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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Hegseth orders review of standards

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Wednesday ordered a "rapid" services-wide review of existing standards for physical fitness, body composition and grooming, according to a Pentagon news release.

In a memo, Hegseth directed the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness to gather the existing standards. Darin Selnick is performing those duties.

While described as "rapid," the memo does not provide a timeline for the review.

"We must remain vigilant in maintaining the standards that enable the men and women of our military to protect the American people and our homeland as the world's most

lethal and effective fighting force," Hegseth wrote in the release.

"This review will illuminate how the Department has maintained the level of standards required over the recent past and the trajectory of any change in those standards," he said.

The review of grooming standards will also include the wearing of beards, according to the memo.

The Army, Air Force and Navy all offer shaving waivers to service members diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae that allow them to forgo shaving. The condition, which manifests in painful razor bumps, disproportionately affects Black men.

Hegseth has long been a critic of physical fitness standards

in the armed forces, in particular saying that the inclusion of women in combat has led to lowered standards.

The ban on women serving in combat roles was lifted in 2013 by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, and women were fully integrated into those roles by 2016.

The review will look at how standards have changed since Jan. 1, 2015.

"The review will also provide insight on why those standards changed and the impact of those changes," the memo states.

Hegseth wrote in his most recent book, "The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free," published last year, that women are not fit for combat because

they "cannot physically meet the same standards as men."

During a Feb. 7 town hall meeting at the Pentagon, Hegseth described soldiers as "standard bearers."

"What are the standards?" he said. "I mean, and it starts with the basic stuff, right? It's grooming standards and uniform standards and training standards, fitness standards."

Hegseth compared lax standards to the broken windows theory of policing, in which unpunished small misdemeanors embolden greater lawbreaking.

"[I]f you violate the small stuff, and you allow it to happen, the big stuff, it creates a culture where big stuff you're not held accountable for," he said. "I think the same thing exists inside our services."

Senior service leaders warn of stopgap challenges

BY SVETLANA

SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senior service leaders said Wednesday that they will be significantly challenged by a stopgap spending bill that the Senate plans to vote on this week to fund the government through Sept. 30 and avoid a shutdown.

The bill includes a \$6 billion increase for the military but largely keeps the same spending levels as last year because lawmakers could not agree on appropriations for fiscal 2025, which began Oct. 1.

The resulting temporary funding extension, known as a continuing resolution, will force the military services to operate with substantially less money

than they expected, causing disruptions in programs and modernization efforts, according to service leaders.

"The Navy will need to make hard choices this year if we are operating under a full-year continuing resolution," Adm. James Kilby, vice chief of naval operations, said in testimony before a subpanel of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

He said he expects to see slowed progress in shipbuilding, getting new weapons and equipment to modernize the Navy's fleet and maintaining the service's momentum in recruiting. The maintenance schedules for 11 ships are also at risk, he said.

Gen. James Mingus, vice chief of staff of the Army, said

the service will be impacted but "the degree and the severity is unknown" because the Defense Department has never had to operate under a continuing resolution that spanned an entire fiscal year.

The House narrowly passed the yearlong continuing resolution Tuesday and then adjourned for the remainder of the week, leaving the Senate with the option of passing the same legislation or facing a government shutdown at midnight Friday.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., blasted the House on Wednesday for "skipping town on a Tuesday" and forcing senators to accept either a "half-assed" funding measure that will harm the military or a "catastrophic" shut-

down.

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he could not vote for the stopgap funding bill as it is if Republicans were not also working on separate legislation to beef up defense spending.

Senate Republicans hope to infuse an additional \$150 billion into the military through a major spending and cost-cutting package targeting President Donald Trump's domestic agenda this year.

Wicker last year advocated for increasing the 2025 defense budget by \$25 billion. He expressed frustration Wednesday that the military would see just a \$6 billion increase.

