

Biden, Trump clinch noms for rematch

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump clinched their parties' presidential nominations Tuesday with decisive victories in a slate of low-profile primaries, setting up a general election rematch that many voters do not want.

The outcome of contests across Georgia, Mississippi and Washington state was never in doubt. Neither Biden, a Democrat, nor Trump, a Republican, faced major opposition. But the magnitude of their wins gave each man the delegate majority he needed to claim his party's nomination at the summertime national conventions.

Not even halfway through the presidential primary calendar, Tuesday marked a crystalizing moment for a nation uneasy with its choices in 2024.

There is no longer any doubt that the fall election will feature

a rematch between two flawed and unpopular presidents. At 81, Biden is already the oldest president in U.S. history, while the 77-year-old Trump is facing decades in prison as a defendant in four criminal cases. Their rematch — the first featuring two U.S. presidents since 1912 — will almost certainly deepen the nation's searing political and cultural divides over the eight-month grind that lies ahead.

In a statement, Biden celebrated the nomination while casting Trump as a serious threat to democracy. Trump, Biden said, "is running a campaign of resentment, revenge and retribution that threatens the very idea of America."

He continued, "I am honored that the broad coalition of voters representing the rich diversity of the Democratic Party across the country have put their faith in me once again to lead our party — and our country — in a mo-

ment when the threat Trump poses is greater than ever."

Trump, in a video posted on social media, celebrated what he called "a great day of victory."

"But now we have to get back to work because we have the worst president in the history of our country," Trump said of Biden. "So, we're not going to take time to celebrate. We'll celebrate in eight months when the election is over."

Both candidates dominated Tuesday's primaries in swing-state Georgia, deep-red Mississippi and Democratic-leaning Washington. Trump also won Hawaii's Republican caucus.

Despite their tough talk, the road ahead will not be easy for either presumptive nominee.

Trump is facing 91 felony counts in four criminal cases involving his handling of classified documents and his attempt to overturn the 2020 election, among other alleged crimes.

He's also facing increasingly pointed questions about his policy plans and relationships with some of the world's most dangerous dictators. Trump met privately on Friday with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has rolled back democracy in his country.

Biden, who would be 86 years old at the end of his next term, is working to assure a skeptical electorate that he's still physically and mentally able to thrive in the world's most important job. Voters in both parties are unhappy with his handling of immigration and inflation.

And he's dealing with additional dissension within his party's progressive base, furious that he hasn't done more to stop Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. Activists and religious leaders in Washington encouraged Democrats to vote "uncommitted" to signal their outrage.

F-35 stealth fighter cleared for full rate of production

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon has cleared the F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter for full rate of production after years of delay.

The move "helps to validate the aircraft's capabilities for present and future partners of the F-35 enterprise," the Pentagon said in a news release Tuesday.

The change in designation allows the F-35 Joint Program Office to negotiate multiyear contracts for the fighter with manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

Just over 990 F-35 aircraft have been delivered to the United States and foreign military

services over the past 14 years, the news release said.

The F-35 is a single-seat, stealthy combat jet with highly advanced electronics used in warfare and surveillance.

Full-rate production was delayed by a series of problems that began in 2012, the Government Accountability Office said in a December report.

The most recent issue was a plethora of problems with a simulator running the F-35's mission systems software that provides complex test scenarios replicating real-world settings, according to the GAO report.

The F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter program has pro-

ven to be the Defense Department's most expensive weapon system program, with an estimated price tag of more than \$1.7 trillion to buy, operate and sustain them, according to the report.

The Pentagon plans to acquire just over 2,450 F-35s for the Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy, according to a 2022 report by the Congressional Research Service. U.S. allies are expected to buy hundreds more.

Each service uses the same basic F-35, but with variations to fit for their missions.

Four to five F-35s are delivered each month, CRS report-

ed, and between 156 to 170 would be produced each year in full production.

William LaPlante, undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, said in the Tuesday news release that production approval was a "major achievement" that will foster integrated deterrence by U.S. forces and ally and partner nation militaries.

"With this milestone, the program is now well positioned to efficiently produce and deliver the next generation of aircraft to meet the evolving needs of our services, partners, and [foreign military service] customers," the release states.

Putin: Russia prepared to use nukes

Associated Press

President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty or independence is threatened, issuing another blunt warning to the West just days ahead of an election in which he's all but certain to secure another six-year term.

The Russian leader has repeatedly talked about his readiness to use nuclear weapons since invading Ukraine in February 2022. The most recent such threat came in his state-of-the-nation address last month, when he warned the West that deepening its involvement in the fighting in Ukraine would risk a nuclear war.

Asked in an interview with Russian state television released early Wednesday if he has ever considered using battlefield nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Putin responded that

there has been no need for that. He also noted that he doesn't think that the world is heading for a nuclear war, describing President Joe Biden as a veteran politician who fully understands possible dangers of escalation.

Still, the remarks appeared to be a message to the West that he is prepared to use all means to protect his gains in Ukraine.

