

Airmen witness war zone from above Gaza

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

OVER THE GAZA STRIP — The U.S. airmen aboard a C-130 cargo plane stole glances at the billowing black smoke and collapsed buildings below them, as they prepared to airdrop three tons of humanitarian aid.

Their mission Wednesday into the northern Gaza Strip was the U.S. military's 14th airdrop of aid into what was once the territory's largest population center.

Witnessing the scenes of devastation is eye-opening, said Lt. Col. Jeremy Anderson, airborne mission commander for Wednesday's airdrop.

"It hits home for a lot of the air crew, when they look out and they see firsthand the environment that they are providing aid to," said Anderson, who has flown on five missions to airdrop aid to Gaza since the beginning of March.

American officials say that the airdrops do help, while conceding that they won't alleviate much of the need in Gaza.

More than 2 million people

are estimated to be displaced by the war that began Oct. 7, when a Hamas terrorist attack killed 1,200 people in Israel. Gaza health authorities estimate the number of dead in the territory at more than 30,000 people, a figure that does not distinguish between bystanders and combatants.

The plane on Wednesday flew from Jordan across the West Bank, into Israel and then over the Mediterranean Sea, before approaching Gaza. Along for the mission were two MQ-9 Reaper drones. The drops are monitored through drone feeds and evaluated for problems with the landing, military officials said.

The U.S. mission Wednesday came amid parallel airdrop missions by Jordan, Egypt, Germany and Singapore. More countries are expected to contribute in the coming weeks.

On the American C-130 were 16 pallets carrying Jordanian-supplied rice, flour, milk, pasta and canned foods. The pallets were topped by Jordanian parachutes, which are designed for

people, but can slow the pallets enough to prevent injuries to people on the ground.

Other American aid missions to Gaza have used C-17 Globemaster IIIs, which can carry more weight, flying out of Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. These flights drop pallets of American military rations and water bottles.

The airdrops are "woefully insufficient" but better than nothing, said Alex Plitsas, a senior fellow with the Washington-based Atlantic Council.

But until the U.S. readies a temporary pier that could provide as many as 2 million meals a day, "air drops are a way of showing you're doing something," said Plitsas, an Army veteran, during a phone interview Wednesday.

Asked about whether these pallets of aid might inadvertently benefit Hamas and other terrorist groups, U.S. officials said they hope the supplies find their way to the civilians desperately short of food after months of intense ground combat.

Anderson, the airborne mis-

sion commander for Wednesday's airdrop, said the areas where these pallets land can't be called drop zones, because that implies that there are trusted personnel on the ground to receive them.

But he said air crews use electro-optic infrared sensors to make sure there are no people where the bundles are supposed to land.

Over Gaza, the back door of the plane opened.

As the aircraft slowed to about 160 mph, the bundles rolled out of the back of the plane. All the parachute canopies opened and loose pieces of cardboard scattered into the sky like confetti.

The door remained open as airmen looked out over the city, the aid bundles with their parachutes appearing smaller and smaller as they drifted downward.

"Honestly, it's a little bit, but we do what we can," Anderson said. "We'll continue to maximize what's in our control, and what's in our control is airdropping."

West Coast crew adds to US effort to build Gaza port

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy will deploy 260 sailors and two U.S. naval ships from the West Coast to help build a temporary seaport to deliver aid into war-torn Gaza, officials said Wednesday.

The Pentagon announced nearly two weeks ago that about 1,000 U.S. troops would deploy a floating pier and a roughly 1,800-foot causeway in the Mediterranean Sea off Gaza's coast, where commercial vessels can

dock and offload aid to be transported by smaller vessels and vehicles into Gaza.

The operation will use a makeshift dock known as a Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore, or JLOTS, and include Navy and Army personnel, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said at the time.

Four Army ships departed Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., last week carrying dozens of soldiers from the Army's 7th Transportation Brigade. Army officials said about 500 soldiers

were expected to deploy to support the pier-building operations. They followed the U.S. Army Vessel Frank S. Besson, which left Joint Base Langley-Eustis March 9, according to the Defense Department.

"Once in theater these vessels and their crews will establish a roll-on, roll-off pier capability that allows ship-to-shore humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza," Ryder said last week. "We expect the pier to be fully operational in approximately 60 days, which will be

able to facilitate the delivery of up to 2 million meals daily."

Navy officials, who spoke Wednesday on the condition of anonymity, said 260 sailors and the USNS 2nd Lt. John P. Bobo and USNS 1st Lt. Baldomero Lopez would be involved in the operation. The Bobo and Lopez are prepositioning sealift ships, according to the Navy.

It was not clear when the sailors and ships would be deployed, but officials said the Navy would support the 60-day window.

Leaders push for expansion of basic needs allowance

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senior enlisted leaders threw their support behind a proposal to widen military family eligibility for a basic needs allowance on Wednesday, urging lawmakers to approve the measure to help lessen food insecurity.

