

Japan, US work in waves on island defense

By **BRIAN McELHINEY**
AND **KEISHI KOJA**

Stars and Stripes

KIN BLUE BEACH, Okinawa — An hourlong amphibious landing by U.S. Marines and Japanese troops over the weekend served as the “key bilateral training event” of Iron Fist, a defining exercise of the U.S.-Japan military alliance.

The focus of this year’s three-week exercise, which concludes Friday, is strengthening island defense and amphibious capabilities.

For the third consecutive year, Iron Fist is taking place in Japan rather than off California’s coast, where it was held from 2006 through 2022.

“Exercises are most effective when they are conducted by the forces most likely to operate together in the areas where they are most likely to operate,” Brig. Gen. Trevor Hall, commander of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, told reporters Saturday at Kin Blue Beach after the landing.

“Through our combined capabilities, we provide deterrence to all threats in this region,” he said.

Unofficially, Iron Fist does not identify a specific adversary, but China remains a central consideration.

The Pentagon has designated Beijing a “pacing challenge” in the Indo-Pacific since 2021, citing its military expansion and regional ambitions, particularly regarding Taiwan and the South and East China Seas.

Japan faces “the most severe security environment it has seen since the end of World War II,” Maj. Gen. Hajime Kitajima, commander of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, told reporters Saturday, reiterating a statement he made Feb. 17 at Iron Fist’s start.

“This exercise is not aimed at a certain country or region,” he said.

Iron Fist incorporates elements of the Marines’ amphib-

ious warfare legacy while aligning with its modern Force Design strategy.

The strategy aims to counter China’s often used area denial and anti-access tactics in the Western Pacific.

Saturday’s amphibious landing began at 9 a.m. with approximately 200 U.S. Marines and sailors alongside 200 Japanese troops executing four waves of beach assaults.

In the first wave of the exercise, Marines and Japanese soldiers landed in combat rubber reconnaissance craft, securing positions along the seawall with rifles at the ready.

The second wave brought six Japanese amphibious assault vehicles ashore, followed by a Japanese air-cushioned landing craft in the third wave.

Two Marine AH-1Z Viper helicopters circled overhead, providing reconnaissance and firepower, said III Marine Expeditionary Force spokesman Capt. Pawel Puczek.

“They can provide additional

fires to provide security for the landing force,” he told Stars and Stripes at the beach.

“If they see a situation changing here on the ground, then they can report it back to the force that’s landing,” he added.

The final wave saw Marines disembark from a landing craft and sprint up the beach with rifles in hand.

A 7-ton truck carrying supplies followed closely behind the marines.

The Marines arrived from the amphibious dock landing ship USS Rushmore, according to Puczek.

Meanwhile the air-cushioned landing craft and the amphibious assault vehicles arrived from the Japanese tank-landing ship JS Kunisaki, 31st MEU spokesman Maj. Edward Pingel confirmed in a text message following the exercise.

The Marine landing craft arrived from the USS Rushmore, while the rubber crafts came from White Beach and the Kunisaki, he said Monday.

US soldiers test Dronebuster prototype in Thailand

By **ALEX WILSON**
Stars and Stripes

PHU LAM YAI, Thailand — As U.S. and Thai soldiers engaged in a mock gunbattle over the weekend, a singular warning cut through the chaos: “Drones! It’s a drone swarm!”

About a dozen unmanned aircraft flying in two formations appeared on the horizon, their rotor hum prompting soldiers to shift their focus upward.

A fire team of four quickly took positions with one of their newest weapons — the Dronebuster.

The handheld electronic device emits electromagnetic signals designed to disrupt or disable unmanned aerial systems.

During Saturday’s training, the targeted drones simply reversed course. In a real combat scenario, they would likely fall from the sky, said Capt. Tyler Schultz, an observer coach and trainer with the 196th Infantry Brigade, based at Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

The Dronebuster used Saturday was a prototype developed from an existing system, he told Stars and Stripes.

The swarm attacked twice during the drill, but not all drones were repelled in time; those that made it through resulted in simulated explosions near the troops, all from the 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo.

Drones present multiple challenges in warfare, including their high maneuverability and the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe.

“Identification of these drones is a huge challenge, as well as getting that ... Dronebuster operator in the right spot

to actually be effective and take a shot at that drone,” Schultz said.

Addressing those challenges requires repeated training and rehearsals, said Maj. Paul Hanneman, operational planner for the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center, based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

“This is exactly the arena that we train in, so we can fight in a similar arena,” Hanneman said at the exercise. “That’s why we’re over here in Thailand, where it’s hot, it’s remote, it’s rugged.”

Lakenheath preps for potential nuke storage

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — A U.S. Air Force base in the United Kingdom is being prepared as a potential deployment site for nuclear bombs, a leading atomic policy research group said in a new report.

Three years of budget documentation and observations that include satellite imagery indicate that the U.S. military wants to reestablish a nuclear mission at RAF Lakenheath for the first time in nearly two decades, the Federation of American Scientists said.

"The addition of a large nuclear air base in northern Europe is a significant new development that would have been inconceivable just a decade-and-a-half ago," according to the report, issued Wednesday.

As of now, there are no indications that nuclear weapons have been deployed to Lakenheath, the report said.

