

## Dems make play for vet, military votes

*AP/Report for America*

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Highway signs welcome drivers entering North Carolina to “the nation’s most military friendly state,” and veterans here know they’re being courted. But in a state where camouflage-colored appeals have become commonplace, recent efforts by progressive groups to cut into what has long been a reliably red constituency face an early test on Super Tuesday.

Among the 16 states and one territory casting ballots in Tuesday’s 2024 presidential primaries and caucuses are some with the nation’s highest rates of active-duty service members and largest populations of veterans: Texas, California, Virginia and North Carolina. But Tar Heel State veterans interviewed in the runup to the primary season’s biggest voting day varied in their politics, even if they agreed that their military service informed their opinions.

Ryan Rogers, who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, says the Biden administration mishandled the August 2021 attacks on Kabul’s airport that killed at least 60 Afghans and 13 U.S. troops.

The right-leaning independent voter from eastern North Carolina fears the blasts signaled a weakness that could endanger U.S. troops overseas.

“I don’t care what side you’re on,” he said. “You better be strong.”

But Ric Vandett, a 78-year-old Vietnam veteran from Hickory, won’t vote for President Joe Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump. The left-leaning independent voter said he cannot forget Trump’s refusal to acknowledge defeat in the 2020 election, which he blames for the Jan. 6 attacks on the U.S. Capitol.

“We came extremely close to a major constitutional crisis on Jan. 6,” he said. “I’m afraid to see that happen again.”

Recent statements by Trump have fueled Democrats’ sense that there’s an opening among voters with strong military ties, even if that gap hasn’t surfaced during his march toward the GOP nomination.

Ahead of South Carolina’s Republican primary, Trump said he “would encourage” Russia “to do whatever the hell they want” to NATO countries that don’t meet defense spending targets.

He also questioned why the husband of rival Nikki Haley wasn’t joining her on the campaign trail, though Michael Haley was then deployed with the South Carolina Army National Guard.

Haley responded that Trump knows “nothing about” serving the country. Trump handily defeated Haley in South Carolina, just like every state primary and caucus to date. Her only win came on Sunday in Washington, D.C.

Trump benefited from the bloc’s support in the 2020 general election. AP VoteCast found that about 6 in 10 military veterans said they voted for Trump then, as did just over half of those with a veteran in the household.

Among voters in this year’s South Carolina Republican primary, AP VoteCast found that close to two-thirds of military veterans and people in veteran households voted for Trump over Haley.

Still, progressive groups are citing Trump’s unorthodox foreign policy and past comments to argue that he’s no friend to Americans in uniform. Any significant departure from the more conservative constituency

of veterans and military families could spell trouble for Trump in a November rematch with Biden.

The Democrats will have to work for that support, according to Cal Cunningham, North Carolina Democrats’ 2020 nominee for U.S. Senate and an Army reservist who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Winning over this community is always challenging, Cunningham said, because people with military experience tend to value a culture more aligned with the “hierarchical” GOP than the “egalitarian” Democrats.

Their ability to do so could help determine which candidate receives North Carolina’s 15 electoral votes this fall.

Trump’s weekend rally in Greensboro was protested by Common Defense, a progressive organization founded in 2016 to engage veterans as more than just “political props.” The group said Trump’s “alarming disregard for the core tenets of democracy” goes against their oaths.

The Biden campaign has also ratcheted up attacks over Trump’s history of disparaging remarks about the armed forces.

## Philippine, Chinese vessels collide in South China Sea

*Associated Press*

MANILA, Philippines — Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in the disputed South China Sea and four Filipino crew members were injured Tuesday in high-seas confrontations as Southeast Asian leaders gathered for an Asian summit where alarm over Beijing’s aggression at sea was expected to be raised.

The Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying ves-

sels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels, Philippine officials said.

The BRP Sindangan of the Philippine coast guard had minor structural damage from the collision that happened shortly after dawn. Over an hour later,

another Chinese coast guard ship first blocked then collided with a supply boat the Philippine coast guard was escorting, the Philippine officials said.

The supply boat, manned by Filipino navy personnel, was later hit by water cannon blasts from two Chinese coast guard ships. Its windshield shattered, injuring at least four Filipino crew members, according to a statement from the Philippine government task force dealing

with territorial disputes.

The task force said the actions by the Chinese were “another attempt to illegally impede or obstruct a routine resupply and rotation mission.”

The Chinese coast guard said in a statement that “it took control measures in accordance with the law against Philippine ships that illegally intruded into the waters adjacent to Ren’ai Reef,” the name Beijing uses for Second Thomas Shoal.

# High-altitude drone deployed to Sicily

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy is boosting its intelligence capabilities in Europe and Africa with a contingent operating its newest high-altitude surveillance drone recently deployed to Sicily.

The service's only unmanned patrol squadron, or VUP-19, celebrated the deployment of a detachment to Naval Air Station Sigonella and the opening of an MQ-4C Triton drone hangar Saturday, a base statement the same day said.

The Navy didn't say how many personnel were assigned to the detachment or whether it was operational yet. It's also unclear if any of the drones were assigned to the base. VUP-19 is

homeported at Naval Air Station Jacksonville and Naval Station Mayport in Florida.

