCKEE, Calif. — Keep the shovels handy: a powerful blizzard in the Sierra Nevada was expected to wane Sunday, but more heavy snow is on the way.

The National Weather Service said conditions would improve as winds weakened Sunday, but precipitation would quickly return, with heavy snow in some areas and rainfall in others. That wasn’t much of a break after a multiday storm that one meteorologist called

“as bad as it gets” closed a key east-west freeway in northern California, shut down ski resorts and left thousands of homes and businesses without power.

By Sunday morning, Pacific Gas & Electric had restored power to all but about 7,000 California customers, while NV Energy had reduced its number to roughly 1,000 homes and businesses. And some ski areas were planning to reopen, albeit with delayed start times and

limited operations.

“We aren’t outta the woods just yet,” officials at Sierra at Tahoe posted on the resort’s website.

Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of Lake Tahoe and site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, closed chairlifts Saturday because of snow, wind and low visibility. It planned to reopen late Sunday morning after getting an estimated 5 feet of snow on the upper mountain as of Saturday night.

“We will be digging out for the foreseeable future,” officials said on the resort’s blog.

More than 10 feet of snow was expected at higher elevations, National Weather Service meteorologist William Churchill said Saturday, creating a “life-threatening concern” for residents near Lake Tahoe and blocking travel on the east-west freeway. He called the storm an “extreme blizzard” for the Sierra Nevada but said he didn’t expect records to be broken.

Oregon lawmakers pass bill to recriminalize drugs

Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — A bill recriminalizing the possession of small amounts of drugs was passed by the Oregon Legislature on Friday, undoing a key part of the state’s first-in-the-nation drug decriminalization law as governments struggle to respond to an overdose crisis in the U.S.

The state Senate approved House Bill 4002 in a 21-8 vote after the House passed it 51-7 on Thursday. The bill now heads to the desk of Gov. Tina Kotek, who said in January that she is open to signing a bill that would roll back decriminalization, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

“With this bill, we are doubling down on our commitment to make sure Oregonians have access to the treatment and care that they need,” said Democratic Senate Majority Leader Kate Lieber, of Portland, one of the bill’s authors, adding that its passage will “be the start of real and transformative change for our justice system.”

The measure makes the possession of small amounts of drugs such as heroin or methamphetamine a misdemeanor, punishable by up to six months in jail. It enables police to confiscate the drugs and crack down on their use on sidewalks and in parks. Drug treatment is to be offered as an

alternative to criminal penalties.

The bill also aims to make it easier to prosecute people who sell drugs. It increases access to addiction medication, and to obtain and keep housing without facing discrimination for using that medication.

Decriminalization of personal-use amounts of drugs, OK’d by voters in 2020 under Ballot Measure 110, was supposed to move hundreds of millions of dollars of marijuana tax revenues into drug treatment and harm reduction programs. That didn’t translate into an improved care network for a state with the second-highest rate of substance use disorder in the nation.

US airdrops pallets of meals, aid into Gaza

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. military C-130 cargo planes dropped food in pallets over Gaza on Saturday in the opening stage of an emergency humanitarian assistance authorized by President Joe Biden after more than 100 Palestinians who had surged to pull goods off an aid convoy were killed during a chaotic encounter with Israeli troops.

Three planes from Air Forces Central dropped 66 bundles containing about 38,000 meals into Gaza at 8:30 a.m. EST (3:30 p.m. local). The bundles were dropped in southwest Gaza, on the beach along the territory's Mediterranean coast. The airdrop was coordinated with the Royal Jordanian Air Force, which said it had two food airdrops Saturday in northern Gaza and has conducted several rounds in recent months.

"The amount of aid flowing to Gaza is not nearly enough and we will continue to pull out every stop we can to get more aid in," Presi-

dent Joe Biden said Saturday in a post on the social media site X.