U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the potential for a nuclear mission at Lakenheath. However, per policy the military doesn't typically discuss the locations of nuclear weapons stored in Europe.

A decision to reactivate the nuclear mission at Lakenheath was likely part of a 2021 posture review that paved the way for various investments at the base, according to the report. For instance, documents submitted to Congress in 2022 showed that the United Kingdom had been added to a list of countries for upgrades to NATO "special weapons" sites.

Related contracting docu-

ments and satellite images of construction work also added to mounting evidence that the nuclear mission would return to Lakenheath, said the federation, which traces its roots to atomic scientists who formed a group in the aftermath of World War II.

Air Force budget materials described the construction of a "surety dormitory" there to accommodate an increase in personnel related to "the arrival of a potential Surety Mission," the report said. The term "surety" is typically used by the Defense Department when referring to the safety and security of nuclear weapons, the watchdog group added.

Once relevant construction is completed, the base could receive weaponry for its nuclear arsenal from other locations in Europe, according to the report.

"In the case of a nuclear crisis with Russia, a portion of U.S. nuclear weapons could be redistributed from more vulnerable NATO bases to RAF Lakenheath to improve survivability and complicate Russia's targeting strategy," the report said.

The federation's assessment said the return of the nuclear mission to Lakenheath is most likely intended as a backup rather than a signal of the imminent return of such weapons.

"The change appears to be a direct reaction to the worsening political and military relations with Russia, resulting from its invasions in 2014 and 2022 of Ukraine, frequent nuclear warnings, and Russian deployment of increasingly capable long-range conventional weapons," according to the report.

US, Thai troops train by detonating 700 lbs of TNT

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

PHU LAM YAI, Thailand — About 30 U.S. and Thai troops braced themselves Sunday as more than 730 pounds of TNT and nearly 20 pounds of C4 detonated just over half a mile away.

Hunkered inside a reinforced shelter, they listened in silence for 30 seconds, waiting for the tell-tale clatter of lethal shrapnel that could reach the bunker.

The detonation, part of an explosive ordnance disposal demonstration, included about 90 high-explosive mortar shells from the Thai army. The shells, manufactured in 1960 and filled with TNT, were deemed unfit for use, said Sgt. Jared Strickland, an EOD specialist with the U.S. Army's 65th Explosive Ordnance Disposal Company at Fort Wainwright, Alaska.

Disposing of aging munitions

for partner nations is routine for the company, Strickland said.

"They'll contact us; they'll give us all the old stuff, and we go and dispose of it safely in an area that can withstand the detonation," he said. "Our Thai counterparts had a bunch of ordnance they no longer deemed usable — so we learn from them, and they learn from us on how to dispose of different things with different techniques."

Before the explosion, Strickland's team and soldiers from the Thai army's 22nd Ordnance Ammunition Regiment carefully stacked the 90 shells inside a crater. They then placed 16 blocks of C4 lengthwise across the pile.

Given the extreme heat and the age of the munitions, the team took extra precautions, Strickland said. Each shell and each block of C4 carried enough explosive force to destroy a small building if detonated indoors.

DOD streamlines clearances to hasten airstrikes, raids

The Washington Post

The Trump administration has reduced the levels at which many military airstrikes and raids must be approved, U.S. officials said Friday, paving the way for the U.S. military to respond more rapidly to perceived threats.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth acknowledged the decision on social media, confirming a CBS News report simply by writing on X: "Correct." The Pentagon cited Hegseth's social media post in response to questions but did not provide additional details. Another U.S. defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said battlefield commanders have received new authorization in recent days to carry out operations without seeking high-level approvals that were required during the Biden administration.

The decision marks a throw-

back to President Donald Trump's first administration, when he loosened battlefield restrictions and said he would not tie the hands of U.S. troops operating in hostile areas. A significant spike in airstrikes against enemy combatants followed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other countries.

Brian Hughes, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, said in a statement Friday that Trump "will not hesitate to eliminate any terrorist who is plotting to kill Americans."

Wes Bryant, an Air Force Special Operations veteran who served in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, said that pushing down the approval of strikes to senior military commanders, rather than senior Pentagon officials, can allow U.S. troops to respond more swiftly and decisively in counterterrorism operations.

Crews fight wildfires across Carolinas

Associated Press

Lighter winds Monday helped crews in South Carolina and North Carolina battle wildfires that caused evacuations and threatened hundreds of homes over the weekend.

Hundreds of firefighters from across South Carolina managed to keep the massive blaze in Horry County near Myrtle Beach from destroying any homes despite social media videos of orange skies at night and flames engulfing pine trees just yards away.

It was the biggest fire in the area since a 2009 wildfire near-

by did \$42 million in damage and burned down about 75 homes.

The danger wasn't over Monday. Officials in all of South Carolina banned almost all outdoor fires, including burning yard debris and campfires.

Burn bans were also in place in western North Carolina. Some residents in Polk County remained evacuated from their homes as fire crews Monday morning set their own blazes to burn possible wildfire fuel to make it easier to contain a 480-acre fire that was about 30% contained.

The North Carolina Forest Service reported more than 200 wildfires across the state Monday, although almost all of them were small and not threatening any structures.

A drier-than-normal winter across the Carolinas combined over the weekend with high winds as a cold front without the usual rain that accompanies the weather systems in the South moved through the area to increase the fire danger.