NAS Sigonella's location in the Mediterranean enables deployment of P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft throughout the theater, supporting U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command. That makes the addition of the Triton "a strategic win because it augments the capabilities of P-8 Poseidon detachments," Capt. Aaron Shoemaker, commanding officer of NAS Sigonella, said in the statement.

Designed to complement the P-8 Poseidon, the Triton can conduct multi-intelligence operations as well as support signals intelligence and search and rescue and communications re-

lay, according to manufacturer Northrop Grumman.

In September, VUP-19 returned to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, for continued refinements in tactics, techniques and procedures so it could be eased into operations in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Andersen also has a VUP-19 detachment.

With the war in Ukraine, Russian threats in the Baltic Sea and the impacts of the Israel-Hamas war in the eastern Mediterranean, there is greater focus on the European theater now than at any time since the Cold War.

In addition, the Navy partners with African nations to combat extremist militants and protect sea lanes. The U.S. Naval Forc-

es Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations covers half of the Atlantic Ocean, from the Arctic Ocean to the coast of Antarctica, including all of Europe and Russia and most of Africa.

The drone is built to operate above 50,000 feet and can fly for more than 24 hours at a time, according to the Navy. It can survey 4 million nautical miles in a single 24-hour mission, Northrop said in a statement last year.

Since 2017, Northrop has received more than \$600 million in Navy contracts to produce and modify the Triton, which has a 20-year lifespan.

Tritons have been deployed to the Indo-Pacific region since achieving early operational capacity in May 2020, according to Northrop.

## N. Korea makes threats to take military moves

*Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea called the ongoing South Korean-U.S. military drills a plot to invade the country, as it threatened Tuesday to take unspecified "responsible" military steps in response.

The North's warning came a day after the South Korean and U.S. forces kicked off their annual computer-simulated command post training and a variety of field exercises for an 11-day run. This year's drills were to involve 48 field exercises, twice the number conducted last year.

In a statement carried by state media, the North's Defense Ministry said it "strongly denounces the reckless military drills of the U.S. and (South Korea) for getting more undisguised in their military threat to a sovereign state and

attempt for invading it."

An unidentified ministry spokesperson said North Korea's military will "continue to watch the adventurist acts of the enemies and conduct responsible military activities to strongly control the unstable security environment on the Korean Peninsula."

The spokesperson didn't say what measures North Korea would take, but observers say North Korea will likely carry out missile tests or other steps to bolster its war capability.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said later Tuesday that its drills with the United States is a regular defensive training.

A ministry statement said South Korea will make an overwhelming response if North Korea launches direct provocations against it during the drills.

## Airmen carry out Indo-Pac's 1st hypersonic drill on Guam

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Airmen on Guam trained last week on a hypersonic weapon the Air Force has kept under wraps for nearly a year.

Photographs of airmen checking out what appears to be an AGM-183 Air-launched Rapid Response Weapon were released on Andersen Air Force Base's website Feb. 29. It was mounted beneath a B-52H Stratofortress bomber.

The AGM-183 is a conventional, rocket-powered hypersonic gliding missile with a warhead of "kinetic energy" projectiles rather than explosives, according to a fiscal 2021 Air Force report.

"The Air-launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) program combines critical high-speed flight technologies and accelerates the weaponization

of air-to-ground hypersonic strike capabilities for the U.S. Air Force," manufacturer Lockheed Martin states on its site.

Andersen is the only spot in the Indo-Pacific where the Air Force is conducting the training, 1st Lt. Ariana Wilkinson, spokeswoman for Andersen's 36th Wing, said.

On Guam, airmen trained on hypersonic fundamentals and discussed hypersonic operations to increase readiness and prepare for the weapons, including the Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile, Air-launched Rapid Response Weapon and other programs under development, according to a news release that accompanied the photos.

"The Air Force will continue to invest in researching, developing, testing, producing, and fielding cost-effective weapons," the release said.

# Intel sharing on dating site tied to ex-officer

By J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

A retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel is accused of leaking classified information about Russia's war against Ukraine via text messages on an unspecified foreign dating website, according to the Justice Department.

David Franklin Slater, 63, attended classified briefings as part of his work at U.S. Strategic Command and then sent secrets from them to a person who claimed to be a woman living in Ukraine, prosecutors said Monday in a statement.

He faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted on the charges, which include one count of conspiracy to disclose sensitive information and two counts of unauthorized disclosure of sensi-

tive information.

The indictment was filed in U.S. district court in Omaha, Neb., on Feb. 21 and did not identify the alleged co-conspirator.

Slater retired from the Army in 2020 and took a job as a civilian employee for the Air Force. He worked in a classified area at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska from August 2021 until April 2022, the indictment said.

The base is the home of STRATCOM and contains some of the military's most sensitive information networks.