Shipbuilding focus helps as US chases China

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The creation of the White House's shipbuilding office could help get Navy shipbuilding on track, but the U.S. won't catch up to China dominating the industry without a multidecade whole-of-government and commercial sector approach, according to a defense analyst.

"I do believe that presidential-level attention is what is needed to make it happen," said Cynthia Cook, defense analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank based in Washington. "That said, there's a lot of other things in the industrial base we are going to need."

President Donald Trump announced last week during his national address to Congress that he would create a White House shipbuilding office. The office, he said, will aim to "resurrect the American shipbuilding industry." Trump said the U.S. once had a great domestic shipbuilding industry, which is greatly diminished now. That will change, he promised.

"We used to make so many ships. We don't make them anymore, very much," Trump said. "But we're going to make them very fast, very soon."

More than a week after Trump's announcement, the White House was unable to provide details on the function of the office. Naval Sea Systems Command — the service's shipbuilding management arm — and the office of the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition referred all questions about shipbuilding to the White House.

Without yet knowing what the office will do, Cook said the office would be most effective if it focused its efforts on simplifying the requirement process for procuring and designing new Navy ships, as well as look at how U.S. policies might be hindering shipbuilding efforts.

"The idea of becoming competitive in shipbuilding — it can happen, but that would be really expensive," she said. "Notionally, the U.S. government could completely subsidize shipbuilding and let other nations buy ships for less than cost, but just the idea of building up that capacity capability — expanding the supply base and all the tactical challenges along the way — make it seem really hard."

The Navy, which relies on contracted private shipbuilding companies, has come under fire in recent years for its shipbuilding

struggles. The sea service planned to have a battle force of 313 ships by 2025. But in its fiscal 2025 plan, the Navy said it will have 287 ships by 2025. Meanwhile, China, considered America's top military competitor, is rapidly growing its fleet and is on pace to reach a 425-ship fleet by 2030.

The Navy's shipbuilding has been plagued with construction delays exacerbated by a workforce shortage and supply chain issues. From 2019 to 2023, the Navy planned for the delivery of 11 new Virginia-class submarines and 15 new Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. Only four of those submarines and seven of the destroyers were delivered. Additionally, a federal watchdog report found 37 out of 45 — or 82% — of ships now under construction are facing delays ranging from five months to more than three years.

"When we think about shipbuilding, as in any defense manufacturing endeavor, it's not just the ships that will need to surge production. It's also every level of the supply chain," Cook said.

To achieve this, she said, there needs to be more cooperation between the government and commercial sector, as well as allied nations and their commercial

shipbuilding industries.

Shelby Oakley, the Government Accountability Office's director of contracting and national security acquisitions teams, said Tuesday that a major shortcoming of the Navy is the service does not heed lessons from the commercial sector.

"The Navy's budget and acquisition processes don't use the successful approaches of commercial companies that our work has found can be thoughtfully applied to Navy shipbuilding programs," Oakley said during a hearing before a subpanel of the House Armed Services Committee.

The Constellation-class frigate program, Oakley said, is a prime example. The frigate program is at a standstill while the Navy and shipbuilder determine how to build the ship. The program is at least three years behind schedule because the Navy has changed the design of the ship throughout the construction process. Having a completed design before beginning construction is a leading practice of commercial shipbuilding, according to Oakley.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., said in response that the Navy should "let go" of exquisite vessel designs to "follow what the commercial industry is doing so that we can speed things up."

Report: China's naval growth may be aided by foreign firms

The Washington Post

A single Chinese state-owned shipbuilder produced more commercial vessels by tonnage in 2014 than the entire U.S. industry has since World War II, according to a report that underscores how China has come to dominate the sector.

Foreign companies may be inadvertently fueling the expansion of the Chinese navy, according to the report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, posing a security threat

to the United States and its allies.

President Donald Trump has Chinese ship manufacturing in his crosshairs — he has proposed charging Chinese-built vessels up to \$1.5 million to dock at any U.S. port — as part of his pledge to resurrect shipbuilding.