The Defense Department in its fiscal 2025 budget request is asking Congress to expand the pool of troops that qualify for the monthly allowance by raising the household income cutoff from 150% of federal poverty guidelines to 200%.

Few service members and mostly only those with large families are taking advantage of the stipend in its present form, which became law in 2021, senior leaders told members of the House Appropriations Committee on Wednesday. Troops must have at least one dependent to be eligible.

In the Army, only 16 people are receiving the allowance, according to Sgt. Maj. Michael Weimer. One of them, an E-4 rank that lives at Washington's Joint Base Lewis-McChord, had to have nine dependents to qualify for the supplemental.

"I had to have my team do the calculation on the whiteboard for me to truly understand between federal poverty guidelines and gross household income, and I felt like I needed an accounting degree to truly understand how to get soldiers to take advantage," Weimer said.

Raising the income ceiling would mean that a family of eight would need to make under

about \$105,000 to qualify for the stipend instead of the current threshold of about \$80,000. An average allowance today is more than \$1,000 per month.

Pentagon officials said the eligibility expansion would cost \$245 million and help decrease service member reliance on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the food stamp program.

Nearly 26% of active-duty troops are considered to be food insecure, meaning they skip or cut meals or go hungry instead of eating, according to a 2023 study by the Rand Corp. think tank that examined 2018 data.

It is unclear if a larger group of candidates for the basic needs allowance will have the impact the Pentagon intends.

A recent survey by the non-profit organization Blue Star Families found that the allowance is having a limited effect so far on alleviating hunger.

"Our limited, but novel, data shows that this new policy may not yet efficiently target food insecure military families, though this may change as more families become aware of the program," the survey states. "Many families who could benefit are unaware of the program."

Chief Master Sgt. John Bentivegna of the Space Force said it was "unacceptable" for a military family to not have enough food on the table. But he said educating families, specifically young enlisted members, about budgeting and healthy eating was also an important part of addressing food insecurity.

US Air Force conducts hypersonic missile test

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force used a Guam-based B-52H Stratofortress bomber to test a hypersonic missile it had relegated to prototype status.

The AGM-183A Air-launched Rapid Response Weapon, or ARRW, was fired Sunday over the Reagan test site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, according to an Air Force statement emailed Wednesday by Secretary of the Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanek.

"This test launched a full prototype operational hypersonic missile and focused on the ARRW's end-to-end performance," the statement said. "The Air Force gained valuable insights into the capabilities of this new, cutting-edge technology."

The AGM-183 is a conventional, rocket-powered hyper-

sonic gliding missile with a warhead of "kinetic energy" projectiles rather than explosives, according to a fiscal 2021 Air Force report.

Sunday's test may be the AGM-183's final flight.

The Air Force had asked for \$150.3 million for research and to test the weapon, Air Force assistant secretary Andrew Hunter told the House subcommittee on tactical and land forces March 29, 2023.

"While the Air Force does not currently intend to pursue follow-on procurement" of the AGM-183 once it develops a prototype, "there is inherent benefit to completing" the test flights "to garner the learning and test data that will help inform future hypersonic programs and potential leave behind capability support," according to a record of that testimony on the Armed Services Committee website.

Commodore of special warfare group relieved

Stars and Stripes

The commodore of Naval Special Warfare Group 8 was relieved of his command Wednesday, the service announced.

Capt. Richard A. Zaszewski was relieved by Rear Adm. Keith Davids, commander of Naval Special Warfare Command, "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command," the service announced in a news release. Deputy commodore Capt. Stig Sanness assumed the duties of commodore, with no impact to mission readiness, the Navy said.

Under federal privacy law, military officials are not required to disclose the reasons for removing or reassigning

personnel. Military officials often cite "a loss of confidence" when commanders are removed from their posts without providing any specifics that led to the decision.

Zaszewski commissioned in 1997, according to his service record provided by the Navy, and he has received many military awards, including a Silver Star, three Bronze Stars, a Legion of Merit and five Defense Meritorious Service Medals.

Naval Special Warfare Group 8 was established August 2021 and assumed responsibility for all units in Naval Special Warfare Groups 3 and 10, which were disestablished the same time.

US signs deal for key Indo-Pacific access

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

A 20-year agreement between the U.S. and several small Pacific island nations significantly advances America's strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region, a top Defense Department official told lawmakers Wednesday.

President Joe Biden signed legislation March 9 that provides \$7.1 billion over two decades to the Freely Associated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau.

The bipartisan renewal of the Compacts of Free Associations, or COFA, between the U.S. and the three nations "ensures that the United States — and only the United States — can maintain a military presence" in those countries, Ely Ratner, assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, said in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee.

Approving COFA funding "marked one of the 118th Congress' most significant achievements to advance U.S. strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region," he said.