The person who prosecutors said plied Slater for information referred to him as her "secret informant love" and "secret agent," according to court filings. Slater received messages such as "Beloved Dave, do NA-

TO and (U.S. President Joe) Biden have a secret plan to help us?" and "Dave, I hope tomorrow NATO will prepare a very unpleasant "surprise" for (Russian President Vladimir) Putin! Will you tell me?"

In response, Slater sent classified assessments of Russian military capabilities and the travel plans of U.S. officials visiting Ukraine, the indictment said.

One message on April 14, 2022, thanked Slater for "valuable information" about two U.S. officials going to Kyiv. That was the day the first U.S. delegation of Republicans Sen. Steve Daines of Montana and Rep. Victoria Spartz of Indiana visited Ukraine.

Slater is scheduled for his first court appearance Tuesday,

court documents said. He began speaking with the co-conspirator via emails and texts around the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, according to prosecutors.

The co-conspirator would ask Slater questions about what he saw at classified briefings, the indictment said.

A March 11 message said, "Dear, what is shown on the screens in the special room?? It is very interesting." Another on April 21 said, "You have a job in the Operations Center today, I remember, I'm sure there is a lot of interesting news there?"

Other messages appeared to thank Slater for providing information. One sent April 12 said, "Sweet Dave, the supply of weapons is completely classified, which is great!"

## Navy will extend testing of Pearl Harbor-Hickam water

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Navy will extend by a year monitoring of its water distribution system at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam that had been contaminated with jet fuel in late 2021, Navy Region Hawaii said recently.

The Navy will begin voluntarily monitoring in April, which is when the original two-year testing period ends.

The testing was originally required by the Interagency Drinking Water System Team, whose members came from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Hawaii Department of Health, Navy and Army.

The water sampling began in the wake of a 2021 jet fuel spill from Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, a World War II-era underground collection of tanks located a few miles from the base.

The jet fuel seeped into the aquifer and contaminated one of

three wells used by the Navy for its system that supplies water to roughly 93,000 residents of military housing communities on and near the joint base. Thousands of residents were temporarily relocated to area hotels as the Navy sealed off the tainted well and flushed the entire system.

The Navy has tested more than 8,000 samples since monitoring began, the Saturday news release said. Testing results are posted at [www.jbphh-safewaters.org](http://www.jbphh-safewaters.org).

Earlier this year, the Navy began looking into a spate of complaints by residents on the distribution system about tap water with a foul smell or sheen.

Testing found low levels of total petroleum hydrocarbon, or TPH, that did not exceed the safe drinking water standard of 266 parts per billion. The TPH did not appear to originate from JP-5 jet fuel that had been stored at the Red Hill facility.

## Strategy seen in settlement of Wis. fake elector lawsuit

*Associated Press*

Two attorneys for then-President Donald Trump orchestrated a plan for fake electors to file paperwork falsely saying the Republican won Wisconsin in a strategy to overturn Joe Biden's 2020 victory there and in other swing states, according to a lawsuit settlement reached Monday that makes texts and emails public.

Under their agreements, Kenneth Chesebro and Jim Troupis turned over more than 1,400 pages of documents, emails and text messages, along with photos and video, offering a detailed account of the scheme's origins in Wisconsin. The communications show how they, with coordination from Trump campaign officials, replicated the strategy in six other states including Georgia, where Chesebro has already pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the 2020 election.

The agreements settle a civil lawsuit brought by Democrats in

2022 against the two attorneys and 10 Republicans in Wisconsin who posed as fake electors.

"Our democracy demands better than this," said Scott Thompson, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys who helped negotiate the agreements. "That is why this lawsuit ... consistently sought transparency, accountability and deterrence."

There is no admission of wrongdoing or liability in the agreements in which Chesebro and Troupis promise to never participate in similar efforts involving future campaigns. Troupis must also pay an undisclosed amount to the plaintiffs.

Troupis said Monday in an emailed statement that the "alternate elector ballots" were "a reasonable course of action" given that the 2020 results were appealable to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Trump lost Wisconsin to Biden, a Democrat, by fewer than 21,000 votes.

# Ukraine claims it has sunk another Russian warship

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine claimed Tuesday it has sunk another Russian warship in the Black Sea using high-tech sea drones as Kyiv's forces continue to take aim at targets deep behind the war's front line. Russian authorities did not confirm the claim.

The Ukrainian military intelligence agency said a special operations unit destroyed the large patrol ship Sergey Kotov overnight. The ship, which Ukraine said was commissioned in 2021 and was hit near the Kerch Strait, reportedly can carry cruise missiles and around 60 crew.

The sinking of such a modern ship would be a significant loss and an embarrassing blow for Moscow, even though there are dozens of other vessels in its Black Sea fleet.

Patrol boats such as the Sergey Kotov are part of Russia's countermeasures against drone

attacks, according to an article published last month by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a U.S. think tank. The vessels use radar and a helicopter to detect and destroy drones using grenade launchers and heavy machine guns, it said.

Kyiv's forces are struggling to keep the better-provisioned Russian army at bay at some points along the largely static 930-mile front line, but are also taking aim at targets far beyond the battlefield.

In the Black Sea, Ukrainian successes against enemy warships have pushed the Russian fleet away from the coast, allowing Ukraine to set up a grain export corridor.