China's emergence as a shipbuilding giant began in the 2000s with aggressive state support.

The industry has become even more important under Chi-

nese leader Xi Jinping, who aims to turn his country into a maritime power to rival the U.S. The Chinese navy is now the world's largest, overtaking the U.S. Navy in number of warships.

The China State Shipbuilding Corporation is at the center of those ambitions.

The state-owned firm is a major defense contractor that supplies the Chinese military but also has commercial operations. But in China, the line between

the CSSC's commercial and military operations is blurred as part of Xi's strategy to leverage the private sector to boost the military.

The report found that over 75% of ships produced at the CSSC shipyards with the closest ties to the military were destined for foreign firms, including those in countries with close relationships with the United States, such as Denmark, France, Greece, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.

Senate Democrats fight GOP funding bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A day before a shutdown deadline, Senate Democrats are mounting a last-ditch protest over a Republican-led government funding bill that already passed the House but failed to slap any limits on President Donald Trump and billionaire Elon Musk's efforts to gut federal operations.

Senate Democrats are under intense pressure to do whatever they can to stop the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency, which is taking a wrecking ball to long-established government agencies by purging thousands of federal workers from jobs.

Democrats are pushing a 30-day funding bill as an alternative. But its prospects are dim in

the Congress controlled by Republicans. And it's unlikely the Democrats would allow a government shutdown, worried about the further chaos they have said Trump and Musk could cause.

As the Senate opened Thursday, with one day to go before Friday's midnight deadline, Senate Majority Leader John Thune said: "It's time for Democrats to fish or cut bait."

Debates over funding the federal government routinely erupt in deadline moments, but this year it's showing the political leverage of Republicans, newly in majority control of the White House and Congress, and the shortcomings of Democrats who are finding themselves unable to stop the Trump administration's

march across federal operations.

In a rare turn of events, House Republicans stuck together to pass their bill, many conservatives cheering the DOGE cuts, leaving Democrats sidelined as they stood opposed. The House then left town, sending it to the Senate for passage.

Options for Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer are limited, especially as the party is wary of fully withholding their votes and being blamed for a full shutdown of services.

Schumer announced that Democrats were unified in pressing for a 30-day stopgap measure as an alternative to the House passed bill, which would instead fund operations through the end of the budget year in September.

With his party united, Schumer said the Republicans, who hold a 53-47 majority, lack the support needed to reach the 60-vote threshold, which is required to overcome a filibuster.

But Republicans have shown little interest in the offer.

What is more likely is that senators will have a chance to vote on the Democrats' stopgap measure, but if it fails as expected, the Senate would then turn to the broader bill for passage, hours before the deadline.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent sought to shift attention from Trump's tariff tit-for-tat tariff war to a looming federal government shutdown.

"I can tell you what's not good for the economy is this government shutdown," Bessent said.

House CR includes \$1.5B for unrequested warship

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — The continuing resolution the House passed Tuesday would add more than \$1.5 billion to start building a warship the Navy did not request and that experts suggested the shipbuilder may have trouble constructing on time and on budget.

The fiscal 2025 stopgap measure, which the Senate must clear by March 14 to avoid a government shutdown, would provide \$892.5 billion for defense. That is \$6 billion more for defense than was appropriated in fiscal 2024, a growth rate of less than 1% and not enough to outrun inflation.

Despite the funding constraints, members would add the sizable tranche of funds for the third, unrequested Arleigh Burke class destroyer, a warship that is built in states represented by senior defense lawmakers, in addition to proposing funding for the two Arleigh Burke ships that were requested.

Three destroyers are not listed in any one year in the service's future purchasing projections, and in some of those years the Navy plans to buy only one. Nor was the third vessel included in the Chief of Naval Operation's list of "unfunded priorities" for fiscal 2025 that the service wants but that did not make it into the formal proposal.