U.S. Central Command said on X that "the combined operation included U.S. Air Force and RJAf C-130 aircraft and respective Army Soldiers specialized in aerial delivery of supplies, built bundles and ensured the safe drop of food aid."

The U.S. airdrop is expected to be the first of many.

Three Biden administration officials said the planes dropped the military Meals Ready to Eat (MREs)—shelf-stable meals that contain a day's worth of calories in each sealed package—in locations that were thought would provide civilians with the greatest level of safety to access aid. Afterward, the U.S. monitored the sites and was able to see civilians approach and distribute food among themselves, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to provide additional details that had not been made public.

Biden on Friday announced the U.S. would begin air dropping food to starving Gazans after at least 115 Palestinians were killed and hundreds more wounded in the Thursday attack as they scrambled for aid, the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza said.

Hundreds of people had rushed about 30 trucks bringing a predawn delivery of aid to the north. Palestinians said nearby Israeli troops shot into the crowds. Israel said they fired warning shots toward the crowd and insisted many of the dead were trampled.

White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said Friday that the airdrops were being planned to deliver emergency humanitarian assistance in a safe way to people on the ground. The United States believes the airdrops will help address the dire situation in Gaza, but they are no replacement for trucks, which can transport far more aid more

effectively, though Thursday's events also showed the risks with ground transport.

Kirby said the airdrops have an advantage over trucks because planes can move aid to a particular location very quickly. But in terms of volume, the airdrops will be "a supplement to, not a replacement for, moving things in by ground."

The C-130 is widely used to deliver aid to remote places because of its ability to land in austere environments.

Since the war began on Oct. 7, Israel has barred entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies, except for a trickle of aid entering the south from Egypt at the Rafah crossing and Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing.

The United Nations says one-quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people face starvation.

Aid officials have said that airdrops are not an efficient means of distributing aid and are a measure of last resort.

Ship hit by Houthis sinks, first vessel lost in conflict

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A ship attacked by Yemen's Houthi rebels has sunk in the Red Sea after days of taking on water, officials said Saturday, the first vessel to be fully destroyed as part of their campaign over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The sinking of the Rubymar, which carried a cargo of fertilizer and previously leaked fuel, could cause ecological damage to the Red Sea and its coral reefs.

Persistent Houthi attacks have already disrupted traffic in the crucial waterway for cargo and energy shipments moving from Asia and the Middle East to Europe. Already, many ships have turned away from the route.

The sinking could see further detours and higher insurance

rates put on vessels plying the waterway — potentially driving up global inflation and affecting aid shipments to the region.

The Belize-flagged Rubymar had been drifting northward after being struck by a Houthi anti-ship ballistic missile on Feb. 18 in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial waterway linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Yemen's internationally recognized government, as well as a regional military official, confirmed the ship sank. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as no authorization was given to speak to journalists about the incident.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center, which watches over Mideast waterways, separately acknowledged the Rubymar's sinking Saturday afternoon.

Attack on Odesa cited in Ukraine leader's aid plea

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The death toll rose to 10 on Sunday from a Russian drone strike that destroyed an apartment block in Ukraine's southern port city of Odesa the previous day when a local official reported that the body of a third child was pulled from the rubble, along with that of the child's mother.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on Western allies to boost Ukraine's air defenses in the wake of the deadly attack.

Ukraine's interior ministry on Sunday reported that rescue workers that morning retrieved the remains of a woman and infant. On Saturday, Ukrainian authorities reported that another young baby was among those killed after falling debris from

an Iranian-made drone hit the apartment building — one of eight Russian drones reported by officials. Later that day, Zelenskyy said that a second child had also died, and called on Kyiv's Western partners to send more air defense systems.

"Tymofiy was 4 months old. Mark was about to turn 3 years old. My condolences to all of their close ones," Zelenskyy wrote in English on X, formerly Twitter. He added that a 3-year-old girl and seven other people were injured in the attack.