Putin said that in line with the country's security doctrine, Moscow is ready to use nuclear weapons in case of a threat to "the existence of the Russian state, our sovereignty and independence."

"All that is written in our strategy, we haven't changed it," he said.

In an apparent reference to NATO allies that support Kyiv, he also declared "the nations that say they have no red lines regarding Russia should realize

that Russia won't have any red lines regarding them either."

Lithuania's foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, recently lamented that the West too often constrains itself with self-imposed "red lines" regarding Russia. He also welcomed a comment by French President Emmanuel Macron that the possibility of Western troops being sent to Ukraine could not be ruled out.

In the wake of recent gains, Putin argued that Kyiv and its Western allies will eventually have to accept a deal to end the war on Russian terms.

"It shouldn't be a break for the enemy to rearm but a serious talk involving the guarantees of security for the Russian Federation," he said.

Putin said that a recent spike in Ukrainian drone attacks deep inside Russia is part of efforts to derail the country's three-day

presidential election, which starts Friday and which he is set to win by a landslide, given his near total crackdown on dissent and tight control over Russia's political system.

Russian authorities reported another major attack by Ukrainian drones early Wednesday. The Defense Ministry said air defenses downed 58 drones over six regions. One of the drones hit an oil refinery in the Ryazan region, injuring at least two people and sparking a fire. Another was downed as it was approaching a refinery near St. Petersburg.

Ukraine, meanwhile, reported more Russian attacks early Wednesday.

A Russian strike killed two people and wounded another five in the town of Myrnohrad in the eastern region of Donetsk, according to Gov. Vadym Filashkin.

SEALs break new ground as sub breaks ice in Arctic drill

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. special operators and allied commandos moved across frozen tundra in snowmobiles and linked up with a fast-attack submarine after it cracked through a thick sheet of ice, marking a first in the Arctic Circle, military officials said this week.

Some 400 Navy SEALs, Army Green Berets and elite troops from several NATO countries were fanned out in the upper Arctic for weeks to hone their cold-weather fighting skills during Arctic Edge 24.

The exercise was part of a flurry of ongoing military maneuvers stretching from the northernmost points of the

United States to Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Special operators broke new ground when MH-47G Chinook helicopters landed in a secure zone past Utqiagvik, Alaska, having received ice depth information from a U.S. submarine in the area, Naval Special Warfare Group Two said in a statement Tuesday.

From there, the commandos took off in snowmobiles to set up a command-and-control tent, coordinated an airdrop "of a critical package" from a C-130 Hercules and carried on across the tundra to deliver the package to the submarine USS Hampton, which moments beforehand surfaced through the sea ice, military officials said.

"This marked the first-ever

integration of SOF personnel, SOF aircraft and snowmobiles coming together to conduct an operation with a submarine that surfaced that deep in the Arctic Circle," Naval Special Warfare Group Two said in a statement Tuesday.

Military officials did not detail the contents of the "critical package" or the nature of the training scenario, which brought together special operators and an attack submarine designed to seek and destroy enemy submarines and surface ships.

The strategic value of the High North has increased over the years, as melting sea ice opens the possibility of new shipping lanes and greater access to undersea natural resources that the Kremlin has

its eye on.

Russia has sought to fortify its position in the region with numerous military bases now in operation.

Capt. Bill Gallagher, commander of Naval Special Warfare Group Two, said in a statement Tuesday that the drills were intended to discourage aggression from potential adversaries.

"Given the frequency with which we are training alongside our allied partners and demonstrating our combined expertise in some of the most severe environments on the planet, we are sending a clear message about our warfighting ability and our preparedness to defend the homeland across the Arctic region," Gallagher said in the statement.

Ga. judge dismisses some charges against Trump

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The judge overseeing the Georgia election interference case on Wednesday dismissed some of the charges against former President Donald Trump, but many other counts in the indictment remain.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee wrote in an order that six of the counts in the indictment must be quashed, including three against Trump, the presumptive 2024 Republican presidential nominee. But the order leaves intact other charges, and the judge wrote that prosecutors could seek a new indictment on the charges he dismissed.

The ruling is a blow for Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, whose case has already been on shaky ground with an effort to have her removed from the prosecution over her romantic relationship with a colleague.

It's the first time charges in any of Trump's four criminal cases have been dismissed, with the judge saying prosecutors failed to provide enough detail about the alleged crime.

The six charges in question have to do with soliciting elected officials to violate their oaths of office. That includes two charges related to the phone call Trump made to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger,

a fellow Republican, on Jan. 2, 2021.

"All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said during that call.

The case accuses Trump and 18 others of conspiring to overturn his 2020 election loss in the state to Democrat Joe Biden. The nearly 100-page indictment details dozens of acts by Trump or his allies to undo his defeat, including harassing an election worker who faced false claims of fraud and attempting to persuade Georgia lawmakers to ignore the will of voters and appoint a new slate of electoral college electors favorable to Trump.