The Arleigh Burke destroyers bristle with missiles, long-range guns, torpedoes, anti-missile interceptors and highly capable radars.

The ships are built in Maine and Mississippi, the home states of Senate Appropriations Chair Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Senate Armed Services Chair Roger Wicker, R-Miss. The chair of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, Republican Trent Kelly, also hails from Mississippi. The shipyards in those states are among the largest employers in their regions.

Trump flies migrants left in Gitmo back to US

The Washington Post

The Trump administration has removed the migrants who were still being held at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station and flown them to the United States, a Defense Department official said Wednesday.

The 40 men have been transported to Louisiana, where there is a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Alexandria. It comes just two weeks after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security sent another group of 48 migrants back to the same city from Guantanamo.

It is unclear why DHS routed the group of migrants back to the U.S. after the costly flights to the military base on Cuba. The agency did not immediately respond to a request about the latest transfer. The defense official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing operations.

Both of the transfers back were on ICE Air, a less expen-

sive option compared to the 17 military flights that have transported migrants to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, since the Trump administration's migrant operation began more than a month ago. A nonmilitary flight departed Guantanamo on Tuesday afternoon, according to flight trackers.

Nearly 300 migrants have been detained in Guantanamo since President Donald Trump took office and quickly ordered the U.S. government to begin holding detainees at the naval station as part of its plan to carry out the largest number of deportations in U.S. history.

On Friday, a D.C. federal court will hear arguments for two lawsuits by civil rights organizations against the Trump administration's Guantanamo migrant operation: A lawsuit over the lack of legal access to migrants at the base and another that requests to block the transfer of 10 migrants detained in the U.S. to Guantanamo.

Putin signals support for ceasefire deal

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday that he agrees in principle with a U.S. proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in Ukraine, but the terms need to be worked out, and he emphasized that it should pave the way to lasting peace.

"The idea itself is correct, and we certainly support it," Putin told a news conference in Moscow. "But there are issues that we need to discuss, and I think that we need to talk about it with our American colleagues and partners and, perhaps, have a call with President Trump and discuss it with him."

President Donald Trump said there have been "good signals" coming out of Russia and offered guarded optimism about Putin's statement.

Putin noted the need to develop a mechanism to control possible breaches of the truce. Another issue, he said, is whether Ukraine could use the 30-day ceasefire to rearm.

Putin made the remarks just hours after the arrival of Trump's envoy in Moscow for talks on the 30-day ceasefire that Ukraine has accepted.

The diplomatic effort coincided with a Russian claim that its troops have driven the Ukrainian army out of a key town in Russia's Kursk border region, where Moscow has been trying for seven months to dislodge Ukrainian troops from their foothold.

Putin said it appeared that the U.S. persuaded Ukraine to accept a ceasefire and that Ukraine is interested because of the battlefield situation, particularly in Kursk.

Putin thanked Trump "for paying so much attention to the settlement in Ukraine."

He also thanked the leaders of China, India, Brazil and South Africa for their "noble mission to end the fighting," a statement that signaled those countries' potential involvement in a ceasefire deal.

Russia has said it will not accept peacekeepers from any NATO members to monitor a prospective truce. A Kremlin adviser said Putin planned to meet with Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, later Thursday.

The Russian Defense Ministry's claim that it recaptured the town of Sudzha, a Ukrainian operational hub in Kursk, came hours after Putin visited his commanders in Kursk. The claim could not be independently verified. Ukrai-

nian officials made no immediate comment.

The renewed Russian military push and Putin's high-profile visit to his troops unfolded as Trump seeks a diplomatic end to the war, which began more than three years ago with Russia's full-scale invasion.

The U.S. on Tuesday lifted its March 3 suspension of military aid for Kyiv after senior U.S. and Ukrainian officials reported making progress on how to stop the fighting during talks in Saudi Arabia.

Trump said Wednesday that "it's up to Russia now" as his administration presses Moscow to agree to the ceasefire. The U.S. president has made veiled threats to hit Russia with new sanctions if it does not engage with peace efforts.