"Delays in the delivery of weapons to Ukraine, as well as air defense to protect our people, unfortunately result in such losses. ... Ukraine has never requested anything more than what is necessary to protect lives," Zelenskyy wrote.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Tourist rescued after Jeep plunges off cliff

HONOLULU — A tourist driving in the dark on the southern tip of Hawaii's Big Island accidentally drove his rented Jeep off a cliff but was able to swim toward shore until firefighters pulled him up with a rope and helicopter.

The man was treated for facial injuries and slight hypothermia after last week's rescue, the Hawaii County Fire Department said. Police said the 27-year-old was visiting from the Canadian province of British Columbia.

Firefighters, police and the U.S. Coast Guard responded to the cliffs of South Point in Naalehu at about 3:45 a.m. Sunday to a report of a swimmer in distress in the ocean, the release said.

The rescue required 16 people and could have been dangerous for those involved because of the high surf in the area, Mayor Mitch Roth said.

"A lot of resources," Roth said. "It sounds like a careless act."

Planned Parenthood suit based on sting video

MO ST. LOUIS — Missouri's attorney general filed a lawsuit Thursday accusing Planned Parenthood of illegally taking minors into Kansas to obtain abortions without parental consent, basing the allegation on a video from a conservative group that has promoted false claims on other issues.

Republican Attorney General

Andrew Bailey's lawsuit accuses Kansas City, Mo.-based Planned Parenthood Great Plains of violating Missouri law, which makes it illegal to "intentionally cause, aid, or assist a minor to obtain an abortion" without consent from a parent or guardian. The lawsuit filed in state district court in Columbia, Mo., asks the court to stop Planned Parenthood from engaging in the conduct it alleges.

Bailey's lawsuit provides no evidence outside of a hidden camera video from a conservative group, Project Veritas. The video is of a conversation between Planned Parenthood employees and someone impersonating someone seeking an abortion for a fictitious 13-year-old.

Judge OKs law requiring citizenship proof to vote

AZ PHOENIX — A federal judge is upholding provisions of new Arizona laws that would require counties to verify the status of registered voters who haven't provided proof of U.S. citizenship and cross-check voter registration information with various government databases.

In a ruling Thursday, U.S. District Judge Susan Bolton concluded Arizona legislators did not discriminate when they adopted the laws and the state does have an interest in preventing voter fraud and limiting voting to those individuals eligible to vote.

However, Bolton said the requirement for those using a state registration form to include their state or country of birth violates a provision of the Civil Rights Act and a section of

the National Voter Registration Act. Doing so, she explained, would result in the investigation of only naturalized citizens based on county recorders' subjective beliefs that a naturalized individual is a non-citizen.

Man accused of drunken driving gets \$320,000

MI FOWLERVILLE — A Michigan village has agreed to a \$320,000 settlement with a man from Japan who was wrongly accused of drunken driving after a police officer badly misread a breath test, court records show.

Ryohei Akima blew a 0.02 on the test, but it was mistakenly read by the Fowlerville officer as 0.22 — nearly three times Michigan's blood-alcohol limit for driving. Caitlyn Peca, who was a rookie officer, told a colleague over the radio, "I have no idea what I'm doing," according to a summary of the case.

Akima, a native of Yonago, Japan, was in the U.S. on a work visa in 2020. Charges of driving while intoxicated were dropped when a blood sample further showed that he wasn't drunk.

Flagpole family to pay \$250K fine for cabins

ME AUGUSTA — The family that had wanted to build the world's tallest flagpole in rural eastern Maine has agreed to pay a \$250,000 penalty under a consent agreement following construction of more than 50 cabins without obtaining environmental permits from the state.

The Board of Environmental Protection signed off Wednesday on the consent agreement

signed late last month by Morrill Worcester, patriarch of the family whose company owns the land.

The Flagpole View Cabins were built from 2019 to 2022 in sparsely populated Columbia Falls near the site where the family wanted to build a flagpole taller than the Empire State Building. The flagpole was to be a centerpiece of a billion-dollar development honoring veterans.