The Ukraine defense ministry posted on X, formerly Twitter, a video of what it said was the nighttime attack on the Sergey Kotov using Magura V5 uncrewed vessels that are designed and built in Ukraine and laden with explosives.

The Ukrainian claims could not immediately be independently verified, and disinformation has been a feature of the fighting that broke out after Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor in February 2022.

The private security firm Ambrey said the attack took place at the port of Feodosia, in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. Ambrey said it has seen footage taken by a crew member on a merchant vessel in the port, showing the Sergey Kotov firing at the drones.

The ship was hit at least twice, with the second strike resulting in a large blast, Ambrey reported.

Last month, Ukraine claimed it twice sank Russian warships using drones. On Feb. 1, it claimed to have sunk the Russian missile-armed corvette Ivanovets, and on Feb. 14 it said it destroyed the Caesar Kunikov landing ship. Russian officials did not confirm those claims.

# Apple fined nearly \$2B over music streaming

*Associated Press*

LONDON — The European Union leveled its first antitrust penalty against Apple on Monday, fining the U.S. tech giant nearly \$2 billion for unfairly favoring its own music streaming service by forbidding rivals like Spotify from telling users how they could pay for cheaper subscriptions outside of iPhone apps.

Apple muzzled streaming services from telling users about payment options available through their websites, which would avoid the 30% fee charged when people pay through apps downloaded with the iOS App Store, said the European Commission, the 27-nation bloc's executive arm and top antitrust enforcer.

"This is illegal. And it has impacted millions of European consumers who were not able to make a free choice as to where, how and at what price to buy music streaming subscriptions," Margrethe Vestager, the EU's competition commissioner, said at a news conference in Brussels.

It's the culmination of a bitter, yearslong feud between Apple and Spotify over music streaming supremacy.

A complaint from the Swedish streaming service five years ago triggered the investigation that led to the \$1.95 billion fine.

The decision comes the same week new rules take effect to prevent tech giants from cornering digital markets.

The EU has led global efforts to crack down on Big Tech companies, including three fines for Google totaling more than 8 billion euros, charging Meta with distorting the online classified ad market and forcing Amazon to change its business practices.

# France becomes the only country to explicitly guarantee abortion as a right

*Associated Press*

PARIS — French lawmakers on Monday overwhelmingly approved a bill to enshrine abortion rights in France's constitution, making it the only country to explicitly guarantee a woman's right to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy.

The historic move was proposed by President Emmanuel Macron as a way to prevent the kind of rollback of abortion rights seen in the United States in recent years, and the vote during a special joint session of France's parliament drew a long standing ovation among lawmakers.

The measure was approved in a 780-72 vote in the Palace of Versailles. Abortion enjoys wide support in France across most of the political spectrum, and has been legal since 1975.

Many female legislators in the hall smiled broadly as they cheered. While a small group of protesters stood outside the joint session, there were jubilant scenes of celebrations all over France as women's rights activists hailed the measure promised by Macron within hours of the Dobbs ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022. The U.S. decision has reverberated across Europe's political

landscape, forcing the issue back into public debate in some countries at a time when far-right nationalist parties are gaining influence.

Both houses of France's parliament, the National Assembly and Senate, had separately adopted a bill to amend Article 34 of the French Constitution, but the amendment needed final confirmation by a three-fifths majority in the special joint session. The measure specifies that "the law determines the conditions by which is exercised the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed."

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Police horses cause highway traffic jam**

**OH** CLEVELAND — Drivers on an Ohio interstate came upon an unusual traffic hazard over the weekend — a pair of police horses trotting against traffic on the highway.

The two animals on the lam caused an unusual traffic jam Saturday afternoon as they wove through slowing traffic and then stopped it on Interstate 90 in the downtown Cleveland area.

Cleveland.com reported that video from the Ohio Department of Transportation showed the animals trotting on the side of the road near the unit's stables at about 12:15 p.m. Saturday. The camera follows the animals, ultimately trailed by a police cruiser, heading further along the highway and then down an on-ramp.

**2 men dead after small plane crash near home**

**MN** AFTON — Investigators are trying to determine what caused a small plane to crash near a home in Minnesota, killing both people on board.

The accident happened just before 9:45 a.m. Saturday in Afton, a town of about 2,900 residents 30 miles east of Minneapolis. The Washington County Sheriff's Office said in a news release that it received several calls reporting what sounded like an explosion.

Responders found the plane engulfed in flames in the yard of a home, near the attached garage, the sheriff's office said. After the fire was extinguished, the bodies of an 85-year-old man from White Bear Lake, Minn.,

and a 68-year-old man from Baytown Township, Minn., were found. No one on the ground was hurt.

**IRS agent charged with manslaughter in training**

**AZ** TUCSON — An April trial date has been scheduled for an Internal Revenue Service special agent accused of involuntary manslaughter in the shooting death of a fellow employee after training exercises at a firearm range last year.

A federal grand jury indicted Larry Edward Brown Jr. on one count of involuntary manslaughter of an officer of the United States on Wednesday. He was released Friday after his initial court appearance in Tucson. An April 2 trial is scheduled.