Trump threatens a 200% tariff on European wine

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Thursday threatened a 200% tariff on European wine, champagne and spirits if the European Union goes forward with a planned tariff on American whiskey.

The European tariff, which was unveiled in response to steel and aluminum tariffs by the U.S. administration, was expected to go into effect on April 1.

But Trump, in a morning social media post, vowed a new

escalation in his trade war if the EU pushes ahead with the planned 50% tariff on American whiskey.

"If this Tariff is not removed immediately, the U.S. will shortly place a 200% Tariff on all WINES, CHAMPAGNES, & ALCOHOLIC PRODUCTS COMING OUT OF FRANCE AND OTHER E.U. REPRESENTED COUNTRIES," Trump wrote. "This will be great for the Wine and Champagne businesses in the U.S."

The Republican president on

Wednesday had signaled that he intended to take the action.

"Of course I will respond," Trump told reporters during an Oval Office exchange.

Trump, in announcing new tariffs, openly challenged U.S. allies and vowed to take back wealth "stolen" by other countries, and he drew quick retaliation.

He has separate tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China, with plans to also tax imports from the European Union, Brazil and South Korea by charg-

ing "reciprocal" rates starting on April 2.

The EU announced its own countermeasures. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the United States was "applying tariffs worth 28 billion dollars, we are responding with countermeasures worth 26 billion euros," or about \$28 billion.

Those measures cover not just steel and aluminum products but also textiles, home appliances and agricultural goods.

White House withdraws CDC director nomination

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House has withdrawn the nomination of Dr. David Weldon, a former Florida congressman, to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Senate health committee announced Thursday morning that it was canceling a planned

hearing on Weldon's nomination because of the withdrawal.

A person familiar with the matter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said the White House pulled the nomination because it became clear Weldon did not have the votes for confirmation.

Weldon was considered to be

closely aligned with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the U.S. health secretary who for years has been one of the nation's leading anti-vaccine activists.

A former Florida congressman, Weldon also has been a prominent critic of vaccines and the CDC, which promotes vaccines and monitors their safety.

Weldon becomes the third Trump administration nominee who didn't make it to a confirmation hearing. Previously, former U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz withdrew from consideration for attorney general and Chad Chronister withdrew from consideration for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Records say passenger attacked flight attendant

GA SAVANNAH — Court records say a passenger on a small regional flight to Miami attacked a flight attendant, kicked and punched the seat of the person in front of him and swallowed rosary beads as pilots returned to the airport in Savannah, Ga.

The passenger was traveling with his sister, who said her brother told her before the violent outburst to “close her eyes and pray because Satan’s disciple(s) had followed them onto the plane,” according to an FBI agent’s affidavit.

No one was seriously hurt on the flight operated by Envoy Air. The 31-year-old passenger was jailed on charges including misdemeanor battery, misdemeanor obstruction of police and a felony count of criminal property damage. FBI Agent Savannah Solomon described the episode in her affidavit.

Pharmacist sentenced in health care fraud case

TX DALLAS — A Texas pharmacist was sentenced to prison for a scheme to defraud the federal government out of millions of dollars for skin creams.

Dehshid “David” Nourian was sentenced last month to 17½ years in prison for health care fraud, money laundering and defrauding the U.S. government. The court also ordered Nourian, 62, to pay \$115 million in restitution and forfeit more than \$400 million in assets.

Nourian, of Plano, has appealed the ruling, court documents show.

Federal prosecutors said Nourian and partners paid doctors millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks to prescribe expensive and unnecessary compounded creams for pain and scars from 2014 to 2017. Doctors referred the prescriptions to a handful of pharmacies operated by Nourian and his partners.

Bill seeks to make being transgender a felony

TX AUSTIN — A Republican representative in Texas has introduced a bill that would make being transgender a felony in the state.