Under the agreement, the company must file an after-the-fact application for a permit for the work that was already completed.

Ex-diplomat to admit working as Cuban agent

FL MIAMI — A former career U.S. diplomat told a federal judge Thursday he will plead guilty to charges of working for decades as a secret agent for communist Cuba, an unexpectedly swift resolution to a case prosecutors called one of the most brazen betrayals in the history of the U.S. foreign service.

Manuel Rocha's stunning fall from grace could culminate in a lengthy prison term after the 73-year-old said he would admit to federal counts of conspiring to act as an agent of a foreign government. Prosecutors and Rocha's attorney indicated the plea deal includes an agreed-upon sentence but they did not disclose details in court Thursday. He is due back in court April 12, when he's likely to be sentenced.

The hearing shed no new light on what exactly he did to help Cuba while working at the State Department for two decades.

— From wire reports

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James pushes scoring mark past 40,000

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James reached 40,000 points Saturday night, still going strong in his 21st NBA season as he tries to put the career scoring record out of reach.

James drove past Michael Porter Jr. and hit a layup with 10:39 left in the second quarter of the Los Angeles Lakers' 124-114 loss to the Denver Nuggets for the historic basket.

"Being the first player to do something, it's pretty cool in this league, just knowing the history, the greats that's come through the league, and then you see some of the greats on the floor tonight, it was great to compete," James said. "But for me, the main thing, as always, is to win, and I hated that it had to happen in a defeat."

James did it in 1,475 regular-season games, reaching double-digit points in each of the last 1,205 of them. He has largely avoided major injuries in that time, while also playing another 3½ seasons worth of games in the playoffs en route to four titles in 10 NBA Finals appearances, all with unfathomable pressure placed on him to be the next transcendent player before ever stepping on the court as a professional.

"For the first time in a long time, I've seen the commercial that was played before my first game," James said. "I think they mentioned all the greats to ever play the game of basketball, like Big O and Michael and Kareem and Kobe, and forgot who all else was in that commercial. And then it was like,

'the next one, LeBron James.'

"I didn't see that commercial when it happened, but when I was watching it today, I was like what the hell? That expectation on an 18-year-old kid like that, that was insane to think about."

Even with those expectations, James put in the work and has now accomplished something that seemed impossible.

James' relentless march saw him pass the previous record of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 38,387 points on Feb. 7, 2023 against the Oklahoma City Thunder.

All that scoring happened without James' necessarily wanting that to be his trademark. He is fourth in career assists with 10,847, picking up another nine against Denver, and his average of 7.35 per game ranks in the top 25.

Nuggets coach Michael Malone, who spent five seasons with James as an assistant for the Cleveland Cavaliers from 2005-2010, saw an early dedication from James in all areas. It was already a priority for James to keep himself in peak physical condition, even if the run to the scoring title was an unforeseen outcome back then.

"I remember being in Cleveland, him being in the weight room with our weight and strength coaches, and there's no way he's doing what he's doing at this stage of his career if he is not putting a ton of time into his body, his diet, his sleep, all those things that really matter," Malone said before the game.

James' combination of longevity and sus-

tained excellence is what makes it entirely likely he could be the only player to ever reach 40,000 points.

To put the feat in perspective, Nuggets center Nikola Jokic will need to average 25 points over his next 1,057 appearances to join James at 40,000 points. That would be nearly 13 full seasons without injuries or any other unforeseen circumstance, all the way past age 41 without a drop in production for the two-time MVP.

Dallas Mavericks guard Luka Doncic seems like the most reasonable candidate to make a serious push, as his career average of 28.51 points per game is third in league history behind Michael Jordan (30.12) and Wilt Chamberlain (30.07). But Doncic will need to keep it up for 1,022 more games to match James, a timeline pushing into the 2036-37 season barring interruption.