The area near Myrtle Beach is one of the most dangerous for wildfires in South Carolina as hundreds of years of decompos-

ing vegetation creates peat, which when it dries out can burn for a long time.

Pine trees and other waxy vegetation provide fuel for fires to rapidly spread in dry, windy conditions.

Horry County's population has doubled to 400,000 people over the past 25 years. Many of those newcomers have moved into neighborhoods being rapidly built right next to the oval Carolina Bays where the peat and flammable vegetation all grows together. Fires have been part of the natural landscape of the bays for centuries.

Illinois man pleads guilty for shooting at parade

Associated Press

WAUKEGAN, Ill. — An Illinois man pleaded guilty Monday to killing seven people and injuring dozens more when he opened fire on a 2022 Independence Day parade in a Chicago suburb, a stunning development moments before opening arguments in his trial on charges of murder and attempted murder.

Appearing in a Lake County circuit courtroom, Robert E. Crimo III, 23, withdrew his ear-

lier not-guilty plea in the Highland Park shooting.

Prosecutors initially charged him with 21 counts of first-degree murder — three counts for each person killed — as well as 48 counts of attempted murder. Prosecutors dropped the less serious 48 counts of aggravated battery before the start of the trial with jury selection last week.

On Monday, Judge Victoria Rossetti read the charges to Crimo and asked questions to be

sure he understood before any open plea was read to the court.

He gave one-word answers, indicating he understood the charges. His mother, Denise Pesina, had a brief outburst at the news and was called up to the judge for a warning. She was allowed to stay.

The judge said with the plea change, there would be no trial or further motions on the case.

Lake County prosecutors read the names of all those killed in the shooting and of

those injured in the shooting, with the judge stopping to ask questions to make sure Crimo understood.

They went over the substantial evidence, including his prints on the gun used in the crime, and statements to police admitting to the mass shooting.

Sentencing will come April 23, but Crimo is certain to spend the rest of his life behind bars. Each count of first-degree murder carries a natural life prison sentence.

Zelenskyy says he'll meet Trump if talks 'serious'

Bloomberg News

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he's willing to meet again with Donald Trump if the U.S. president invites him, but signaled that another White House encounter would have to be "serious" for him to make the trip.

Friday's clash with Trump and Vice President JD Vance left attempts to get the U.S. administration on Kyiv's side in tatters. It also set off a scramble among Europeans to get the two leaders back to the table as they

tried to demonstrate broad support for Ukraine at a security summit in London.

"We are worthy of an equal dialogue," Zelenskyy said on Sunday after attending the summit. If the U.S. president invites him "for a constructive dialogue, to solve real problems, for serious issues and real, decisive actions and answers — I will arrive," he said.

Despite his defiant tone, Zelenskyy said his country was ready to accept a natural resources deal with the United

States. The accord was left unsigned after the Oval Office bust-up that marked the most serious crisis between Ukraine and its biggest military supporter since Russia's full-scale invasion began three years ago.

Holding such a conversation in public wasn't a good thing for either the U.S. or Ukraine, the Ukrainian president said, declining a reporter request to switch to English to avoid any misinterpretation. But in a clear attempt to turn the page on the dispute, he added: "I am con-

vinced that the situation will pass and more important things are ahead."

European leaders led by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron spent the weekend in a diplomatic whirlwind as they tried to mend the break with the U.S. They also fast-tracked efforts to improve their own defense capabilities in the wake of Trump's outreach to Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine — potentially over their heads.

Big night for 'Anora' at Academy Awards

Associated Press

"Anora," a strip-club Cinderella story without the fairy-tale ending, was crowned best picture at the Academy Awards on Sunday in Los Angeles, handing Sean Baker's gritty, Brooklyn-set screwball farce Hollywood's top prize.

In a stubbornly fluctuating Oscar season, "Anora," the Palme d'Or-winner at the Cannes Film Festival, emerged as the unlikely front-runner. Baker's tale of an erotic dancer who elopes with the son of a Russian oligarch — unusually explicit for a best-picture winner — was made for just \$6 million but went home with five big awards, including four for its scrappy indie director.

Oscar voters, eschewing blockbuster contenders like "Wicked" and "Dune: Part Two," instead added "Anora" — which has one of the lowest box-office totals ever for a best-picture winner with \$16 million in ticket sales — to a string of recent indie best-picture winners, including "Everything Everywhere All at Once" in 2023, "CODA" in 2022 and "Nomadland" in 2021.

For a film industry that's been transformed by streaming and humbled by economic turmoil, Baker and "Anora" epitomized a kind of cinematic purity. On the campaign trail, Baker called for the return to the 90-day exclusive theatrical release.

"Where did we fall in love with the movies? At the movie theater," Baker said Sunday, accepting the award for best director. "Filmmakers, keep making films for the big screen."

In personally winning four Oscars (picture, directing, editing, screenplay), Baker tied the mark held by Walt Disney, who won for four different films in 1954.

That Baker and Disney share the record is ironic; his "The Florida Project" took place in a low-budget motel in the shadow

of Disney World.

"Long live independent film!" Baker shouted from the Dolby Theatre stage.

Awards spread around

Eight of the 10 best-picture nominees won at least one award in a ceremony buoyantly hosted by Conan O'Brien that favored song and dance over strong political statements.