The bill, authored by state Rep. Tom Oliverson, creates a new crime of “gender identity fraud” punishable by up to two years in state prison and a \$10,000 fine. It has not picked up any official support or co-sponsors in the Texas statehouse since it was filed on March 5.

Oliverson’s bill would make it a crime to “knowingly (make) a false or misleading verbal or written statement to a governmental entity or (a) person’s employer by identifying the person’s biological sex as the opposite of the biological sex assigned to the person at birth.”

Court: Nonresident gun laws legal after changes

MA BOSTON — The state’s highest court has issued a pair of decisions regarding the rights of nonresidents to carry firearms through the Bay State, finding that, while some of the commonwealth’s old licensing rules were in fact unconstitutional, changes made to the law in the wake of a major 2022 Supreme

Court decisions pass the legal sniff test.

The decisions issued by the Supreme Judicial Court — Commonwealth v. Dean F. Donnell Jr. and Commonwealth v. Philip J. Marquis — both deal with charges levied against non-resident gun owners found to be unlawfully in possession of firearms after police responded to a car crash scene in Massachusetts, and the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen on the state’s relevant gun laws.

According to the court, a charge of unlawful possession of a firearm filed in the Donnell case failed to meet constitutional scrutiny because the underlying law allowed the Colonel of the Massachusetts State Police too much discretion on who could and could not possess a firearm.

Woman pleads guilty in cross-burning hoax

CO DENVER — A woman who was part of a group charged with setting a cross on fire in front of a defaced campaign sign for a candidate who became Colorado Springs’ first Black mayor pleaded guilty on Tuesday in what authorities say was a hoax.

Deanna West, one of three people indicted in the 2023 incident, pleaded guilty in Denver federal court to one count of being part of a conspiracy to set the fire and then spread false information about it in the run-up to the election of Mayor Yemi Mobolade. In exchange, prosecutors said they would drop an additional charge.

Prosecutors said that after

staging the cross burning, a photo and video of it were sent to media and civic organizations making it seem like an attack on Mobolade. According to the plea agreement, the conspiracy’s goal was to interfere in the campaign of Mobolade’s opponent and create the belief that Mobolade was being discouraged from running because of his race.

Woman pleads not guilty in historic abortion case

LA BATON ROUGE — A Louisiana woman pleaded not guilty Tuesday to a felony, after allegedly getting abortion pills from a New York doctor and giving them to her teenage daughter to terminate a pregnancy.

The woman’s arraignment is part of a cross-state legal battle that involves what may be the first instance of criminal charges against a doctor accused of sending abortion pills to another state, putting Louisiana’s near-total abortion ban in tension with New York’s shield laws.

In January, a West Baton Rouge grand jury unanimously issued an indictment against the 39-year-old Louisiana woman for criminal abortion by means of abortion-inducing drugs, which is a felony. The woman has not been publicly identified by The Associated Press to protect the identity of the minor. The indictment came months after the state became the first to reclassify mifepristone and misoprostol — a two-drug regimen that can be used to end pregnancies through the 10th week — as “controlled dangerous substances.”

—From wire reports

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Thunder top Celtics for playoff spot

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Oklahoma City Thunder clinched a spot in the playoffs, and they did it against the team they could face when the NBA postseason reaches its peak.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 34 and Chet Holmgren added 23 points and 15 rebounds to lead the Thunder to a 118-112 victory over the Boston Celtics on Wednesday night in a much-anticipated potential NBA Finals matchup.

"We're in March, not June," Oklahoma City coach Mark Daigneault said after the Thunder swept the two-game season series against the defending champions. "So we're focused on March."

The Thunder also beat the Celtics in Oklahoma City on Jan. 5 in a game that Holmgren missed with an injury.

If they meet again this season, it would have to be in the NBA Finals.

"They've achieved what we're trying to accomplish, and there's no better test than that in the NBA," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "Playing against them is always fun, it's always a really good challenge, and something that we could test ourselves against. I guess we passed the test so far."