House passes bill that could ban TikTok

The Washington Post

The House overwhelmingly passed a measure Wednesday to force TikTok to split from its parent company or face a national ban, a lightning offensive that materialized abruptly after years of unsuccessful negotiations over the platform's fate.

The legislation, approved 352 to 65 with 1 voting present, is a sweeping bipartisan rebuke of the popular video-sharing app — and an attempt to grapple with allegations that its China-based parent, ByteDance, presents national security risks. The House effort gained momentum last week after President Joe Biden said he would sign the bill if Congress passed it.

But its fate now rests in the Senate, where some lawmakers have expressed concern it may run afoul of the Constitution by infringing on millions of Americans' rights to free expression and by explicitly targeting a business operating in the United States.

"Today we send a clear message that we will not tolerate our adversaries weaponizing our freedoms against us," Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., whose committee advanced the TikTok bill just days prior, said ahead of the vote.

Though TikTok is incorporated in the United States and has headquarters in Los Angeles, its ties to Beijing-based tech giant ByteDance have long triggered fears the app could be weaponized by Chinese government officials to snoop on Americans or shape their political views. The company says it has never shared U.S. user data with the Chinese government and would not do so if asked, and its critics have yet to present evidence to the contrary.

House GOP's probe of Jan. 6 tries shifting blame away from Trump

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans are launching a vast reinvestigation of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, seeking to push the blame away from Donald Trump, who has been indicted over his actions or his supporters in the mob siege trying to overturn the 2020 election.

As Trump campaigns to return to the White House, the House Administration subcommittee on oversight held the first of what is expected to be regular public hearings revisiting the official account, which had aired in great detail in 2022 by the House's Select Committee on Jan. 6.

Chairman Barry Loudermilk, R-Ga., called Jan. 6 a "dark day" in U.S. history as he opened Tuesday's hearing to delve into the investigation of pipe bombs

that were left outside Republican and Democratic party headquarters that day. But, he said, "we still have many unanswered questions."

The panel's work comes as Trump and President Joe Biden are set for a 2020 rematch this fall, and Republicans, some once skeptical of Trump's return to the White House, have quickly been falling in line to support the former president. The House GOP's high-profile impeachment inquiry into Biden has stalled without a clear path forward.

Speaker Mike Johnson said House Republicans intend to release a final report on Jan. 6 "to correct the incomplete narrative" advanced by the previous work of the Select Committee on the Jan. 6 attack.

With newly released testimony and an 80-plus page report of

initial findings, the House Administration subcommittee has outlined a roadmap ahead for its probe — including revisiting key testimony from White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson, who delivered a bombshell account of Trump's actions that day.

At the first hearing, Republicans grilled the U.S. Capitol Police about why a bomb-sniffing K9 unit did not initially detect the pipe bombs found outside party headquarters and why police didn't respond faster to seal off the area. U.S. Capitol Police Assistant Chief Sean Gallagher told the panel it was "chaotic" that day as the mob of Trump supporters descended on the Capitol.

"I want to be upfront and honest, U.S. Capitol Police haven't shied away from the failures of that day," Gallagher said.

Study: Self driving systems have blind spot

Associated Press

DETROIT — Most electronic systems that take on some driving tasks for humans don't adequately make sure drivers are paying attention, and they don't issue strong-enough warnings or take actions to make drivers behave, according to an insurance industry study published Tuesday.

Only one of 14 partially automated systems tested by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety performed well enough to get an overall "acceptable" rating. Two others were rated "marginal," while the rest were rated "poor." No system received the top rating of "good."

"Most of them don't include adequate measures to prevent misuse and keep drivers from losing focus on what's happen-

ing on the road," said IIHS President David Harkey.

The institute, Harkey said, came up with the new ratings to get automakers to follow standards, including how closely they watch drivers and how fast the cars issue warnings if drivers aren't paying attention.

It also says it is trying to fill a "regulatory void" left by inaction on the systems from the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Harkey said the agency needs to do more to set standards for the systems, which are not able to drive vehicles themselves.

The agency said Tuesday that it welcomes the IIHS research and will review the report.

The 14 systems, which include several variations from single automakers, are among the most

sophisticated now on the market, Harkey said.

Only one of the systems, Teammate in the Lexus LS, earned the adequate rating. General Motors' Super Cruise in the GMC Sierra and Nissan's Pro-Pilot Assist with Navi-Link in the Ariya electric vehicle were rated marginal.

Other systems from Nissan, Tesla, BMW, Ford, Genesis, Mercedes-Benz and Volvo were rated poor.

Harkey said the driving systems initially were combinations of safety features such as automatic emergency braking, lane departure warnings, lane centering and blind-spot detection. But now they give drivers the chance to not pay attention for some period of time, raising safety risks, he said in an inter-

view.

Some automakers, he said, market the systems in a way that drivers could think they are fully autonomous. "The one thing we do not want is for drivers to misinterpret what these things can or cannot do," he said.