The three nations lie in an expanse of sea east of the Philippines just above the Equator.

Renewing the COFA agreement was "critical," Suzanne Vares-Lum, a retired Army major general and now director of the Honolulu-based East-West Center, said by phone Tuesday.

Crucially, the agreement precludes China from exerting more influence in the region by filling unmet needs within the three nations, Vares-Lum said.

"I think it shows our acknowledgement that we are not leaving any gaps in the relationship and that the COFA agreements fulfill the government functions of each of the countries for day-to-day requirements — education,

health care, families, environment, the preservation of cultural resources — of their own security," she said.

The agreement somewhat mitigates China's successful foray into the Solomon Islands, which lies south of Micronesia.

American and Australian officials were stunned in early 2022 when Solomon Islands announced a security agreement with China, raising the possibility that Beijing could leverage that into greater military presence in the region.

Under the renewed COFA agreement, Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau gain more than just the billions of funding in exchange for America's exclusive military access to their land, waters and airspace.

Citizens of those countries are allowed to work and attend school in America, enlist in the U.S. armed services and access

veterans' health care, Vares-Lum said.

The previous COFA agreement expired last fall, and renewal had been tied up in congressional gridlock, Robert York, director for regional affairs at Pacific Forum, a Honolulu-based policy research institute, said by phone Monday.

Some U.S. lawmakers were apparently shaken out of their complacency when a leaked letter from Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr. to a U.S. senator was posted on X on Feb. 15, York said.

The letter, posted by Cleo Paskal, a non-resident senior fellow at the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies, warned that China was upping pressure on Palau to break its diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Whipps' letter urged the U.S. senator, whose name was redacted, to pass the COFA legislation.

GAO: Army effort to expedite delayed new Stryker instead

By **PHILLIP WALTER**
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

The Army's efforts to accelerate an upgrade of its Stryker combat vehicle — which the service says is needed to meet challenges posed by Russia and China — delayed its final rollout by at least a year, a government watchdog agency says.

Development of the latest Stryker variant, known as the Medium Caliber Weapon System, was plagued with software and hardware problems in 2022, according to a Government Accountability Office report released Wednesday.

Those problems could have been mitigated if the Army had obtained more information from manufacturer Oshkosh Defense before authorizing production to start in March of that year, a GAO audit found.

"The Army authorized the start

of production prior to gathering sufficient knowledge of key production steps for a fully informed decision," the audit said.

According to program officials, the green light was given so that the Army could provide soldiers with the MCWS as soon as possible at a cheaper cost. But the ensuing complications mean it now won't be possible to have an all-MCWS brigade until the first quarter of fiscal year 2025 at the earliest, a year longer than was planned originally, the GAO said.

The Stryker is an eight-wheeled armored vehicle that transports infantry into combat and then supports them on the battlefield.

After the drawdown of Army armored combat vehicles from Europe in 2013, the Army reassessed threats and determined its Stryker brigades did not have sufficient firepower compared with potential adversaries.

Gray, 'Marine's Marine' and 29th commandant, dies at 95

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**
Stars and Stripes

Gen. Al Gray, the 29th commandant of the Marine Corps, died Wednesday at his home in Alexandria, Va., after a brief stay in hospice care, the service announced.

"He was a 'Marine's Marine' — a giant who walked among us during his career and after, remaining one of the Corps' dearest friends and advocates even into his twilight," said Gen. Eric M. Smith, the current commandant of the service.

Gray, from Point Pleasant Beach, N.J., enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1950 and commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1952, according to his official biography. He served a tour as an artillery officer with the 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, and a subsequent tour as an infantry officer with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

Gray served for nearly three years in Vietnam before returning to Washington for duty in February 1968. Then-Maj. Gray received the Silver Star Medal for his actions on May 14, 1967, for rushing into a minefield to save an injured Marine, guiding medical attention to the Marine and administering first aid, according to his citation.

Gray was promoted to general and became commandant on July 1, 1987, and retired from the service on June 30, 1991. The general oversaw the development and publication of Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, also known as "Warfighting."

He was well known for being the first commandant to have his official photograph and portrait taken in the camouflage utility uniform, famously remarking that "every Marine is, first and foremost, a rifleman. All other conditions are secondary."

\$1.2T plan to avert shutdown unveiled

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers introduced a \$1.2 trillion spending package Thursday that sets the stage for avoiding a partial government shutdown for several key federal agencies this weekend and allows Congress, nearly six months into the budget year, to complete its work in funding the government through September.

Democrats were largely able to swat back hundreds of policy mandates and some of the steeper budget cuts that House Republicans were seeking to impose on nondefense programs, though House Speaker

Mike Johnson, R-La., highlighted some policy wins, including a nearly 24% increase in detention beds for migrants awaiting their immigration proceedings or removal from the country.