Brown, 42, of the Phoenix suburb of Peoria, is charged in the Aug. 17 shooting of IRS Special Agent Patrick Bauer.

The U.S. Attorney's Office said both Brown and Bauer were trained use-of-force instructors and special agents of the IRS' Criminal Investigation unit. Bauer was a 15-year veteran and Brown has more than 12 years of experience.

**Bill passed for victims of abuse at reform school**

**FL** TALLAHASSEE — Restitution for decades of abuse at two now-shuttered reform schools where boys were beaten, raped and killed is now in the hands of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis after the Senate unanimously passed a bill Monday to set aside \$20 million for victims.

The bill creates a process for

former inmates at the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna and the Florida School for Boys at Okeechobee to make claims over physical, mental or sexual abuse between 1940 and 1975. It's estimated that victims will receive about \$50,000 each.

A group known as The White House Boys, named for the white cinderblock building at Dozier where boys were taken and hit with a long leather strap, have spent years trying to get recognition for the abuse. Nearly 100 boys died between 1900 and 1973 at Dozier and the University of South Florida spent four years exhuming remains from 55 unmarked graves in overgrown woods on the school's property.

**Judge rules against laws restricting abortion**

**MT** HELENA — Three Montana laws restricting abortion access are unconstitutional, including a ban on abortions beyond 20 weeks of gestation, a state judge said in granting a motion for summary judgment filed by Planned Parenthood of Montana.

The 20-week ban and the two other laws passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature in 2021 — one that banned telehealth prescriptions of abortion medication and required a 24-hour waiting period after giving informed consent, and another that required providers to offer patients the option of viewing an ultrasound or listening to the fetal heart tone — had been blocked by a preliminary injunction that was granted in October 2021.

District Court Judge Kurt Krueger's decision cited a 1999

Montana Supreme Court ruling that said the state Constitution's right to privacy includes a woman's right to obtain a pre-viability abortion from the provider of her choice.

**Murder suspect holding shower head fatally shot**

**SC** COLUMBIA — A man who had beaten his mother and girlfriend to death inside a burning house and who reportedly told relatives he wanted to be killed by police was fatally shot by eight officers as he held a chrome shower head they thought was a gun, according to a police department presentation of evidence in the case.

Gary Pratt Whitten was out on bail — wearing an ankle monitor and under orders to stay away from his girlfriend's home after pointing a gun at her in December — when he killed the women on Jan. 17, investigators told The Post and Courier newspaper.

Data from the monitor indicated Whitten was at the home in Greenville for several hours the day of the killing, but the company that keeps track of the ankle bracelet didn't contact the sheriff's office until Whitten removed it. The fire was reported 30 seconds later, authorities said.

The video includes snippets of body camera recordings showing Whitten, 36, stepping out on the porch of a mobile home. Deputies saw a chrome object in his hand as one yelled "he's got a gun" and dozens of shots were fired by the eight officers in about five seconds. Deputies said they spent 26 minutes trying to get him to surrender.

— From wire reports

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# Eagles' Kelce retires after 13 seasons

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Jason Kelce needed only seconds to burst into tears.

Kelce's eyes flooded each time he relayed a story about backyard football games with his brother, the love he felt from his parents and the devotion of his coaches — even a band teacher — that shaped him along way. But it was his career with the Philadelphia Eagles that choked up Kelce the most. The Super Bowl. The parade. His beloved offensive line coach.

All of the memories, the wins, the brotherhood — both with his fellow Eagles players and younger brother Travis, a tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs — consumed Kelce to the point where he needed about 45 minutes to reach the inevitable conclusion that everyone inside a crowded auditorium knew was coming from the moment a news conference was announced.

It was time to retire.

The 36-year-old Kelce officially called it quits Monday at the Eagles' NovaCare Complex, ending a 13-year career spent entirely with Philadelphia in which he became not only one of the great centers of his era who played a key role in the franchise's lone Super Bowl championship, but also a beloved Philly personality and popular podcast host.

"Let's see how long this lasts,"

said Kelce, wearing a sleeveless Eagles T-shirt, before he burst into tears and needed several moments to compose himself at the news conference attended by his parents, Ed and Donna, wife Kylie and Travis. Eagles coach Nick Sirianni sat behind reporters.

"I have been the underdog my entire career," Kelce said. "And I mean it when I say it, I wish I still was."

Kelce was a sixth-round pick out of Cincinnati in the 2011 draft. The burly, bushy-haired and bearded Kelce has been a stalwart of the offensive line since he was drafted and as an Iron Man after he missed most of the 2012 season with a partially torn MCL and torn ACL.

The moment that endeared him for life to the Philly faithful came at the Super Bowl parade following the 2017 season when he dressed as one of Philadelphia's famed Mummers, and he delivered a fiery, profane speech that whipped the crowd into a frenzy.

"No one likes us! No one likes us! No one likes us! We don't care," Kelce exclaimed that day in February 2018. "We're from Philly! (Expletive) Philly. No one likes us! We don't care!"