The systems, IIHS said, should be able to see if a driver's head or eyes are not directed on the road, and whether their hands are on the wheel or ready to grab it if necessary.

The institute also said if a system doesn't see a driver's eyes on the road or hands aren't ready to steer, there should be audible and visual alerts within 10 seconds. Before 20 seconds, the system should add a third alert or start an emergency procedure to slow down the vehicle, the institute said.

Fixes eyed as robberies of letter carriers persist

Associated Press

When the U.S. Postal Service launched Project Safe Delivery last year, officials pledged they would be "doubling down" on their efforts to combat growing rates of letter carrier robberies.

The crackdown has led to hundreds of arrests, and robberies slowed toward the end of the year. But, overall, the number of postal carriers who were robbed in 2023 rose again and the number who were injured nearly doubled as criminals continue to target carriers for their antiquated "arrow keys" that allow access to mailboxes.

This week, legislation is being introduced in Congress to accelerate the replacement of tens of thousands of mailbox keys, boost prosecutions and review sentencing guidelines.

All of it can't come soon enough for letter carriers.

"We're like sitting ducks out there," said Houston mail carrier Tijuana Abbott. "Enough is

enough."

Postal carrier robberies climbed to 643 last year, an increase of nearly 30%, according to figures provided by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

Under Project Safe Delivery, which was launched last May, there have been more than 1,200 arrests for mail thefts and letter carrier robberies. The Postal Inspection Service also conducted law enforcement surges in trouble spots including Chicago, San Francisco and cities across Ohio.

The effort also included the deployment of more than 10,000 high-security blue boxes, and the installation of nearly 30,000 electronic locks on mail receptacles.

There is a glimmer of hope.

Postal robberies dipped 19% over the past five months, while arrests for letter carrier robberies grew 73% so far in the 2024 fiscal year, said Jeff Adams, postal service spokesperson.

Kids get schooled in pot in NYC magnet program

New York Daily News

New York middle school students at an after-school health education program in the South Bronx start the session by sharing what they already know about cannabis.

The seventh-graders from Intermediate School 218 Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School understand it comes from a plant. It smells, they say, and it can feel addictive. They've heard it can impact your lungs. Peer facilitators, who are seniors in high school, transcribe their callouts on the board.

"It's easy to get," one student says.

As politicians grapple with the proliferation of an estimated 2,500 unlicensed dispensaries in New York, teens are taking matters into their own hands to learn about marijuana and make informed decisions about its use.

After legalization for adults ages 21 and older, the nonprofit WHEDco's peer-led Just Ask Me,

or "JAM," program, in which mentors talk to younger students about sexual education, is adding lessons on cannabis to its curriculum and expanding to two other Bronx schools. The workshop teaches teens about its effects as cannabis products are growing not only more accessible, but also stronger and easier to hide in school using edibles and vapes.

Teachers report seeing more and younger students coming to school high, but reliable data is out of date.

In 2021, 12% of city public high school students reported using marijuana in the past 30 days, according to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, compared with 18% before the pandemic.

At the after-school program, students are told there is no safe amount of cannabis for their age group, and not everyone smokes weed or smokes regularly. Products can vary in strength and are more potent than ever, and may contain hazardous chemicals.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

House passes bill meant to crack down on e-cigs

KY FRANKFORT — Legislation aimed at cracking down on the illegal sale of electronic cigarettes to young people and keeping unauthorized vaping products out of stores won passage in the Kentucky House on Monday.

Republican state Rep. Rebecca Raymer, the bill's lead sponsor, said it's a response to the state's "vaping epidemic" and, in particular, complaints about how rampant vaping has become in schools.

The measure cleared the House on a 62-26 vote and heads to the Senate next. Republicans have supermajorities in both chambers.

The bill would require Kentucky businesses to acknowledge whether they're involved in the retail sale of tobacco products when filing business paperwork with the Secretary of State's office. That list would be sent to the Kentucky Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, which regulates tobacco and vape sales.

Afghan man stands trial in first of 3 killings

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Muslims in New Mexico's largest city are hoping more light will be shed on what led to the shooting deaths of three men from their community during the summer of 2022 as prosecutors begin to make their case against an Afghan refugee charged with the killings.

Attorneys were expected to deliver opening statements in an Albuquerque court Tuesday in what will be the first trial for

Muhammad Syed, who settled in the U.S. several years ago with his family. He denied involvement in the killings after being detained just days after police put out a public plea for help and shared photographs of a vehicle believed to be involved in the crimes.

Tips poured in and investigators turned their attention to Syed. Police stopped him in his vehicle in August 2022 more than 100 miles from Albuquerque. He told authorities he was on his way to Texas to find a new home for his family, saying he was concerned about the ambush-style killings.

Preacher guilty of wire fraud, attempted extortion

NY NEW YORK — A Brooklyn preacher known for his flashy lifestyle and who boasted of his friendship with New York City's mayor was found guilty in federal court Monday of wire fraud, attempted extortion and lying to the FBI.