This year's spending bills were divided into two packages. The first one cleared Congress two weeks ago, just hours before a shutdown deadline for the agencies funded through the bills. Now Congress is focused on the second, larger package, which includes about \$886 billion for the Defense Department, about a 3% increase from last year's levels. The 1,012-page bill also funds the

departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Labor, and others.

Nondefense spending will be relatively flat compared with the prior year, though some, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, are taking a hit, and many agencies will not see their budgets keep up with inflation.

When combining the two packages, discretionary spending for the budget year will come to about \$1.66 trillion. That does not include programs such as Social Security and Medicare, and financing the country's rising debt.

The House is expected to take the measure up first, on Friday. Then it would move to the Senate where senators would have to agree on taking it up expeditiously to avoid a partial shutdown. Usually, such agreements include votes on proposed amendments to the bill.

Johnson promoted the bill as a serious commitment to strengthening national defense by moving the Pentagon toward a focus on its core mission while expanding support for those serving in the military. The bill provides for a 5.2% pay increase for service members.

Russia launches 31 missiles at Kyiv; all are blocked

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia fired 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv before dawn Thursday in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in six weeks, officials said. Air defenses shot down all the incoming missiles, though 13 people including a child were injured by falling wreckage, they said.

Residents of Kyiv were awakened by loud explosions around 5 a.m. as the missiles arrived at roughly the same time

from different directions, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv City Administration.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched two ballistic missiles and 29 cruise missiles against the capital.

Kyiv has better air defenses than most regions of the large country. The missile interception rate is frequently high, rendering Russian attacks on the capital significantly less successful than during the early days of the war.

Even so, Ukrainian officials warn that they need considerably more Western weapons if they are to prevail against Russia's invasion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to "respond in kind" to Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine.

At an event in the Kremlin, Putin said Russia "can respond in the same way regarding civil-

ian infrastructure and all other objects of this kind that the enemy attacks. We have our own views on this matter and our own plans. We will follow what we have outlined."

An 11-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man were hospitalized in Kyiv, the city administration said. Eight other people sustained light injuries, according to Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Ukraine's Emergency Service said around 80 people were evacuated from their homes.

5th ex-Miss. deputy gets prison for torture of 2 men

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — A fifth former sheriff's deputy in Mississippi was sentenced Thursday to more than 27 years in prison for breaking into a home with a group of law enforcement officers as they tortured two Black men, an act the judge called "egregious and despicable."

Former deputy Brett McAlpin, 53, was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Tom Lee after pleading guilty to the attack, which involved beatings, re-

peated uses of stun guns and assaults with a sex toy before one of the victims was shot in the mouth. The sixth and final member of the group, 32-year-old former Richland police officer Joshua Hartfield was set to be sentenced Thursday afternoon.

The judge sentenced Christian Dedmon, 29, to 40 years and Daniel Opdyke, 28, to 17.5 years on Wednesday. He gave nearly 20 years to Hunter Elward, 31, and 17.5 years to Jeffrey Middleton, 46, on Tuesday.

All but Hartfield served with the Rankin County Sheriff's Department outside Mississippi's capital city, where some called themselves "The Goon Squad."

In March 2023, months before federal prosecutors announced charges in August, an investigation by The Associated Press linked some of the deputies to at least four violent encounters with Black men since 2019 that left two dead and another with lasting injuries.

The officers invented false charges against the victims,

planting a gun and illegal drugs at the scene of their crime, and stuck to their cover story for months until finally admitting that they tortured Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Terrell Parker. Elward admitted to shoving a gun into Jenkins' mouth and firing it in what federal prosecutors said was meant to be a "mock execution."

For each of the deputies sentenced so far, Lee has handed down prison terms near the top of the sentencing guidelines.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

6 wounded in fight outside funeral home after service

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Six people were wounded, some of them severely, in a fight that broke out Tuesday outside a Utah funeral home among people who had just attended a service there, authorities said.

Officers arrived at the Neil O'Donnell Funeral Home near downtown Salt Lake City around 1:30 p.m. to find three people with stab wounds ranging from minor to severe, according to the Salt Lake City Police Department.

A fourth person was hospitalized in critical condition.

Witnesses told police a vehicle involved in the fight sped off just before they arrived at the scene, spokesperson Brent Weisberg said.

After tracking down and stopping the car, police brought two passengers to the hospital with minor injuries and detained a third person for questioning after finding a gun in the vehicle, Weisberg said.

2 men die near waterfall made popular on TikTok

WA INDEX — The bodies of two people recovered over the weekend after they fell into the water at a dangerous swimming area in Washington state made popular by TikTok have been identified as men from Japan.

The Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office identified the men Tuesday as Hiroya Konosu, 21, and Takayuki Suzuki, 34, the Daily Herald reported.