Acting awards went to Mikey Madison, Adrien Brody, Kieran Culkin and Zoe Saldña.

Twenty-two years after winning best actor for "The Pianist," Brody won the again for his performance as another Holocaust survivor in Brady Corbet's "The Brutalist." His win came over Timothée Chalamet ("A Complete Unknown"), who had a chance to become the youngest best actor ever, a record owned by Brody.

"I'm here once again to represent the lingering traumas and the repercussions of war and systematic oppression and of antisemitism and racism and othering," Brody said.

"I pray for a healthier and happier and more inclusive world. If the past can teach us anything it's to not let hate go unchecked."

Madison won best actress for her breakthrough performance in "Anora," a victory that came over category favorite Demi Moore ("The Substance"). Madison and Baker both spoke, as they did at Cannes, about honoring the lives of sex workers.

Netflix's beleaguered contender, "Emilia Pérez," the lead nominee going into the show (13), took two awards — best song and best supporting actress, for Saldña — after a scandal caused by offensive tweets by star Karla Sofía Gascón torpedoed its chances.

"I am a proud child of immigrant parents with dreams and dignity and hardworking hands," Saldña said. "I am the first American of Dominican origin to accept an Academy

Award, and I know I will not be the last."

1 expected win, 1 upset

The night's first award went to Culkin for best supporting actor. He had cruised through the season, picking up award after award, for his performance alongside Jesse Eisenberg in "A Real Pain."

"I have no idea how I got here," Culkin said, "I've just been acting my whole life."

The biggest early upset came in the best animated feature category. "Flow," the wordless Latvian film, upset DreamWorks Animations' "The Wild Robot." The win for "Flow," an ecological parable about a cat in a flooded world, was the first Oscar for a Latvian film.

"Thank you to my cats and dogs," director Gints Zilbalodis said in accepting the award.

'Wicked' wins two

"Wicked" stars Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo kicked off the ceremony with a tribute to Los Angeles following the wildfires that devastated the Southern California metropolis this year. Grande sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and Erivo performed Diana Ross' "Home" before they joined together for "Defying Gravity" from their blockbuster big-screen musical. "Wicked," the biggest box-office hit among the best-picture nominees, won for production design and costume design.

"I'm the first Black man to receive the costume design award," said costume designer Paul Tazewell, who couldn't finish that sentence before the crowd began to rise in a standing ovation. "I'm so proud of this."

Makeup and hairstyling went to "The Substance" for its gory creations of beauty and body horror.

"Dune: Part Two" won for visual effects and sound, and its sandworm — arguably the star

of the night — figured into multiple gags throughout the evening.

Corbet's sprawling postwar epic "The Brutalist," shot in VistaVision, won for its cinematography, by Lol Crawley, and its score, by Daniel Blumberg.

The papal thriller "Conclave," picked by some to upset "Anora," went home with just one award, for best adapted screenplay.

Not much talk of politics

Though the Oscars featured the first time an actor was nominated for portraying a sitting U.S. president (Sebastian Stan as a young Donald Trump in "The Apprentice"), politics went largely unmentioned through most of the ceremony.

The president's name was never uttered during the nearly four-hour ceremony. While the show featured several striking political moments, much of this year's Oscars was more dedicated to considering the fluctuating place of movies in today's culture, and in Los Angeles' resilience following the devastating wildfires of January.

O'Brien avoided politics completely in his opening monologue. The first exception was nearly two hours in, when presenter Daryl Hannah announced simply: "Slava Ukraini" ("Glory to Ukraine!")

"No Other Land," about Israeli occupation of the West Bank and made by a group including Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers, won best documentary. After failing to find a U.S. distributor, the makers opted to self-distribute the film, which grossed more than any other documentary nominee.

"I'm Still Here," a portrait of resistance under the Brazilian military dictatorship, won best international film. The award once seemed a lock for "Emilia Pérez." As that film collapsed, "I'm Still Here" rode a wave of passionate support in Brazil and political timeliness elsewhere.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

FedEx plane makes quick landing after bird strike

NJ NEWARK — A FedEx cargo plane made an emergency landing at a busy New Jersey airport Saturday after a bird strike caused an engine fire that could be seen in the morning sky.

The plane landed at Newark Liberty International Airport during the emergency, said Leni Valens, a spokesperson for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. There were no reported injuries, and fire on the cargo plane was contained to the engine, Valens said.

Audio recorded by LiveATC indicates the strike happened when the plane was several hundred feet off the ground.

Mexican drug lord pleads not guilty in agent's death

NY NEW YORK — After years as one of U.S. authorities' most wanted men, Mexican drug cartel boss Rafael Caro Quintero was brought into a New York courtroom Friday to answer charges that include orchestrating the 1985 killing of a U.S. federal agent.

Dressed in an orange prison jumpsuit, the 72-year-old Caro Quintero spoke little during the brief proceeding as his lawyer entered a not guilty plea on his behalf.

Another cartel leader, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, 62, also pleaded not guilty through an attorney. He's accused of arranging kidnappings and killings in Mexico, but not accused of involvement in the death of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena.

Prosecutors said Caro Quintero blamed Camarena for a

raid on a huge marijuana plantation and had the agent kidnapped, tortured and killed as revenge.