The Thunder were the second NBA team to clinch a playoff berth this season; Cleveland, which is one win better, earned its spot on Friday. Last year, OKC clinched a spot in the postseason on March 31.

"It means we got better than we were last year. Ultimately, that's all you can ask for," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "You put the work in, put the time in ... we took steps in the right direction. We got better and we, I guess checked a goal off the list a little bit earlier than last year, and we have a lot more to do."

Boston, which rode its 3-point shooting to an unprecedented 18th NBA championship last

season, set a franchise record with 63 3-point attempts Wednesday. It tied the most ever for an NBA team in a regulation game.

"Every game's a test," said Daigneault, whose team was coming off a split in back-to-backs against 2023 NBA champion Denver. "We can't choose the opponent, but when you play against elevated teams like this — especially on the road — it's a real opportunity to improve. And so we take these games seriously."

"We want to see what we have. We want to see what we can learn. We won tonight; we can learn from that. We lost the other night; we can learn from that," he said. "But, yeah, we have to squeeze all the juice out of all these games that we can."

Jayson Tatum scored 33 points for the Celtics, including a 3-point play at the end of the third quarter that erased the remnants of a 12-point Thunder lead and tied the game 88-all. Boston went 3-for-14 from 3-point range from there, while Gilgeous-Alexander and Cason Wallace scored eight points apiece in the fourth quarter.

"Obviously, there's always added juice to the game playing the defending champions. I think anybody would say that," Holmgren said. "But at the end of the day, it's one of 82. Win or lose, we're going to try to learn from it, come back next game and try to be better."

Timberwolves 115, Nuggets 95: Anthony Edwards scored 29 points, Julius Randle added 25 and visiting Minnesota extended its winning streak to six games by routing Denver.

Rudy Gobert finished with 11 points and 10 rebounds for the Timberwolves, who improved to 3-0 against the Nuggets this season. The last game between these two Northwest Division foes is April 1 in Denver.

Donte DiVincenzo had 10 points as Minnesota's bench outscored Denver's reserves by

a 26-14 margin.

Nikola Jokic led the Nuggets with 34 points and eight rebounds. He and the rest of Denver's starters were taken out with 5:05 remaining and Minnesota up 109-84.

Knicks 114, Trail Blazers 113 (OT):

Mikal Bridges hit a 25-foot 3-pointer at the buzzer to give visiting New York an overtime win over Portland.

Bridges finished with 33 points and AG Anunoby had 23 as New York won its second in a row and improved to 2-2 on its five-game West Coast trip with one game remaining.

Scoot Henderson led Portland with 30 points, while Deni Avdija had 27 points — including a three-point play with three seconds left in overtime to give the Trail Blazers a brief 113-111 lead — but Portland lost its fifth in a row. Avdija also had 15 rebounds.

Karl-Anthony Towns shot 8-for-12 from the field, including two 3-pointers late in regulation, to finish with 21 points for the Knicks.

Clippers 119, Heat 104:

Bogdan Bogdanovic scored a season-high 30 points and Ivica Zubac added 26 points and 14 rebounds, helping visiting Los Angeles beat Miami.

James Harden had 24 points, 11 assists and eight rebounds for the Clippers, who won for the fourth time in five games and pulled within 1½ games of idle Golden State for the No. 6 — and last guaranteed — playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Tyler Herro scored 31 points and Andrew Wiggins added 22 for the Heat, who fell 2½ games behind Atlanta in the race for the No. 7 spot and most advantageous play-in position in the Eastern Conference.

Rockets 111, Suns 104: Jaalen Green had 29 points to lead host Houston to a victory over Phoenix in a game where Houston's Steven Adams and Phoenix's Mason Plumlee were ejected for fighting.

Alperen Sengun scored 20 points and Dillon Brooks added 19 to help the Rockets extend their winning streak to four.