Search and rescue personnel responded to the Eagle Falls ar-

ea along the Skykomish River east of Index on Saturday after reports that two men had gone underwater and hadn't resurfaced. The men were reportedly part of a four-person group.

Their bodies were recovered Sunday.

The beautiful but dangerous swimming hole along U.S. Route 2 has soared in popularity because of social media, Sky Valley Fire Chief Eric Andrews said. The falls, videos of which went viral on TikTok in 2020, have become a "hot spot" for drownings in recent years, he said.

Governor signs absentee ballot, anti-DEI bills

AL MONTGOMERY — Alabama lawmakers on Tuesday gave final approval to a bill that would outlaw paid assistance with absentee ballot applications and another that would restrict diversity, equity and inclusion programs at universities and state agencies.

Republicans had named the bills as priorities for the legislative session. The Senate, in votes divided along party lines, agreed to changes made by the House of Representatives. Gov. Kay Ivey signed both bills Wednesday.

The absentee voting bill makes it a misdemeanor to distribute a pre-filled absentee ballot application to a voter or return another voter's completed application. And it is now a felony to give, or receive, a payment or gift "for distributing, ordering, requesting, collecting, completing, prefilling, obtaining, or delivering a voter's absentee ballot application."

The other bill prohibits universities, K-12 school systems

and state agencies from sponsoring DEI programs.

College to name building after Robert Gates

VA WILLIAMSBURG — Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates will have an academic building named after him at William & Mary, the university in Virginia where he holds the honorary position of chancellor, the school announced Wednesday.

Robert M. Gates Hall will be a hub for disciplines that include economic development and inequality, geopolitical conflict, national security and conservation, the school said in a statement. Gates served under presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and was director of the CIA under President George H.W. Bush.

A \$30 million gift from an anonymous donor is making the hall possible. The currently vacant Brown Hall will be renovated on campus.

Man guilty in polygamous sect sexual acts scheme

AZ PHOENIX — A businessman pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiring with the leader of an offshoot polygamous sect near the Arizona-Utah border to transport underage girls across state lines, making him the first man to be convicted in what authorities say was a scheme to orchestrate sexual acts involving children.

Moroni Johnson, who faces 10 years to life in prison, acknowledged that he participated in a scheme to transport four girls under the age of 18 for sexual activity. Authorities say the conspiracy between the 53-year-

old Johnson and the sect's leader, self-proclaimed prophet Samuel Bateman, occurred over a three-year period ending in September 2022.

Authorities say Bateman had created a sprawling network spanning at least four states as he tried to start an offshoot of the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which historically has been based in the neighboring communities of Colorado City, Ariz., and Hildale, Utah. He and his followers practice polygamy.

Bateman has pleaded not guilty to state and federal charges. He was ordered jailed until the resolution of his trial, now scheduled for Sept. 10.

State moves to protect horseshoe crabs

MA BOSTON — Wildlife protection advocates are welcoming a decision by the Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission to approve protections for horseshoe crabs during spawning, which is when the creatures are at their most vulnerable.

The move comes as interstate regulators are limiting the harvest of the primordial species of invertebrate to try to help rebuild its population.

Horseshoe crabs predate the dinosaurs, but their populations have been depleted for decades due to harvest in part for bait to catch eels and whelk, a species of sea snail. Their blood is also used to test for potentially dangerous impurities by drug and medical device makers.

The regulation needs final approval by Gov. Maura Healey.

— From wire reports

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Purdue has new look with stronger backcourt

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Purdue guard Fletcher Loyer can already sense a difference this March.

His legs feel stronger, more rested and better conditioned for NCAA Tournament play. It's a welcome change for the top-seeded Boilermakers.

A year ago, their weary freshmen backcourt of Loyer and Braden Smith struggled mightily against 16th-seeded Fairleigh Dickinson, resulting in a March Madness upset for the ages. Now they're back, plotting a rebound for the history books.

"You could feel your legs starting to wear down a little bit last year and you have to figure out what you need to do to get yourself ready to play and feel good about yourself," Loyer said Sunday following the NCAA Tournament draw. "So it's just doing that, finding a routine that works and now I'm really ready to go Friday."

Loyer and Smith made a concerted effort in the offseason to return this season stronger and

more focused. Each trimmed five pounds off their listed weight from 2022-23, hit the weight room and worked steadily on improving their shooting and decision-making.

Smith responded by dishing out 240 assists and breaking the single-season school record that stood for nearly a half century, flirted with multiple triple-doubles and earned first-team all-Big Ten honors. Loyer's shooting percentage increased from 32.9% in 2022-23 to 43.9% this season and he ranks second on the team with 54 3-pointers.

So as the Boilermakers start another opening tourney week studying two No. 16 seeds, Montana State and Grambling, Loyer and Smith sound much more confident they can get the job done in Friday night's first-round game in nearby Indianapolis.