Kelce recalled that moment Monday, saying: "I won't forget the parade and what it meant to the city of Philadelphia. The joy in our community and the closure it

gave so many."

"That wasn't my speech," Kelce said. "It was Philadelphia's."

The Kelce brothers played each other in the Super Bowl two seasons ago, which was won by the Chiefs — "I won't forget falling short to the Chiefs," Jason said Monday — and co-host the "New Heights with Jason & Travis Kelce" podcast.

He's been a showman off the football field, singing the national anthem at a 76ers game, partying with the Phillie Phanatic and pounding a beer to a roaring ovation at a Phillies postseason game.

But it was his work on the offensive line that made him a star. Kelce ended his career by making 156 straight starts, and he earned six All-Pro Team selections.

He was part of Philadelphia's core four of stars that have experienced droughts and championship runs, multiple coaches and one of the worst collapses in the city's sports history. Fletcher Cox and Brandon Graham are the lone holdovers from former coach Andy Reid's last season with the Eagles in 2012. Lane Johnson completes the four veteran anchors and was a rookie in former coach Chip Kelly's first season in 2013.

Kelce is the first one to call it quits.

Sirianni added to Kelce's lore

by shipping a keg of beer to the center's home to entice him to return in 2022.

"No Keg videos this year," Kelce wrote Monday morning on social media.

Eagles fans came prepared to toast Kelce with a cold one.

Kelce and his family were greeted by cheering fans — and yes, one even brought a keg of beer — outside the complex.

He thanked a long list of mentors from his high school football, hockey and lacrosse coaches and his old band teachers at Cleveland Heights (Ohio) high school for putting up with a "rambunctious kid that was will full of immaturity, stupidly and cockiness."

He thanked his coaches at Cincinnati for believing he could play center, a fortuitous decision that made him a great fit in Philadelphia, then thanked his four coaches with the Eagles.

Kelce choked up again thanking Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie for his leadership and general manager Howie Roseman for drafting him. He shared memories of his Eagles career and said he would never forget the day Reid called to tell him Kelce had been drafted by the Eagles. Kelce's father rushed into a room, "with tears streaming down his face," in a pure joy of the moment.

He never made the Eagles regret their decision.

## Broncos to release Wilson when new league year begins

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Two years ago, Russell Wilson exuberantly declared he intended to play a dozen years in Denver and double the trio of Lombardi Trophies in the Broncos' lobby.

General manager George Paton was equally dizzy, thrilled to send four premium draft picks and three players to Seattle for a younger, healthier version of Peyton Manning and excited to sign the Super Bowl-winning quarterback to that \$242 million extension six months later.

Acquiring Wilson turned out to be the big-

gest miscalculation in franchise history. He won just 11 of his 30 starts and witnessed both the coaching and quarterback carousels continue to churn in Denver, which hasn't been to the playoffs since winning Super Bowl 50 on Feb. 7, 2016.

On Monday, the Broncos informed Wilson that they'd release him next week when the new league year begins.

"We thank Russell for his contributions and dedications to our team and community while wishing him the best as he continues his career," the team posted on its social media channels, adding, "We are excited to improve

this offseason and will have the flexibility to get better through the draft and free agency."

The divorce will be a costly one for the Broncos, however. They still owe Wilson his \$39 million salary for 2024 minus whatever he'd sign for with another team, which would likely be the veteran's minimum salary of \$1.21 million.

Wilson thanked Broncos fans and teammates on social media posts, and issued individual shout-outs to a few of them, including left tackle Garrett Bolles and receivers Courtland Sutton, Jerry Jeudy, Brandon Johnson and Tim Patrick.

# Panthers top Rangers, win 5th straight

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ryan Lomberg scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period, Sam Reinhart scored twice and the Florida Panthers beat the New York Rangers 4-2 on Monday night in a matchup of first-place teams.

Anton Lundell also scored, Aleksander Barkov and Gustav Forsling each had two assists as the Panthers won their fifth straight and 11th in the last 12 games. Florida leads the NHL with 42 wins and 88 points.

Sergei Bobrovsky made 26 saves to improve to 31-11-2 this season, including 15-6-1 on the road. The 35-year-old has 391 career wins.

"He's been freakishly consistent this year," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said of his veteran goaltender. "We've done a pretty good job of not asking him to be the best player on the ice most nights, but he's just found a way to do that for us."

Since Dec. 23, Florida is 24-

4-2. The Panthers also have a league-leading 21 road wins and 44 road points.

"We were faster as the game went on," Maurice added. "It was a good road game."

Will Cuylle and Chris Kreider scored for Metropolitan Division-leading New York, which lost for the third time in four games after a 10-game winning streak. The Rangers also had their six-game home winning streak snapped. Igor Shesterkin finished with 25 saves.

Lundell added an empty-netter in the final minute to seal the win.

**Bruins 4, Maple Leafs 1:** Pavel Zacha scored twice to send Boston to the road win.

Jake DeBrusk had a goal and an assist for the Bruins (36-13-14), who had dropped four of five. Morgan Geekie also scored, and David Pastrnak had three assists.