State's measles cases rise to 146 in outbreak

TX DALLAS — The number of people with measles in Texas increased to 146 in an outbreak that led last week to the death of an unvaccinated school-aged child, health officials said.

The number of cases — Texas' largest in nearly 30 years — increased by 22 last week.

The Texas Department of State Health Services said cases span over nine counties in Texas, including almost 100 in Gaines County, and 20 patients have been hospitalized.

The child who died in the outbreak is the first U.S. death from the highly contagious but preventable respiratory disease since 2015, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. The child was treated at Covenant Children's Hospital in Lubbock, though the facility said the patient didn't live in Lubbock County.

The virus has largely spread through rural, oil rig-dotted West Texas, with cases concentrated in a "close-knit, under-vaccinated" Mennonite community, state health department spokesperson Lara Anton has said.

Governor halts 2 laws to aid wildfire prevention

CA LOS ANGELES — Declaring a state of emergency, California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Saturday suspended two landmark state envi-

ronmental laws to expedite measures he said were needed to protect communities against devastating wildfires.

Newsom suspended the California Environmental Quality Act and the California Coastal Act as the two-month anniversary of the Palisades and Eaton fires approaches and the state prepares for the summer and fall fire season.

The California Environmental Quality Act, known as CEQA, requires local and state agencies to identify and mitigate environmental impacts of their work. The California Coastal Act lays out regulations for coastal development and protection.

The governor's office said the legal moves would fast-track vegetation and tree removal as well as the creation of fuel breaks and allow for quicker approval for more and bigger planned fires for forest management.

Cuomo makes comeback with NYC mayoral bid

NY NEW YORK — Former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Saturday that he is running for mayor of New York City, relaunching his political career following a yearslong exile over a barrage of sexual harassment accusations.

In a 17-minute video, Cuomo pitched himself as an accomplished moderate who can save a city he described as threatening and "out of control," and is capable of navigating the delicate balance between working with Republican President Donald Trump and fighting him, when necessary.

"I am not saying this is going to be easy. It won't be easy, but I

know we can turn the city around, and I believe I can help," he said.

The Democrat is expected to mount a formidable campaign, despite entering the race deeply wounded by the scandal that forced his resignation as governor in 2021. He takes on a large field of primary opponents with low name recognition plus an incumbent, Mayor Eric Adams, who — for now — remains under indictment on federal corruption charges and under scrutiny from critics who have questioned his independence from Trump.

Mayor: City won't ease limits for spring break

FL MIAMI BEACH — Miami Beach broke up with spring break last year and city leaders still aren't interested in couples counseling.

Officials recently announced they were bringing back enhanced security measures for practically the entire month of March, including parking restrictions and increased fees for nonresidents.

The new rules were introduced last year after three consecutive years of spring break violence. The city is again warning visitors to expect curfews, bag searches at the beach, early beach closures, DUI checkpoints and arrests for drug possession and violence.

"Last year's spring break was a success on any level you measure it," Miami Beach Mayor Steven Meiner said. "We had zero fatalities, zero shootings, zero stampedes. The majority of our businesses did very well and actually thanked us for the measures we took."

— From wire reports

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Bell wins 2nd straight Cup Series race

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Christopher Bell is making the most of his late-race chances to seize victories.

Bell passed Kyle Busch with five laps to go, then held off Daytona 500 winner William Byron to win NASCAR's first road course race of the season Sunday at the Circuit of the Americas.

The late-race drama produced his second consecutive victory after his overtime win in Atlanta a week earlier.

Once Bell cleared Busch, the Oklahoma driver had to make a desperate bid to keep his Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota in front of the hard-charging Byron in his Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet, and the Toyota of 2023 race winner Tyler Reddick of 23XI Racing.

Bell raced to his 11th career victory and is a multiple race winner for the fourth consecutive season. Busch, who led 43 of 95 laps in his Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet, faded to fifth

as his winless streak stretched to 60 races dating to 2023.

"These road course races are just so much fun," Bell said. "(Busch) was doing such a good job running his race. He bobbed and allowed me to get out front. When he did, I just said, 'Don't beat yourself.'"

The furious nip-and-tuck finish could have ended in a crash that ruined someone's race and jumbled the field with a late caution flag. Busch and Bell have a heated history of collisions in Austin, notably last year when Busch confronted the younger driver over contact in a race where Bell finished second.

This time, everyone kept it clean all the way to the end.

"Amazing to have such respectful clean, hard racing. It was a beautiful way to end a race," Bell said.

That didn't mean Byron wasn't pushing him hard. And Byron had his own battle with Reddick, who was looking for an opening to attack the front.

"I couldn't never get beside (Bell). We've always raced well together, I didn't want to move him blatantly," Byron said.

Even Busch complimented Bell's driving.

"I'll give Christopher credit," Busch said. "He ran me really hard."

Bell's crew chief, Adam Stevens, said the consecutive wins on a superspeedway oval and a road course show the team can fight for wins every week, starting with the next two races in Phoenix and Las Vegas.

"We don't think there's a track that we go to that we don't have a chance to win," Stevens said. "We have everything we need to win every single weekend."

Hendrick Motorsports' Chase Elliott started third and quickly dropped to the back when he spun by Trackhouse Racing's Ross Chastain in the first turn, but he fought his way back through the field to fourth.