"There's just certain things that you just don't think that's going to happen," James said. "I guess for years people said Kareem's record wouldn't be broken. I was able to eclipse it. But like I said, you have to have some really good luck, you have to play the game at a high level for a long time, and then we see."

As to whether James might ever take up residence in the 50,000-point club, a conservative estimate of 25 points per game from here on out — essentially matching what he has been producing in his 21st professional campaign at 39-years-old — while playing 55 outings each coming season would put him at the doorstep in 2031-32.

Green, VanVleet help propel Rockets past Suns

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Jalen Green scored 34 points, Fred VanVleet added 24 and the Houston Rockets beat the Phoenix Suns 118-109 on Saturday night to split a two-game series.

"This is who we want to be every night," said Green, who hit six 3-pointers.

Phoenix All-Star Devin Booker left late in the game because of a sprained right ankle when he stepped on teammate Royce O'Neale's foot, while fellow Suns guard Bradley Beal was ejected in his return to the lineup after missing five games with a hamstring injury.

Suns coach Frank Vogel said Booker's X-rays were negative.

Beal missed more time after his ejection in the third quarter. He and Green got in a

brief scuffle before they were separated. Beal was assessed two quick technicals and ejected while Green also got a technical.

Kevin Durant led the Suns with 30 points. Booker had 24 and O'Neale 20. Beal finished with seven points on 3-for-6 shooting.

Nuggets 124, Lakers 114: LeBron James reached 40,000 points, but Nikola Jokic had 35 points and 10 rebounds as visiting Denver made a late push to beat Los Angeles.

James had 26 points and nine assists while checking off his latest milestone, but the Lakers couldn't get their third straight victory. Rui Hachimura had 23 points, and Anthony Davis added 17 points and 11 rebounds.

Heat 126, Jazz 120: Jimmy Butler scored 18 of his season-high 37 points in the

third quarter, Bam Adebayo finished with 23 and host Miami held off Utah for its 10th victory in 13 games.

Keyonte George scored 31 points and Lauri Markkanen had 25 for Utah. Collin Sexton and John Collins each scored 18 points.

Nets 114, Hawks 102: Mikal Bridges scored 38 points and host Brooklyn rolled past Atlanta for the second straight game.

Dejounte Murray had 20 points, 11 assists and six rebounds for the Hawks.

Trail Blazers 107, Grizzlies 100: Anfernee Simons scored 20 of his 30 points in the second half and overtime and visiting Portland beat Memphis after overcoming a 13-point deficit in the fourth quarter.

Santi Aldama and Vince Williams Jr. each had 21 points for Memphis.

Purdue clinches share of Big Ten title

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Zach Edey had 32 points and 11 rebounds, Braden Smith added 23 points and nine boards, and No. 2 Purdue beat Michigan State 80-74 on Saturday night to clinch a share of the Big Ten regular-season championship.

Gold confetti fell from the Mackey Arena rafters as Purdue celebrated its conference-best 26th title. With a win in either of their final two games, the Boilermakers (26-3, 15-3) would claim a second straight outright regular-season crown.

"A great accomplishment to win back-to-back," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "It's hard. You play 20 (conference) games. Just happy for our entire team, but really our seniors. They've done things the right way."

The last Big Ten team to win back-to-back outright regular-season titles was Ohio State in 2006 and 2007.

No. 1 Houston 87, Oklahoma 85: Jamal Shead hit a short follow shot with 0.4 seconds left and the visiting Cougars beat the Sooners, giving coach Kelvin Sampson a victory over one of his former schools.

Shead missed a driving layup attempt, but corralled the loose rebound off the floor and put the Cougars back ahead after they blew a 15-point lead. Emanuel Sharp tipped away a desperation pass by Oklahoma's Milos Uzan as time expired.

No. 4 Tennessee 81, No. 14 Alabama 74: Zakai Zeigler scored 18 points and made four 3-pointers as the Volunteers beat the Tide to take sole possession of the Southeastern Conference lead.