Jeremy Swayman made 32 saves for the Bruins, who are

eight points ahead of the Leafs for second in the Atlantic Division.

**Avalanche 5, Blackhawks 0:** Nathan MacKinnon extended his home point streak to 30 games with two goals and two assists, powering host Colorado to the victory.

Jonathan Drouin, Cale Makar and Zach Parise also scored for the Avalanche, who improved to a league-best 24-6-0 at home this season. Justus Annunen stopped 37 shots.

MacKinnon's home point streak is the second-longest to start a season in NHL history, trailing only Wayne Gretzky's 40-game run in 1988-89.

**Kraken 4, Flames 2:** Jared McCann had a goal and an assist, and visiting Seattle won for the third time in four games.

Yanni Gourde, Oliver Bjorkstrand, and Adam Larsson also scored for the Kraken, who are 6-2-1 in their last nine. Philipp Grubauer stopped 35 shots as Seattle pulled even with the

Flames in the Western Conference playoff chase, seven points back of idle Nashville for the second wild card.

**Blues 2, Flyers 1 (SO):** Pavel Buchnevich and Jake Neighbours scored in the shootout, lifting visiting St. Louis to the win.

Neighbours scored between the pads of Flyers goalie Sam Ersson as St. Louis' second shooter. Philadelphia's Morgan Frost beat Jordan Binnington over the left shoulder. After the Flyers' fourth shooter, Owen Tippett, missed, Buchnevich used a nifty move to score with a backhand shot.

**Blue Jackets 6, Golden Knights 3:** Alex Nylander scored three times, and host Columbus posted back-to-back wins for the first time in more than three months.

Nylander has four goals and two assists in five games since he was acquired in a Feb. 22 trade with Pittsburgh. It was his first career hat trick.

## Devils fire Ruff, name Green interim replacement

Associated Press

The New Jersey Devils fired coach Lindy Ruff on Monday and named assistant Travis Green as the interim replacement for the rest of the season.

General manager Tom Fitzgerald made the surprising move with just over 20 games left to play. The Devils have lost five of seven to fall further out of playoff contention, seven points back of Metropolitan Division rival Philadelphia and eight back of the two Eastern Conference wild-card spots.

Ruff, 64, was in his fourth season with the team. The Devils reached the second round of the playoffs last year before losing to Carolina and had preseason expectations of making another run.

"I hold our entire organization to the highest levels of ac-

countability to focus on being a competitive team that expects to be a perennial playoff contender," Fitzgerald said in a statement. "Unfortunately, we are not currently at that level, and I needed to make this decision."

"This was an extremely difficult conversation to have with Lindy based on the relationship that he and I have. He was the right coach to develop our young players on the ice, and above all else, he is a tremendous person."

The Devils gave Ruff a multi-year extension before the start of the season, which was his last under his previous contract. Chants of "Fire Lindy!" could be heard at home games during a rough start and again more recently as New Jersey's struggles continued, following a rout of the Flyers outdoors at the

Meadowlands on Feb. 17.

Green, who was in his first year with the team as an associate coach on Ruff's staff, took over Tuesday at the morning skate ahead of the Devils' next game, which is against Florida. A former teammate of Fitzgerald's during their playing days, Green spent parts of five seasons as head coach of the Vancouver Canucks from 2017-21.

"Travis has key experience running benches at the junior, AHL and NHL levels and knows that there are no shortcuts to success," Fitzgerald said. "He is a high-demanding individual who is familiar with the group and excited about working to get us back on track."

Ruff was in his third head NHL job after coaching Buffalo to the Stanley Cup Final in 1999 as part of a long stint with the

Sabres and four years with Dallas from 2013-17.

Ruff is the seventh NHL coach fired this season among the league's 32 teams. All of his other assistants will remain in place.

The Devils have two games left this week before the trade deadline Friday, when Fitzgerald has more decisions to make about the short- and long-term future of the organization. Leading goal-scorer Tyler Toffoli, acquired last summer from Calgary, is a pending free agent, along with veteran defensemen Colin Miller and Brendan Smith.

Part of Ruff's downfall turned out to be New Jersey's inability to keep the puck out of its own net. Goaltenders combined for a save percentage of .891, second-worst in the league.

# Gobert, Conley lead T-wolves to win

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Rudy Gobert had 25 points and 16 rebounds for his 43rd double-double of the season, Michael Conley added 19 points and seven assists, and the Minnesota Timberwolves completed a four-game season sweep of Portland, beating the Trail Blazers 119-114 Monday night.

With the win, Minnesota (43-19) moved into a tie for first place in the Western Conference with Oklahoma City, which lost to the Lakers in Los Angeles later Monday. The Timberwolves are an NBA-best 30-9 against Western Conference opponents, 20-5 against teams with a less than .500 record and 23-8 at Target Center, for the league's fifth-best home record.

"It was a point of emphasis for us coming into the season," Minnesota coach Chris Finch said before the game of handling lower-ranked teams.

Karl-Anthony Towns scored 14 points, Anthony Edwards had 13, and Naz Reid added 12 points on 4-for-4 shooting from 3-point distance for Minnesota, which was playing its fifth game in seven nights and completed a seven-game homestand with a 4-3 record.