Lamor Miller-Whitehead, 47, was found guilty of five counts after a trial in federal court in Manhattan that began late last month. Prosecutors had argued that the preacher exaggerated his ties to Mayor Eric Adams and let greed overtake him as he looted a parishioner's retirement savings and tried to extort a businessman to fuel his lavish lifestyle.

He also was accused of lying to FBI agents by denying he had a second cellphone.

An attorney for Miller-Whitehead, Dawn Florio, said they are appealing the verdict. She had told jurors during the trial that evidence against her client didn't support the charges.

Reputed gang leader acquitted of murder

CT HARTFORD — A Connecticut man who denies having led a violent Hartford gang has been acquitted of a murder charge and freed following a third trial that resulted from the state Supreme Court overturning his conviction.

Donald Raynor, now 38, broke down in tears when the state court jury announced its not guilty verdict Monday, said his lawyer, Trent LaLima. He was then freed after having spent the past decade detained on bail.

"Donald Raynor has been waiting 10 years in prison for a jury to say not guilty and finally that day has come," LaLima said Tuesday. "I know he's grateful for all the support of friends and family during this long ordeal."

Raynor was arrested in a cold case and charged with murder in 2013 in the drive-by fatal shooting of 22-year-old Delano Gray in 2007. Police alleged Raynor led the violent Money Green/Bedroc gang that had a "hit squad" and trafficked drugs in the city's North End, while Gray was a rival gang member.

Oil sheen may be caused by ocean seepage

CA HUNTINGTON BEACH — An oil sheen spotted off the Southern California coast last week was possibly caused by a natural seep from the ocean floor, but the exact source still isn't known, U.S. Coast Guard officials said Monday.

Authorities detected the 2.5-

mile-long oil sheen Friday morning off Huntington Beach. Crews recovered roughly 85 gallons of oil from the water and 1,050 pounds of oily waste and tar balls from the shoreline, the Coast Guard said in a statement. Lab tests so far have failed to definitively identify the oil source, but preliminary analyses determined it was not a refined product like gasoline or diesel, officials said.

"The lab results were also inconsistent with archived samples from oil platforms in the area," the statement said. The samples are more characteristic of "freshly produced" oil typical of natural seepage, according to officials.

Man bitten by a crocodile after falling off his boat

FL HOMESTEAD — A man visiting the Florida Everglades is recovering after being bitten by a crocodile after falling off a boat, officials said.

The attack occurred Sunday afternoon at the Flamingo Marina in Everglades National Park, according to a National Park Service news release.

The 68-year-old man capsized his sailboat in the marina basin and was attempting to swim to shore with his boat when witnesses saw him go under the water, officials said. Park rangers responded and treated a laceration on the man's leg. Miami-Dade Fire and Rescue transported him to a hospital in stable condition. There was no further information released on his condition.

Rangers and park biologists were investigating and monitoring the suspected crocodile.

— From wire reports

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Henry to Ravens another sign of RBs' value

Associated Press

Backfields are going to look a whole lot different in the NFL next season after a run on free-agent quarterbacks and running backs during the league's two-day legal tampering period.

After QBs ruled Day 1, running backs continued to make strides in free agency Tuesday with four-time Pro Bowler Derrick Henry agreeing to a two-year deal with the Baltimore Ravens, a person with knowledge of the contract told The Associated Press.

Henry's jump from the Tennessee Titans, where he spent his first eight seasons, was among the biggest moves on the eve of the league's new year, which officially began at 4 p.m. EDT Wednesday.

That's when free agents can sign contracts they've agreed to this week.

Henry's deal is worth up to \$20 million and includes \$9 million guaranteed. The two-time NFL rushing champ joins a Bal-

timore team that annually produces one of the league's leading ground games.

Running backs have struggled to earn big money in recent years—to the point where Henry organized a group chat among top players at the position last summer. This year's free-agent class included Saquon Barkley, Josh Jacobs and Tony Pollard, all of whom found new homes during Monday's free-agency frenzy.

Barkley, Jacobs and Pollard were the three running backs franchise tagged a year ago at \$10.1 million, and none signed long-term deals with their teams by the July deadline. All three became free agents this year when their teams declined to tag them again, this time at \$12 million.

Henry turned 30 in January. The four-time Pro Bowler led the NFL in 2023 with 280 rushing attempts and ranked second to Christian McCaffrey with 1,167 yards rushing. His 12 rush-

ing TDs were fourth in the AFC.

Henry leaves Tennessee ranked second in franchise history with 9,502 rushing yards, trailing only Eddie George (10,009).

The Ravens finished with the NFL's best regular-season record in 2023 before losing to Kansas City in the AFC championship game. Now they add another proven offensive playmaker to work alongside quarterback Lamar Jackson, who is coming off his second MVP season.

Baltimore was also able to reach a long-term deal with defensive tackle Justin Madubuike after putting the franchise tag on him. But the Ravens lost inside linebacker Patrick Queen to rival Pittsburgh on Tuesday.