"I think just knowing what all is coming, what all happens, how hard it is and the teams we play, figuring out different ways to take care of your body

and just resting is different," Smith said. "I think we've done a lot better job this year than we did last year just because we've been through it and understand what's going to come."

Last March, most fans ignored what now seem like obvious warning signs.

Purdue went 4-4 in its last eight regular-season games, barely escaped the Big Ten Tournament quarterfinals and nearly blew a 17-point, second-half lead against Penn State in the tourney title game before clinching a No. 1 seed.

Despite shooting a combined 39.6% from the field and 34.4% on 3-pointers over the entire season, Smith and Loyer made just 35.7% of their shots and 24.4% from beyond the arc over the 11 games leading into tourney play. Then in Game 35, against Fairleigh Dickinson, Smith and Loyer were 6 of 20 from the field, 4 of 14 on 3s and had seven assists and nine turnovers, looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable against the Knights.

This year's closing stretch was different.

As 7-foot-4 center and reigning national player of the year Zach Edey continued to dominate in the post and Big Ten Sixth Man of the Year Mason Gillis continued to excel doing the gritty dirty work, it was the play of the second-year guards, the addition of energetic guard Lance Jones and some timely 3-pointers that fueled Purdue.

They've gone 15-2 since mid-January and won five straight by single digits before an overtime loss to Wisconsin in overtime in the Big Ten Tournament semifinals. Those two losses came by a total of five points.

"It feels different because we have better shooters," coach Matt Painter said. "You get in that last four or five minutes, Gillis nails a 3-pointer. You have confidence you're going to be able to do that. I think that's the real separation for this team. We're the second-best 3-point shooting team in the country (40.8%) and that gives us such a balance with Zach."

Shead's development fueled Houston's 2nd straight top seed

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Jamal Shead wasn't anywhere near the player he is now when he joined the Houston Cougars in 2020. His coach offered an unvarnished opinion about his talented guard.

"When he came in, I thought he was a long way away," coach Kelvin Sampson said. "I thought his immaturity was an issue. His day-to-day practice habits were an issue."

Four years later, the 21-year-old Shead barely resembles that freshman player, and his leadership and defensive tenacity has the second-ranked Cougars heading into the NCAA Tournament as a No. 1 seed for a second straight season.

Shead, who was named a first-team AP All-American on Tuesday, will lead Houston (30-4) in the first round of the tournament Friday night against 16-seed Longwood. The Cougars are in the tournament for a school-record sixth

straight season.

Sampson reflected on Shead's journey this week after he received his latest accolade in a season where he's already become the first player in Big 12 history to win player of the year and defensive player of the year honors the same year. Sampson said Shead's parents didn't baby him even during those freshman struggles.

"He didn't have anybody to call home and cry to or to listen to excuses," Sampson said. "That was never going to be an issue. His mom and dad are unusual in that they say the coach is always right. They knew he needed the culture that we've established here."

So with the help of Houston's veterans, Shead began to develop and by January of his first season things started to click for him. By February, he started challenging the veterans or as Sampson recalls: "kicking their butts in practice

some days."

"I think our program raised that kid from being a kid to being a man, and this is the end result," Sampson said. "I think it is a great story in that when things were really tough for him, he didn't quit, he didn't transfer."

Shead admitted that dealing with Sampson's strong coaching style took a while to adjust to, and he still remembers a colorful one-liner he used to call him soft back in his early days on the team.

Now that he's grown into the team's leader, he appreciates how Sampson coached him.

"He has the utmost belief in you and the utmost trust in you when you earn it. And he never wavers with that," Shead said. "That guy has trusted me since Day 1. He's taught me so much. He might get on me the hardest, but I know it's out of love. I know he loves me, so I never take it personally."

Star power this year about the women

Associated Press

As March Madness is set to tip off, three of the most recognizable names in college basketball are in the women's tournament: Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese and Paige Bueckers.

Clark drew record crowds and ratings all season long. Reese has LSU in contention for a second straight national championship. Bueckers is finally healthy and doing things on the court for UConn reminiscent of her freshman season when she was the AP Player of the Year.

Throw in a few stellar freshmen like JuJu Watkins and Hannah Hidalgo, and the game is reaching heights it's never seen.

"One thousand percent we've seen a shift in just the perception of women's college basketball in general," USC coach Lindsay Gottlieb said. "It doesn't have to be at the detriment of men's college basketball. The increased coverage and star power these players have; they are legitimate, popcorn-worthy type of players."

For countless seasons, the buzz around the NCAA tournaments have often been on the men's game. The one-and-done

stars, the juggernaut blueblood programs, the buzzer beaters and athleticism all getting more attention. The women's game has pretty much all of that too, and the ratings and attendance this season suggest casual fans are fully engaged with a game that boasts star power and an increasingly high level of play.