Tennessee (23-6, 13-3 SEC) came into the game tied with Alabama (20-9, 12-4) atop the league standings and delivered its second straight big win heading into the final week of the regular season.

No. 12 Creighton 89, No. 5 Marquette 75: Baylor Scheier-

man scored 26 points and made three straight 3-pointers late in the game to lead the host Bluejays to a victory over the Golden Eagles.

Scheierman, a candidate for Big East player of the year who was playing his final game at CHI Health Center, had 16 rebounds for his eighth double-double in 10 games and 14th of the season.

Ryan Kalkbrenner scored 19 points and Trey Alexander added 18 points for Creighton (22-8, 13-6).

Marquette (22-7, 13-5) played without injured star guard Tyler Kolek and big man Oso Ighodaro (illness).

Kam Jones led the Golden Eagles with 23 points, David Joplin scored 21 and Stevie Mitchell had 15 points and nine rebounds.

No. 6 Arizona 103, Oregon 83: Caleb Love scored 22 points, Oumar Ballo had his ninth straight double-double and the Wildcats closed out the Pac-12 era at McKale Center with a beatdown of the Ducks.

Keyed by Love and then Kylan Boswell, Arizona (23-6, 14-4) had a 17-point lead by the midpoint of the first half and didn't let off the gas. The Wildcats shot 61% overall, went 14-for-25 from 3 and had 27 assists on 39 made field goals to finish the season 15-1 at home.

No. 15 Baylor 82, No. 7 Kansas 74: RayJ Dennis had 19 points and 10 assists, Jayden Nunn scored 18 and the host Bears handed the Jayhawks consecutive losses for the first time this season.

Yves Missi added 17 points and fellow freshman Ja'Kobe Walter had 11 for Baylor (21-8, 10-6 Big 12).

Big 12 scoring leader Kevin McCullar Jr., in his return to the lineup after missing four of the previous five games with a bone bruise in his knee, and Hunter Dickinson had 20 points each for Kansas (21-8, 9-7).

No. 8 Iowa State 60, UCF 52: Tre King had 16 points and

the visiting Cyclones had a late 11-0 run en route to their third straight victory and seventh in eight games.

Milan Momcilovic added 11 points for Iowa State (23-6, 12-4 Big 12). He hit a basket with 2:20 left to give the Cyclones a three-point lead.

No. 9 North Carolina 79, NC State 70: Harrison Ingram scored a season-high 22 points as the host Tar Heels rallied from a 10-point deficit in the second half and beat the Wolfpack.

Elliot Cadeau scored 15 points and RJ Davis finished with 14 after being held to two in the first half for North Carolina (23-6, 15-3 ACC), which won its fourth straight game.

Jayden Taylor hit five 3-pointers and finished with 22 points for N.C. State (17-12, 9-9), which lost for the third time in four games.

No. 10 Duke 73, Virginia 48: Kyle Filipowski scored 21 points and the host Blue Devils shot 59% before halftime to build a huge lead.

Tyrese Proctor added 15 points for Duke (23-6, 14-4 ACC).

Reece Beekman had 18 points and Isaac McKneely added 12 points for the Cavaliers (21-9, 12-7), who have lost four of six.

No. 11 Auburn 78, Mississippi State 63: Johni Broome had 17 points, Denver Jones scored 15 and the host Tigers beat the Bulldogs.

Auburn (22-7, 11-5 SEC) set the tone with its defense, as Mississippi State missed 17 of its first 19 shots. The Tigers never trailed, and they recorded nine blocks and eight steals in the victory.

No. 13 Illinois 91, Wisconsin 83: Marcus Domask had 31 points, Terrence Shannon Jr. scored 23 and the visiting Illini beat the slumping Badgers.

Illinois has won its last six matchups with Wisconsin, which beat Illinois 15 consecutive times before this stretch.