So far, 10 quarterbacks were set to sign with new teams Wednesday: Kirk Cousins, Russell Wilson, Jacoby Brissett, Jameis Winston, Gardner Minshew, Tyrod Taylor, Drew Lock, Marcus Mariota, Mitchell Tru-

bisky and Sam Darnold.

At least a dozen veteran running backs, led by Henry, Barkley, Jacobs and Pollard, are getting deals with new teams.

They're joined by Aaron Jones, D'Andre Swift, Austin Ekeler, Devin Singletary, Antonio Gibson, Zack Moss, Gus Edwards and Nyheim Hines, among others.

The Vikings added Jones, the former Green Bay running back and 2018 third overall draft pick Darnold as a temporary replacement at quarterback for Cousins, whose departure to Atlanta was the biggest move of free agency.

Also Tuesday, the Browns agreed to a one-year deal with Winston to back up Deshaun Watson that's worth up to \$8.7 million, a person with knowledge of the negotiations told the AP.

Also, a person familiar with the deal told the AP that the Texans are acquiring running back Joe Mixon from the Bengals.

Shesterkin stops 28 shots, helps Rangers blank Canes

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Igor Shesterkin made 28 saves for his second consecutive shutout, and the New York Rangers beat the Carolina Hurricanes 1-0 on Tuesday night in a matchup of the top teams in the Metropolitan Division.

Adam Fox scored late in the first period, and that goal held up through Carolina using an extra skater for the final two minutes.

Carolina goalie Pyotr Kochetkov stopped 23 shots, but the Hurricanes' three-game winning streak ended in their final regular-season meeting with the Rangers, who have a six-point lead with 17 games remaining. New York won the season series 2-1.

New York has won 13 of its last 16 games, but the show-

down with a division contender brought extra meaning to this matchup.

The Hurricanes were shut out for the second time this season and the first time since Oct. 24 at Tampa Bay. It came two nights after Carolina scored a season high in goals in a 7-2 rout of Calgary.

Shesterkin blanked St. Louis on 26 shots Saturday and now has three shutouts this season.

Golden Knights 5, Kraken 4 (OT): Jonathan Marchessault scored his second goal of the game with 16 seconds left in regulation to force overtime and Jack Eichel scored 3:01 into the extra session to lift visiting Vegas over Seattle.

Vegas picked up two points in the standings and moved nine points clear of Seattle in the chase for one of the wild-

card spots in the Western Conference.

Panthers 4, Stars 3: Aleksander Barkov scored twice in the third period, including the decisive goal with 5:22 left, and Eastern Conference-leading Florida rallied from a 3-0 deficit to beat host Dallas.

Blackhawks 7, Ducks 2: Connor Bedard had a goal and four assists to set his single-game high in points, Philipp Kurashev scored twice and had two assists, and host Chicago beat Anaheim.

Sabres 7, Red Wings 3: Newly acquired defenseman Bowen Byram scored twice and Zach Benson had a goal and two assists as host Buffalo handed Detroit its sixth straight loss.

The Sabres vaulted ahead of idle New Jersey into 11th place in the Eastern Conference, and

within five points of Detroit, which began the day holding the eighth and final playoff spot.

Wild 4, Coyotes 1: Kirill Kaprizov scored two goals and assisted on another, and Marc-Andre Fleury made 21 saves as host Minnesota beat Arizona.

Flyers 3, Sharks 2: Owen Tippett scored the go-ahead goal in the third period, Morgan Frost had a goal and an assist, and host Philadelphia beat San Jose.

Senators 2, Penguins 1 (OT): Drake Batherson scored 3:13 into overtime, and host Ottawa beat Pittsburgh to stop a seven-game winless streak.

Canadiens 3, Blue Jackets 0: Cayden Primeau made 41 saves for his second career shutout as host Montreal beat Columbus.

MLB looks to increase low rate of Black players

Associated Press

For much of Lee Allen Jr.'s childhood, baseball seemed quite far from him.

Major League Baseball's Royals played in his hometown Kansas City, Mo., but Allen — who is Black and lived in the inner city — didn't come across many baseball opportunities until late in his high school years.

In January 2020, a 17-year-old Allen was invited to one of MLB's development programs, the DREAM Series, where for the first time he was put in front of scouts and coaches to display his skills in a competitive environment.

Four years later, Allen stood on the field at the Jackie Robinson Training Complex in Vero Beach, Fla., wearing a purple, white and gold baseball uniform representing the historically Black college Prairie View A&M University, his eyes set on a pro career.

More than 200 HBCU standouts were there for MLB's Andre Dawson Classic, a collegiate tournament for players hoping to one day crack the major leagues — and perhaps help usher in a new generation of

African American stars.

"Being able to be out here and showcase my talents in front of these scouts and other guys who's looking at us at the next level," said Allen, now a junior infielder for the Panthers, "it feels great for me because I know that those are goals that I can reach, and they're there."