Connor Zilisch had a wild day in his Cup Series debut for

Trackhouse. The 18-year-old started 14th and dropped back with contact in the first lap. He recovered to get back within the top 15 by the start of the third stage.

That's when his day ended. Zilisch couldn't avoid a spin by teammate Daniel Suarez in lap 50, smashed into the wall and had to scramble out of his car when it caught fire.

Elliott's road drought

Elliott leads active drivers with seven road course victories, but hasn't snared one since 2021 when he won twice. He has also never won a road course or street race with a Next Gen car.

Elliott made up 17 positions in the final stage, but was still upset about a possible race win snuffed out by the bump from Chastain.

"It was the first lap of the dang race," Elliott said.

"Who knows. I would have loved to have been in the mix. Easy to say when you've had a bad day."

Knights beat Devils; NJ loses leading scorer Hughes

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Mark Stone and Noah Hanifin each scored a power-play goal in the third period as the Vegas Golden Knights beat the New Jersey Devils 2-0 on Sunday night.

The Golden Knights won for the fifth time in six games. They extended their lead in the Pacific Division to four points over Edmonton.

New Jersey fell two points behind Carolina for second place in the Metropolitan after the Hurricanes beat Calgary 2-1 in overtime. The Devils also lost leading scorer Jack Hughes to an apparent arm injury late in the game, but coach Sheldon Keefe didn't have an update.

"Obviously, it didn't look good," Keefe said. "We're going

to have to take the time to know the full extent of it."

Hughes leads New Jersey with 27 goals and 70 points. His 43 assists are second on the team only to Jesper Bratt's 51.

Jack Eichel had two assists to stretch his single-season franchise record to 26 points on the man advantage. Adin Hill made 25 saves for his third shutout this season.

Maple Leafs 6, Penguins 5 (OT): William Nylander scored 1:00 into overtime as visiting Toronto beat Sidney Crosby and Pittsburgh.

Nylander, Auston Matthews and Matthew Knies each had a goal and an assist as the Maple Leafs earned their fifth consecutive win. John Tavares, Max Domi and Conor Timmins also

scored.

Crosby had a goal and two assists for the Penguins. He passed Bobby Hull for 18th on the NHL's career goals list and Gordie Howe for 10th on the league's assists list. Crosby has 611 goals and 1,050 assists.

Wild 1, Bruins 0: Frederick Gaudreau scored and Filip Gustavsson stopped 28 shots as Minnesota beat visiting Boston.

Gustavsson posted his fourth shutout of the season, his first since Jan. 4 against Carolina. The Wild snapped a three-game losing streak.

Hurricanes 2, Flames 1 (OT): Sebastian Aho's fifth overtime goal of the season came 3:16 into the extra session as Carolina defeated visiting Calgary.

Jacob Slavin also scored for

the Hurricanes and Pyotr Kochetkov made 15 saves.

Stars 6, Blues 3: Wyatt Johnston scored three times to help host Dallas beat St. Louis and win for the fifth time in six games.

Jake Oettinger made a season-high 39 saves for his 29th win, tied for second in the NHL.

Rangers 4, Predators 0: Artemi Panarin, J.T. Miller, K'Andre Miller and Brett Berard scored and Jonathan Quick made 35 saves as New York defeated visiting Nashville.

Mika Zibanejad added two assists as the Rangers won for the sixth time in nine games. The Predators lost their second straight and fell to 6-20-4 on the road, keeping them tied with league-worst San Jose for fewest road wins.

Cavs top Blazers in OT for 10th straight win

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — De'Andre Hunter scored 32 points and made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 30 seconds left in overtime as the Cleveland Cavaliers rallied for a 133-129 win over the Portland Trail Blazers on Sunday to extend their winning streak to 10 and become the first NBA team with 50 victories this season.

The Cavaliers were down 18 in the third quarter before fighting back to win for the 14th time in 15 games. They did it without All-Star guard Donovan Mitchell, who got some planned rest.

Ty Jerome added 25 points and Evan Mobley 20 for Cleveland, which was coming off an emotional win Friday at Boston during which it erased a 22-point deficit.

The Trail Blazers' Deni Avdija had 30 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his first career triple-double. Anfernee Simons added 27 points.

The teams were called for a combined 53 fouls and shot 70 free throws — 35 apiece — in a game that never found any flow. Upset with an inordinate number of personals called during the game, Cavs guard Ty Jerome didn't hold back in criticizing the officiating crew — zeroing in on referee Natalie Sago.

"I thought the refs were really bad tonight, especially Natalie (Sago), she was really bad," Jerome said. "Stuff like that happens. They kind of lose control of the game, and you just got to keep your head. I thought that first half was ridiculous. Third quarter was horrendous.

"You just got to keep your head and keep playing."

Celtics 110, Nuggets 103: Jaylen Brown scored 22 points and Derek White hit a floater from the foul line with less than a minute left on Sunday to help host Boston recover after blowing most of a 20-point, first-half lead to beat Denver.

Jayson Tatum scored 16

points with 11 rebounds and White scored 17 for the Celtics, who have not lost three games in a row all season.