Wisconsin (18-11, 10-8) has

lost seven of its past nine.

No. 16 Kentucky 111, Arkansas 102: Rob Dillingham scored 11 of his 15 points in the final 6:33 and the host Wildcats rallied for a victory.

The Razorbacks (14-15, 5-11 SEC) led 86-77 with 8½ minutes remaining before Kentucky (21-8, 11-5) stormed back with a 21-6 burst to open a 98-92 lead.

Antonio Reeves led Kentucky with 22 points and D.J. Wagner scored 19.

No. 23 Gonzaga 70, No. 17 Saint Mary's 57: Graham Ike scored 24 points and the visiting Bulldogs bolstered their NCAA Tournament hopes by handing the Gaels their first conference loss of the season.

Gonzaga (24-6, 14-2 West Coast Conference) has won eight straight games since losing at home to the Gaels (24-7, 15-1) on Feb. 3.

Aidan Mahaney scored 16 for Saint Mary's, which came in with the nation's longest winning streak at 16 games.

No. 18 South Carolina 82, No. 24 Florida 76: Meechie Johnson scored 25 points, including a tie-breaking 3-pointer with 43.4 seconds to play, as the host Gamecocks rallied for a victory over the Gators.

South Carolina (24-5, 12-4 SEC) trailed 56-46 with 12 minutes to play, but behind Johnson and Collin Murray-Boyles turned things around with a 26-12 surge.

No. 19 Washington State 77, UCLA 65: Jaylen Wells matched a career high with 27 points, including 11 in the final 7½ minutes as the host Cougars beat the Bruins.

Washington State (23-7, 14-5) rallied for the second time in three days to stay a half-game behind first-place Arizona in the Pac-12 race.

No. 25 South Florida 76, Charlotte 61: Chris Youngblood scored 17 points, Kasean Pryor had 16 points and nine rebounds, and the visiting Bulls earned their 14th consecutive victory.

Skinner, Draisaitl lead Oilers past Kraken

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Stuart Skinner answered every test thrown his way. That included the ones which came early on when Edmonton's goalie was still finding his way into the game, and especially those he turned away in a frantic final minute.

Skinner made 24 saves, Leon Draisaitl scored his 30th goal of the season off the league-leading 73rd assist from Connor McDavid and the Oilers held off the Seattle Kraken 2-1 on Saturday.

Brett Kulak scored early in the third period for what proved to be the winning goal, but it was Skinner's performance that ensured a third straight win for Edmonton.

Skinner helped the Oilers keep the pressure on the Knights for second place in the Pacific Division and swept all four games in the season series with the Kraken.

Edmonton has won six straight against Seattle and is 9-2-0 against the Kraken since they joined the NHL.

Maple Leafs 4, Rangers 3 (SO): Max Domi scored the deciding goal in the shootout and

host Toronto beat New York.

John Tavares, Mitch Marner and William Nylander had goals in regulation for Toronto, which has won nine of its last 10 games.

Lightning 4, Canadiens 3 (SO): Victor Hedman scored in the sixth round of the shootout and host Tampa Bay stopped a four-game home losing streak.

Tampa Bay got goals from Brayden Point, Anthony Cirelli and Tyler Motte. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 28 saves in regulation to tie Tiny Thompson for 49th place in wins with 284.

Stars 3, Sharks 2 (SO): Jamie Benn scored in the seventh round of the shootout to lift host Dallas past San Jose.

Jason Robertson and Radek Faksa scored in regulation, and Matt Duchene also scored in the shootout for the Stars, who have points in eight straight games at home (6-0-2).

Flames 4, Penguins 3: Yegor Sharangovich scored twice, including the tiebreaking goal with 50 seconds left in the third period, as host Calgary rallied from two goals down in the third period to beat Pittsburgh.

Nazem Kadri and Blake Cole-

man also scored in the Flames' season-high fifth straight win.