That's MLB's aim as it faces historically low numbers of Black players in the majors. A study done by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at Central Florida found African American players represented just 6.2% of players on MLB opening day rosters in 2023, down from 7.2% in 2022. Both figures were the lowest since the study began in 1991, when 18% of MLB players were Black.

That's also the lowest percentage of African American participation among four of the five major professional sports — NBA, NFL, MLB, MLS — outside of the NHL, where more than 90% of its players are white. MLB has tried to address that with a series of grassroots diversity initiatives.

"We are really doubling down on what we've done," said Del Matthews, MLB's vice presi-

dent of baseball development, "because we are producing kids that are going to college, that are getting internships within the sport. We see more kids playing at the Division I college baseball ranks, and we see more kids being drafted into the minor leagues. And so we're just flooding that through the various programs that we've had."

There are signs of progress at the pro level. Between 2012 and 2021, 17.4% of first-round picks were African American players. That number spiked to 30% in 2022, when four of the first five selections were Black players for the first time ever — and all four were alumni of at least one MLB diversity initiative. In 2023, Black players made up 10 of the first 50 draft selections, or 20%.

MLB's pipeline begins with an annual tour of pro-style camps in various cities across the country to identify baseball potential among inner city kids. The tour has grown each year — from 12 stops when it launched in 2018 to 18 cities now — and targets kids around 13-14 years old, just before they enter high school.

The goal is to eventually send

those players to more advanced development programs, where they can get significant reps playing competitive baseball — mostly cost-free — and create relationships with pro scouts and former major leaguers that can help them down the line.

"The sport has gotten so expensive that it has eliminated a lot of our kids," said Jerry Manuel, a former manager for the White Sox and Mets. "So we've got to do everything we can to get them back in the pipeline."

The programs are mostly funded through USA Baseball, the sport's governing body in the United States, which pays for equipment, meals and potential travel for showcases that Matthews estimated could otherwise cost upward of \$700 per event. Anywhere from 1,200 to 1,500 kids are selected each year to participate in MLB's diversity-focused programming, including the DREAM Series, Breakthrough Series, the Hank Aaron Invitational and girls baseball/softball events. Some players attend several events per year — an opportunity that otherwise wouldn't be feasible for many kids from lower-income families.

Hart's triple-double helps Knicks cruise past 76ers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Josh Hart had 20 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists in his fourth triple-double of the season, OG Anunoby scored 14 points in his return from an 18-game absence and the New York Knicks beat the Philadelphia 76ers 106-79 on Tuesday night.

Jalen Brunson added 20 points and nine assists for the Knicks, who finally got one of their injured starters back and looked nothing like the team that was held to an NBA season-low 73 points in a loss to the 76ers on Sunday.

Anunoby hadn't played since Jan. 27 because of a right elbow injury that required surgery. New York is still playing without All-Star Julius Randle and Mitchell Robinson because of injuries, but has held its opponent below 80 points in three straight games

for the first time since the 2000-01 season.

Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 19 points for the 76ers and Tyrese Maxey had 17 after missing the previous four games because of a concussion.

Timberwolves 118, Clippers 100: Anthony Edwards scored 37 points, Nickeil Alexander-Walker added a season-high 28 and visiting Minnesota roared back from an early 22-point deficit for a victory over Los Angeles.

Kawhi Leonard left the game with back spasms between the first two quarters, the Clippers said. He played the entire first quarter, but he was seen leaving the Clippers' downtown arena during the second quarter.

Kings 129, Bucks 94: De'Aaron Fox scored 29 points and host Sacramento beat

Milwaukee for the first time in more than eight years.

Sacramento had not defeated Milwaukee since Feb. 1, 2016, with the 15-game losing streak being the longest active streak for any team.

Pacers 121, Thunder 111: Myles Turner scored 24 points to help visiting Indiana defeat Oklahoma City.

Celtics 123, Jazz 107: Jayson Tatum scored 38 points and Derrick White added 24 to lead Boston over struggling Utah.

Grizzlies 109, Wizards 97: Trey Jemison scored a career-high 24 points, GG Jackson added 19 and host Memphis used a late rally to hold off Washington.

Rockets 103, Spurs 101: Fred VanVleet scored 21 points and visiting Houston held off San Antonio.

Saint Mary's earns elusive league title

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Gonzaga's stranglehold on the West Coast Conference Tournament had been especially frustrating for Saint Mary's, the Gaels often seeing their nemesis celebrate at their expense.

Not Tuesday night.

No. 21 Saint Mary's led the WCC championship game nearly the entire way to beat No. 17 Gonzaga 69-60 behind Aidan Mahaney's 23 points and Mitchell Saxen's 19 points and 15 rebounds.

Gonzaga (25-7) had won four WCC championships in a row and 10 of 11, with Saint Mary's in 2019 the one year the Bulldogs didn't claim the trophy. The Gaels earned the conference's automatic bid for the NCAA Tournament, but both sides were certain to make the 68-

team field even before tipoff.