Anfernee Simons had 34 points, 14 assists and five rebounds, and Duop Reath shot 5-for-6 from long distance and scored a career-high 26 points for Portland, which was playing its third game in four nights.

"We absolutely had to have this one," said Finch, whose team was coming off back-to-back losses for just the second time this season.

The Timberwolves used a 17-5 run and Gobert's 10 points and seven rebounds to build a 55-48 lead at halftime. Gobert, who ranks fifth in the league in double-doubles, had a three-point play on a dunk over Portland's 7-foot-2 center Moses Brown in the third quarter as Minnesota extended its lead to 13 points.

"The last few games, I felt like I wasn't being aggressive enough," said Gobert, who went 9-for-10 from the floor and 7-for-7 from the line. "Tonight, (I decided) to be aggressive and be more decisive."

**Lakers 116, Thunder 104:** D'Angelo Russell hit five 3-pointers while scoring 26 points, and Anthony Davis added 24 points and 12 rebounds in host Los Angeles' victory over Oklahoma City.

LeBron James had 19 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists in the Lakers' 10th victory in 14 games. Austin Reaves added 16 points while hitting four 3s for the Lakers, who won their third straight meeting with the Western Conference-leading Thunder to take the season series.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 20 points — ending his streak of eight consecutive 30-point games — for the Thunder, who lost for only the second time in nine games.

**Bucks 113, Clippers 106:** Damian Lillard scored 41 points and host Milwaukee overcame the absence of Giannis Antetokounmpo to rally past Los Angeles for their sixth straight victory.

The Bucks are unbeaten since the All-Star break as they get ready to begin a four-game trip to California.

Bobby Portis scored 14 of his 28 points in the fourth quarter and finished with a season-high 16 rebounds. Patrick Beverley added 12 points and sparked the winning rally.

**Bulls 113, Kings 109:** Coby White had a career-high 37 points and DeMar DeRozan scored 19 of his 33 in the fourth quarter as visiting Chicago rallied

from 22 points down to beat Sacramento.

White added seven assists and five rebounds, and Chicago outscored Sacramento 36-18 in the fourth quarter to snap a four-game losing streak against the Kings.

Chicago's Ayo Dosunmu scored 20 points and Nikola Vucevic had 10 points and 13 rebounds.

**Jazz 127, Wizards 115:** Jordan Clarkson scored a season-high 38 points, including a 12-0 run down the stretch, to boost host Utah over Washington, which extended its losing streak to 15.

Collin Sexton scored 29 points and John Collins added 17 points, 15 rebounds and a career-high six blocks for Utah, who had lost eight of nine.

**Grizzlies 106, Nets 102:** Luke Kennard scored a season-high 25 points and visiting Memphis snapped a five-game losing streak by beating Brooklyn.

Jake LaRavia added 14 points and 10 rebounds for the Grizzlies, who outrebounded the Nets 50-33 and piled up 25 second-chance points to make up for all the offense they are missing because of injuries. Lamar Stevens chipped in 13 points.

## Roach, big second half carry No. 9 Duke past NC State

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Jeremy Roach had 21 points and freshman Jared McCain scored 14 of his 16 after halftime to help No. 9 Duke pull away for a 79-64 victory over North Carolina State on Monday night.

Mccain shot 5-for-7 after the break for the Blue Devils (24-6, 15-4 Atlantic Coast Conference), who fell behind 9-0 early. Two of his 3-pointers came during a blistering run of eight straight made shots, turning a one-point deficit into a 64-52 lead on Roach's layup at the

7:46 mark.

Duke star Kyle Filipowski had just nine points while being limited by first-half foul trouble. But the Blue Devils offset that with a big performance from 6-foot-9 freshman reserve Sean Stewart, who had 12 points, five rebounds, three blocks and two steals in 26 minutes.

Duke shot 62.5% (20-for-32) after halftime and finished with a season-high 19 offensive rebounds, leading to 23 second-chance points.

DJ Burns Jr. had a season-high 27 points to lead the Wolf-

pack (17-13, 9-10), who have lost three straight and four of five.

**No. 11 Baylor 93, Texas 85:** Jalen Bridges scored a career-high 32 points and the host Bears overcame a double-digit deficit in the final 13 minutes to beat the Longhorns in the last scheduled game between the rival schools separated by only about 100 miles.

Ja'Kobe Walter and RayJ Dennis each had seven points in a 21-2 run for Baylor (22-8, 11-6 Big 12) during a stretch when Texas missed 11 consecutive shots. The Longhorns also lost

big man Dylan Disu to a left knee sprain with just over 11 minutes left.

Bridges, one of five Baylor veterans recognized before the game on Senior Night, was 8-for-11 shooting, including 6-for-7 from 3-point range. He also had nine rebounds. Dennis, another senior, had 16 points and eight assists, while Walter, a freshman, finished with 15 points.

Max Abmas, the NCAA men's active career scoring leader, had a season-high 33 points to lead Texas (19-11, 8-9).