Nikola Jokic had 20 points, 14 rebounds and nine assists for the Nuggets. Jamal Murray scored 13 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, and Christian Braun scored 24 for Denver, which has lost three of its last five games.

One game after blowing a 22-point lead and losing to the NBA-best Cleveland Cavaliers, Boston coughed up most of a 20-point lead against the Nuggets, the No. 2 team in the West. Denver, which trailed 59-39 in the final minutes of the first half, scored 10 straight points near the end of the third to cut a 15-point lead to five.

Thunder 146, Spurs 132: Jalen Williams had a career-high 41 points, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 31 and Oklahoma City beat San Antonio, spoiling the Spurs' homecoming following a momentous road trip.

The Thunder won their third straight and moved a game behind Cleveland for the NBA's top record.

Rookie guard Stephon Castle had 32 points to lead the Spurs, who have lost five of six.

During its month-long excursion from the Frost Bank Center, San Antonio acquired De'Aaron Fox, lost All-Star center Victor Wembanyama for the season to a blood clot in his shoulder and Gregg Popovich announced he will not return as head coach this season.

Timberwolves 116, Suns 98: Anthony Edwards scored 44 points, Julius Randle added 20 in his first game since missing more than a month with an injury and visiting Minnesota beat Phoenix.

Edwards scored 17 points in the third quarter as the Timberwolves took control, turning a two-point halftime deficit into a 83-72 lead heading into the fourth. Minnesota never trailed

in the final quarter, winning for just the third time in the past nine games.

Donte DiVincenzo scored 24 points on eight 3-pointers. Randle was in the lineup for the first time since Jan. 30 after missing 13 games with a right groin strain.

The sliding Suns have lost 11 of their last 14. Kevin Durant led the team with 26 points and said after the game that the team "embarrassed ourselves the way we played."

Pelicans 128, Jazz 121: Kelly Olynyk scored a season-high 26 points and had nine rebounds and visiting New Orleans used a 15-0 fourth-quarter run to defeat Utah.

CJ McCollum added 25 points and eight assists, Zion Williamson had 24 points and nine assists and Trey Murphy III scored 20 points to help the Pelicans win their fifth straight over the Jazz.

Keyonte George led Utah with 28 points and Brice Sensabaugh added 21. Oscar Tshiebwwe had his first career double-double with 16 points and 13 rebounds. The Jazz had won the five previous meetings with New Orleans in Salt Lake City.

Utah took its first lead when Cody Williams made a 3-pointer to open the fourth quarter. His basket highlighted a 27-8 run that put the Jazz up 100-94. Tshiebwwe led the surge with five baskets. But New Orleans overtook Utah again, going up 118-108 with 4:02 left after McCollum fueled a 15-0 run with three straight 3-pointers.

Pacers 127, Bulls 112: Aaron Nesmith scored a career-high 27 points, Pascal Siakam added 20 and host Indiana defeated Chicago.

Nesmith, a fifth-year guard who returned in January after missing 30 games with an ankle injury, shot 6-for-11 from 3-point range. Three of those came in the third quarter, when he scored 13 points.

Tyrese Haliburton had his fifth consecutive double-double for the Pacers with 17 points and 12 assists. Indiana, which outscored the Bulls 32-20 in the final quarter, had all five starters score in double digits.

Coby White led Chicago with 26 points, including 20 in the first half. Josh Giddey and Matas Buzelis each had 18.

Knicks 116, Heat 112 (OT): Jalen Brunson scored 31 points and visiting New York overcame a 19-point deficit to beat Miami in overtime.

OG Anunoby added 23 points and Karl Anthony Towns had 19 points and 16 rebounds for the Knicks. They have won three straight.

Brunson's 3-pointer with 2:27 remaining in overtime put New York ahead for good at 111-110 and began a 7-0 spurt.

Raptors 104, Magic 102: Immanuel Quickley scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half and visiting Toronto held on to beat Orlando.

Franz Wagner missed a driving layup for the Magic in the final second, enabling the Raptors to win after going without a score in the final 2:52. A backcourt turnover had given the ball back to Orlando with 4.7 seconds left.

RJ Barrett added 22 points for Toronto and Jakob Poeltl had 16 points and 11 rebounds.

Lakers 108, Clippers 102: Luka Doncic had 29 points and nine assists, LeBron James added 17 points and the host Lakers hung on to beat the Clippers for the second time in three days.

Rookie Dalton Knecht scored 19 points for the Lakers, who won their sixth straight game despite playing without injured starters Austin Reaves and Rui Hachimura. The Lakers have won 16 of 19 overall.

Kawhi Leonard scored a season-high 33 points for the Clippers, who erased most of a late 21-point deficit before falling short in their fifth loss in six games.

TCU women complete turnaround with title

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Those “Underfrogs” from TCU, a team that won only one conference game two seasons ago and last year needed open tryouts to fill roster spots after a series of injuries, are now outright women’s Big 12 champions.

The title-clinching game couldn’t have been more fitting for the 10th-ranked Horned Frogs, a 51-48 win Sunday night at 13-time champion and No. 17 Baylor.

“Baylor’s been the powerhouse, the juggernaut in our league for a long time,” second-year TCU coach Mark Campbell said. “So to beat them in this environment for this kind of game, it just shows you that our program’s arrived at the highest level in college basketball. ... This win carries a lot of significance for many reasons.”