"We beat a good team, a program we've got a ton of respect for," Saint Mary's coach Randy Bennett said. "They've helped us become the program that we are because we were punching up there for a long time and trying to do what they were doing and be as good as they were."

The sharp-shooting Mahaney was a major reason the Gaels (26-7) prevailed. He made 9 of 15 shots, including 5 of 7 from 3-point range. Also for Saint Mary's, Saxen produced a double-double despite battling foul trouble.

Saxen said he maintained his aggressiveness by "playing to the emotions of the game. It's hard to tone it down in the championship game like that. Got in foul trouble. I should've been smart early and stayed down on

my feet on a couple of plays."

WCC player of the year Augustas Marciulionis scored 13 points and was named tournament most outstanding player.

Anton Watson led the Zags with 18 points. Ryan Nembhard finished with 13 points and 11 assists, and Graham Ike had 10 points even though he played only 20 minutes because of foul trouble.

"We've got a lot to work on on this loss," Watson said. "We're looking forward to the tournament and trying to make some noise there. We can't hang our heads on this."

The game was close throughout — Saint Mary's largest lead was 11 points — but the Gaels managed to stay in front almost the entire way. Gonzaga used an eight-point run to finally take the lead with 7:41 left, but that ad-

vantage lasted only 22 seconds and was answered by a seven-point spurt by the Gaels.

Both teams came in surging. Saint Mary's now has won 23 of 25 games, and the Gaels ended Gonzaga's nine-game winning streak. All this after the Gaels began the season 3-5.

"It wasn't just one moment," Mahaney said of the turnaround. "We just kept chipping and chipping and chipping until eventually we broke through. It's not easy. It's a credit to everyone just believing."

The Gaels also, at least briefly, ended the Bulldogs' domination of this series. Gonzaga had won 26 of the past 32 meetings, and had been the Gaels' nemesis in WCC championship games in winning three of the previous four against Saint Mary's.

Smith helps Charleston defend Coastal title in OT

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Reyne Smith scored eight of his 23 points in overtime and finished with six 3-pointers, and top-seeded Charleston beat No. 7 seed Stony Brook 82-79 on Tuesday night to claim the Coastal Athletic Association Tournament and an NCAA bid for a second straight season.

Smith poked the ball away from Tyler Stephenson-Moore near the 3-point arc and sank a 3-pointer at the other end to extend Charleston's lead to 78-73 midway through overtime.

But that was Charleston's final field goal of the game, and Ante Brzovic only made one free throw in two trips to the line to keep Stony Brook alive.

After Aaron Clarke made a quick 3-pointer for Stony Brook with 3.9 seconds left, Smith sank a free throw for a three-point lead. Dean Noll grabbed the defensive rebound and launched a three-quarter-length shot that

almost banked in at the buzzer.

Charleston (27-7) became the first team to win back-to-back CAA tournament championships since UNC Wilmington in 2016 and '17.

Ben Burnham added 14 points, Brzovic and Frankie Policelli had 12 each and Kobe Rodgers 10 for Charleston.

Stephenson-Moore finished with 26 points and seven 3-pointers for Stony Brook (20-15).

Horizon League

INDIANAPOLIS — Trey Townsend scored a career-high 38 points and made a number of key plays down the stretch as Oakland earned its first NCAA Tournament bid in 10 years with an 83-76 win over Milwaukee.

Townsend had 27 points in the second half, 16 in the last six minutes and seven in the last three minutes.

Townsend's turnaround jumper with 2:35 left gave the top-

seeded Grizzlies a 72-70 lead. He then intercepted a pass and followed his own miss with a putback for a 74-70 lead with two minutes left.

Blake Lampman made two free throws at 1:03 to give Oakland an 80-74 lead going into the last minute when Chris Conway blocked two Panthers shots and Townsend slapped a loose ball out to a teammate.

Townsend ended up on the foul line and made one with 35.9 seconds to go for an 81-74 lead, matching the largest of the game. He later added two more free throws, finishing 14-for-18 from the line.

Northeast Conference

NORTH ANDOVER, Mass. — Tahron Allen scored 22 points and No. 6 seed Wagner allowed only four points in the final eight minutes of a 54-47 victory over top-seeded Merrimack on Tuesday night in the tournament championship game.

The Seahawks advance to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2003.

After losing four of five to finish the regular season, Wagner defeated Central Connecticut in the semifinals and Merrimack in the championship game. The Blue Devils and Warriors tied for first place in the conference.

Summit League

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — Luke Appel and Zeke Mayo each scored 16 points and South Dakota State defeated Denver 76-68 on Tuesday night to advance to the NCAA Tournament for the seventh time.

The Jackrabbits built a 22-5 lead within the first 10 minutes. South Dakota State led 37-23 at halftime and pushed it to 23 with eight minutes left in regulation. Jaxon Brenchley and Pedro Lopez Sanvicente then hit 3-pointers for Denver and the Pioneers went on a 15-2 run to make it 65-53 with 3½ minutes left.