It helps that the women's players stick around for three, four or even five years without the chance to leave early for the pros so fans get to know them and watch them grow. Three years ago, Clark said she thought women's players should be allowed to turn pro after their freshman year, like the men can.

Instead, she stuck around and had a record-setting year that grabbed the nation's attention.

"It's really, really evident that there's stars out there in this game," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "Whereas before I think they were there, but nobody wanted to acknowledge it and appreciate it as much. ... They're just really good. Everybody is going around telling everybody how good they are. They're all visible."

ESPN said it just saw the most

watched women's college basketball regular season in more than 15 years, with viewership up 37% on its platforms from last season. That doesn't really even include the Clark effect as Iowa's star wasn't on the network much this season. Iowa's ratings on Fox Sports were the highest in a generation.

ESPN plans to show all of Iowa's games, including a few on ABC, as far as the No. 1 seed advances in the tourney.

"It's not just UConn and Tennessee on TV," Auriemma said. "Those kids are on TV a lot. They're in the limelight a lot. They know how to handle it because they're used to it now."

Clark, who broke the NCAA all-time scoring record this season, has helped six different networks reach all-time viewership marks for women's basketball over the past year, starting with last season's NCAA championship game that drew nearly 10 million viewers.

"I kind of get to be in the spotlight and I get to change people's viewpoint of how they see women's basketball," Clark said before the season. "The amount of people that have come up to me and said, 'I've never watched

women's basketball before before you and your team.' Some people could take that as a negative. But to me that's a positive. We're finally getting them to turn on the TV and watch it, but not only watch it once. They're coming back for more."

People aren't just watching, they are also coming to games. All five of the power conferences had huge crowds for their tournaments. The SEC and Big Ten had their best attendance ever. The Pac-12, ACC and Big 12 weren't far behind.

"The big names continue to put up big numbers and people are watching and the media is paying attention," Bueckers said. "The tournament will be great and will continue the rise of women's basketball."

Fans who pack the arenas are also sticking around afterward, hoping to get a coveted autograph.

"We've got NBA players who want to see her, WNBA players, musicians and actors too," Gottlieb said of Watkins. "Regular fans also, it's a diversified crowd. Little boys and girls who ask me if I know JuJu. Could they meet JuJu? Grown men you run into in downtown LA."

No. 1 seed South Carolina's youth could fuel NCAA run

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — It has been a different run of perfection for South Carolina coach Dawn Staley, fueled by a lot of precocious, talented young players who make it difficult at times to know exactly what comes next.

"It feels a little bit different because they're so young," said Staley, who won NCAA titles in 2017 and 2022. "I mean, it's like every day is a new day."

Freshmen MiLaysia Fulwiley and Tessa Johnson and sophomores Chloe Kitts and Ashlyn Watkins have pushed the Gamecocks to the No. 1 overall NCAA

Tournament seed and a 32-0 mark. The team is six victories away from the 10th perfect championship run in women's college basketball.

It's a vast change from a year ago when Staley's group, led by All-Americans Aliyah Boston and Zia Cooke, was coming off an NCAA title and dripping with college experience. Their bid for back-to-back championships ended with a 77-73 loss to Iowa in the Final Four.

"Last year was more like Groundhog Day: you just kind of get through the regular season and get to the Final Four because

they knew what they had to do," Staley said. "This team, they just start over every day, every day is something new."

At practice, Staley has urged Fulwiley to rein in some of the flash for the simpler, winning play. Those words took hold as Fulwiley showed steadiness in leading the Gamecocks with 24 points in a 79-72 win over defending national champion LSU to take the Southeastern Conference Tournament title. Fulwiley was tournament MVP.

"She's changing the women's game on the fly with how she plays and moves on the court,"

NBA champion Steph Curry said as his Curry Brand signed Fulwiley to an NIL deal last week.

Fulwiley is not alone in the South Carolina youth movement. Watkins, the 6-foot-3 sophomore, has gained attention for the first two dunks in program history. She had one at Clemson as a freshman and added another in a win over Kentucky two months ago.

"Honestly, I think I'm just seeing it, I'm seeing the floor better, I'm looking to score. I'm seeing what my teammates are doing," Watkins said. "I'm communicating better and that's giving me confidence."

Padres chase Yamamoto early to win slugfest

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — After chasing Yoshinobu Yamamoto from his major league debut after one inning and scoring their most runs ever against the Los Angeles Dodgers, San Diego's Xander Bogaerts was sad to leave the Gocheok Sky Dome.

"We got to come here more," he said.

Jake Cronenworth tied a career high with four hits and had four RBIs as the Padres outlasted the Dodgers 15-11 on Thursday night after Los Angeles fired Shohei Ohtani's interpreter following allegations of illegal gambling.

Interpreter Ippei Mizuhara was let go from the team Wednesday following reports from the Los Angeles Times and ESPN about alleged ties to

an illegal bookmaker.