The Frogs (28-3, 16-2 Big 12), who are in their 13th Big 12 season, won a regular-season title for the first time since the

Mountain West in 2010.

Sedona Prince had 16 points and 19 rebounds for her 13th double-double this season and Hailey Van Lith scored 14 points as TCU beat the Bears (25-6, 15-3) again, five weeks after an 80-75 win at home that was their first win over their in-state rival in 35 years.

The Frogs were off to a 14-0 start in Campbell’s debut last season when Prince broke her finger in the opening seconds of a 71-50 loss in the team’s last game at Baylor.

Within a couple of weeks after that, with top shooter Madison Conner also hurt, TCU was down to six scholarship players and forfeited two games the week they were having tryouts on campus.

“That was kind of the start of really the downfall of our season last year. And it was so heart-breaking, and it started here. You know, that bus ride from Waco back to Fort Worth was really, really rough,” said

Prince, this time wearing a Big 12 championship T-shirt.

“Coming in here, we’ve worked, built our team back up, recovered and got some new amazing pieces in,” she said. “It’s really, really cool that, you know, it happened to be here, last conference game of the season. Yeah, it’s just very, very special.”

This 90-mile trip home time was much more enjoyable, with something to celebrate before opening Big 12 tournament play in the quarterfinal round in Kansas City on Friday. After that, the Frogs will get to open the women’s NCAA Tournament on their home floor, where they are 19-0 this season.

The regular-season finale, not only for the two teams but the Big 12 overall, was the first winner-take-all game in the league’s 29 seasons.

“There have been so many times postgame when I get to come in here and, oh, it’s the first time we’ve done this and it’s the

first time we’ve done that,” Campbell said. “Well, this tops all of them. To win a league title for TCU and to bring that trophy home, it’s a little surreal.”

The Frogs will make their 10th NCAA Tournament appearance, the first since their last conference title 15 years ago. They have never gotten past the second round.

TCU takes a seven-game winning streak into the postseason, and already with the most wins in school history. Along with two wins over the Bears, the Frogs this season beat Atlantic Coast Conference co-champions No. 3 Notre Dame and No. 9 NC State.

“Obviously we worked so hard this whole season for this moment,” Conner said. “Not only for this moment, for March and this year, so this is just a start. But yeah, we definitely celebrate a little bit. But in the back of our mind, we know we have to move on to the whoever have in the (Big 12) tournament.”

No. 8 Michigan St. tops Wisconsin for 5th straight win

Associated Press

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Jaden Akins scored 19 points and Jaxon Kohler had 10 points and a career-high 16 rebounds to lead No. 8 Michigan State to a 71-62 win over No. 11 Wisconsin on Sunday.

The Spartans (24-5, 15-3 Big Ten) have won five straight, putting them in position to contend for the conference championship with a week left in the regular season.

The Badgers (22-7, 12-6) had won six of seven.

Michigan State freshman Jase Richardson overcame foul trouble in the first half to finish with 11 points, six assists and five rebounds.

Wisconsin’s John Blackwell had 19 points and John Tonje scored 11 in a starting lineup that was without injured guard

Max Klesmit.

The Badgers led by nine points early in the game and were ahead 34-32 at halftime. Richardson’s all-around game helped the Spartans take control early in the second half.

Illinois 93, No. 15 Michigan 73: Tre White had 19 points and 11 rebounds to lead the visiting Illini to a rout of the Wolverines.

Kylan Boswell and Kasparas Jakucionis each scored 17 points for Illinois (19-11, 11-8 Big Ten), which has beaten Michigan (22-7, 14-4) nine straight times.

The Illini struggled to make shots throughout, but 19 offensive rebounds led to 30 second-chance points.

Vladislav Golden had 22 points on 11-of-15 shooting for the Wolverines, who lost for the second time in four games.

Michigan’s other four starters scored 28 points on 11-of-29 shooting.

Illinois scored 31 points in the first half, but reached that total in the second half on Jake Davis’ 3-pointer with 9:51 left. That gave the Illini a 62-50 lead and they made it a 17-point lead on a 3 by Jakucionis with 8:41 remaining.

Another 3 by Jakucionis made it 75-55 with 6:20 to go, and the Wolverines didn’t have an answer.

No. 18 Memphis 88, UAB 81: PJ Haggerty scored 17 of his 25 points in the final 12 minutes to help the visiting Tigers rally from an 11-point deficit to beat the Blazers and inch closer to the American Athletic Conference regular-season title.

Colby Rogers hit five 3-pointers and finished with 21 points

for Memphis (24-5, 14-2) and Dain Dainja had 16 points and a career-high 17 rebounds. Tyrese Hunter added 13 points.

Rogers hit a 3 to make it 48-47 almost three minutes into the second half and give the Tigers their first lead since 6-5.

Ja’Borri McGhee led UAB (19-10, 12-4) with 22 points and Christian Coleman added 14 points and nine rebounds. Bradley Ezewiro scored 12 points and Yaxel Lendeborg had 10.

Memphis will clinch at least a share of the AAC title if Wichita State beat North Texas on Monday.

The Tigers lead the series known as the Battle for the Bones 42-12, including 14-11 in Birmingham. Three of those wins, including one in Birmingham, were officially vacated by Memphis later.