Jets 5, Hurricanes 3: Sean Monahan scored the tiebreaking goal with 3:13 left and visiting Winnipeg rallied from a three-goal deficit in the third period to beat Carolina.

After Hurricanes goalie Pyotr Kochetkov went 10 feet out in front of his crease to try to clear the puck but failed, Monahan controlled the puck and then shot it into the empty net as Kochetkov tried to scramble back.

Flyers 4, Senators 2: Tyson Foerster scored twice in the span of 45 seconds, Felix Sandstrom made 24 saves in his season debut and host Philadelphia beat Ottawa.

Foerster broke a 1-1 deadlock with 47 seconds remaining in the second period, corralling a bouncing puck off a faceoff and fluttering a shot that went over the glove of Ottawa goalie Mads Sogaard. Foerster then scored Philadelphia's NHL-record fifth penalty-shot goal of the season with 2 seconds left.

Blues 3, Wild 1: Jake Neighbours and Alexey Toropchenko scored as host St. Louis snapped

a three-game losing streak.

Torey Krug also scored and Jordan Binnington stopped 21 shots to help the Blues win for just the second time in seven games (2-4-1).

Blue Jackets 5, Blackhawks 2: Alexandre Texier opened the scoring in the first minute, Zach Werenski had two assists, and visiting Columbus beat Chicago.

Panthers 4, Red Wings 0: Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 21 shots for his fourth shutout of the season, Sam Reinhart scored his 42nd goal, and visiting Florida beat Detroit.

Predators 5, Avalanche 1: Cody Glass scored three goals for his first career hat trick and host Nashville won its eighth straight.

Islanders 5, Bruins 1: Kyle Palmieri scored three times in the first period for his third career hat trick and host New York got its third straight win.

Sabres 7, Golden Knights 2: Dylan Cozens capped host Buffalo's five-goal surge by scoring his second short-handed goal of the game with 2:48 left, and the Sabres got their fifth win in six games.

F1 champ Verstappen wins opener amid team turmoil

Associated Press

SAKHIR, Bahrain — The ongoing drama around Red Bull had no effect on its three-time reigning world champion as Max Verstappen routed the field by 22 seconds in the season-opening Formula 1 race on Saturday.

Verstappen started the Bahrain Grand Prix on pole position and was never seriously challenged on his way to a commanding one-two win for Red Bull with teammate Sergio Perez. Embattled team principal Christian Horner was joined before the race and during the podium celebration by his wife, former pop star Geri Halliwell.

"Today went even better than expected," Verstappen said. "It was a lot of fun."

Carlos Sainz Jr. was third for Ferrari after fighting hard with teammate Charles Leclerc.

At the start of the longest-ever F1 season at 24 races, Verstappen already shows signs of repeating his near-perfect record from 2023, when the Dutch driver won 19 of 22 races.

Bahrain was the eighth win in a row for Verstappen going back to last September. He set an F1 record of 10 consecutive wins last season.

The F1 paddock's focus has firmly been on Horner, with Verstappen saying on Saturday

that his boss was "probably a little bit distracted."

"Obviously, it's not been pleasant, some of the unwanted attention, but the focus is now very much on the cars," Horner said. "My focus has very much been on what's going on on track and the result today, I think, demonstrates where the whole team's focus is and we move onwards."

Horner arrived on race day hand in hand with Halliwell, also known as Ginger Spice of the pop group the Spice Girls, and they celebrated together as Verstappen received his trophy.

The race came after FIA President Mohammed Ben Su-

layem said the turmoil around Horner was "damaging the sport," in comments to the Financial Times.

On Wednesday, the team's parent company dismissed a complaint of alleged misconduct by Horner toward a team employee. A day later during practice in Bahrain, a file alleged to contain evidence against Horner was emailed to nearly 200 people in the F1 paddock, including Liberty Media, F1, the FIA, the other nine team principals, and multiple media outlets.

The authenticity of the files has not been verified by The Associated Press.