Ohtani hit three deep flyouts on a 1-for-5 night, including a sacrifice fly, and was 3-for-10 with two RBIs in the series. He did not speak with reporters.

"I hope Sho is good, but you know, at the end of the day we have to make sure we take care of our jobs," said Mookie Betts, who had six RBIs along with four hits that included the first home run of the major league season. "No matter what cards we're dealt, we better go play them."

Yamamoto and Dodgers manager Dave Roberts insisted Mizuhara's situation didn't contribute to the defeat.

"I feel regret that I just couldn't keep the team in the game from the get-go, so I do feel the responsibility for it," Yamamoto said through a

translator. "I just got to get ready for the next outing."

San Diego gained a split in the opening two-game series, Major League Baseball's first games in South Korea. After the Dodgers rebounded from a 9-2 deficit and closed to 12-11, Manny Machado hit a three-run homer in the ninth off J.P. Feyereisen.

San Diego outhit the Dodgers 17-16, and Los Angeles made three errors that led to a pair of unearned runs. Luis Campusano had three hits and 20-year-old center fielder Jackson Merrill got his first two major league hits.

Yamamoto (0-1) signed a \$325 million, 12-year contract, a record amount for a pitcher that created high expectations. San Diego batted around against the two-time Pacific

League MVP, and he left with a 45.00 ERA, allowing five runs, four hits, one walk, a hit batter and a wild pitch. Cronenworth's two-run triple, Ha-Seong Kim's sacrifice fly, Campusano's RBI double and Tyler Wade's run-scoring single built a 5-1 lead.

"Just didn't have the command and so it's not about the stuff," Roberts said. "When you're a command guy, which he's been his entire career, his life, and you just misfire, get behind in counts, hit batters, that's just not who he is. ... He's an easy guy that you know he'll bounce back from this."

Michael King (1-0) won in his Padres debut following his acquisition in the trade that sent Juan Soto to the New York Yankees. King allowed three runs in 3⅓ innings.

US women to face Germany, men get France at Olympics

Associated Press

PARIS — The U.S. women's soccer team will face Germany and Australia at the Paris Olympics when incoming coach Emma Hayes looks to get off to a flying start in the job.

The draws for the men's and women's soccer tournaments were held at a ceremony in Saint-Denis on Wednesday.

The record four-time gold-medalist was drawn against fifth-ranked Germany and World Cup semifinalist Australia in Group B. Those teams will be joined by either Morocco or Zambia from the African Football Confederation.

Hayes takes up her role as U.S. head coach in May after finishing the season with Chelsea, where she is challenging for a quadruple of trophies in her final year. She has already won 14 major trophies at Chelsea, including six Women's Super League titles.

Twila Kilgore is serving as interim coach of the United States until Hayes can join the team. Kilgore recently led the team to the title in the CONCACAF Gold Cup.

"The bottom line is we're excited to have a path, to know who we're playing for the most part, to be able to start working on specific game plans," Kilgore said follow-

ing the draw. "But also just to know the logistical path. There's so much that goes into an Olympics with a short turnaround and congested games."

The U.S. hasn't won Olympic gold since 2012 and is coming off a disappointing Women's World Cup last year, when it suffered its earliest exit from the tournament after being knocked out by Sweden on penalties in the round of 16. It had never finished worse than third at previous World Cups.

Hayes has established herself as one of the sport's leading coaches. She can further add to her record by winning a clean sweep of trophies this season — including the Champions League, which is the one competition she has yet to deliver at Chelsea.

Defending champion Canada was drawn in Group A with host France, Colombia and New Zealand. Before winning the gold medal at the Tokyo Games, Canada won back-to-back bronze medals in London and Brazil.

"We know more than ever that there's not an easy game in the women's game, no matter what the ranking is," Canada coach Bev Priestman said. "We know the other routes we could have gone down. Pleased, excited, but taking nothing for granted."

World Cup winner Spain is in Group C with Japan and Brazil. Nigeria or South Africa will join that group as another CAF qualifier.

The U.S. men's team will face France at the Paris Games after being drawn in the same group as the host nation for the men's tournament.

The U.S. is competing at the Games for the first time since Beijing in 2008 and faces a potentially daunting task after being drawn alongside France, coached by soccer great Thierry Henry, in Group A.

Also in the group are New Zealand and the winner of a playoff between teams from the Asian and the African confederations.

World champion Argentina was drawn in Group B with Morocco, Ukraine and a qualifier to be confirmed from the AFC.

Spain, runner-up in Tokyo, is in Group C along with Egypt, Dominican Republic and another qualifier from the AFC, which is yet to be confirmed.

Group D features Paraguay, Mali and Israel as well as a final qualifier from the AFC.

The soccer tournament will begin two days before the opening ceremony of the Games on July 24, with the women's final concluding the event on Aug. 10.