Bradley Beal's two free throws got the Suns within eight with about 9½ minutes to go before Houston used a 9-2 run to make it 99-84 with about seven minutes remaining.

Grizzlies 122, Jazz 115:

Luke Kennard scored 30 points and Ja Morant had 28, helping host Memphis top Utah.

Kennard went 7-for-9 from 3-point range, and Morant was 4 for 7 from deep. Desmond Bane added 17 points as Memphis posted its fourth straight win.

Utah lost its seventh consecutive game.

Spurs 126, Mavericks 116:

De'Aaron Fox had 32 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds and host San Antonio snapped a three-game skid, beating injury-depleted Dallas.

Dallas (33-34) remained 10th in the Western Conference, holding the final spot for the play-in tournament by 2½ games over Phoenix.

Fox was 12-for-25 from the field in his highest-scoring game since joining San Antonio in a trade with Sacramento on Feb. 5.

Raptors 118, 76ers 105:

AJ Lawson scored 28 points, Jared Rhoden set career highs with 25 points and 12 rebounds and host Toronto beat Philadelphia in a matchup of short-handed teams.

Orlando Robinson scored a career-high 25 points and matched his career high with 12 rebounds to help the Raptors win for the fifth time in six games.

Hawks 123, Hornets 110:

Trae Young made all of his 21 free throws and scored 35 points to lead host Atlanta to its fourth straight victory, over Charlotte.

Young added 12 assists on a poor shooting night from the field. He was 7-for-20 and missed all five of his 3-point attempts.

Ex-Super Bowl MVPs Kupp, Rodgers released

Associated Press

The NFL league year kicked off Wednesday with two former Super Bowl MVPs hitting the open market.

The Los Angeles Rams cut receiver Cooper Kupp just days after signing Davante Adams to be his replacement and the New York Jets released quarterback Aaron Rodgers following a failed two-year stint.

The Rams cut Kupp after being unable to find a trade partner for the 2021 AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year. He announced last month that Los Angeles was trying to trade him despite his desire to remain with the team. But with him being owed \$20 million this upcoming season, no other team was willing to make a trade.

Kupp won the receiving triple crown and Super Bowl MVP in the 2021 season when he caught 145 passes for 1,947 yards and 16 touchdowns. He added 33 catches for 478 yards and six TDs in the postseason, including the game-winning touchdown in a Super Bowl win over the Bengals on the Rams' home field.

But Kupp's production tailed off in the past three seasons. He hasn't played more than 12 games in any season during that stretch because of injuries and hasn't had 900 yards receiving in any season.

The Jets told Rodgers last month that they are going in a different direction at quarterback for 2025 and agreed to a deal with Justin Fields earlier in the week. They made his release official early Thursday.

A handful of teams could still be in search of a starting quarterback, including the New York Giants, Pittsburgh Steelers and possibly Minnesota if the Vikings aren't ready to turn the offense over to 2024 first-round pick J.J. McCarthy.

The Jets acquired Rodgers in a trade from Green Bay in April

2023 in hopes of winning a Super Bowl for the first time since after the 1968 season.

The four-time MVP's first season in New York ended just four snaps into his debut because of a torn left Achilles tendon that sank the Jets' Super Bowl hopes that were stirred by the QB's arrival.

Rodgers worked his way back to the field to start every game this past season, but he and the offense struggled with consistency and results as New York finished 5-12. He threw for 28 touchdowns and 3,897 yards but lacked some mobility in his return from the injury.

The Jets also released linebacker C.J. Mosley.

Other deals:

■ Veteran quarterback Mason Rudolph reached an agreement to return to Pittsburgh on a two-year deal, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press.

The signing gives the Steelers at least one experienced quarterback on the roster after the Steelers declined to bring back Fields. Russell Wilson, who started Pittsburgh's last 12 games in 2024, is meeting with other teams this week.

Rudolph spent the first five seasons of his career with the Steelers, who drafted him in the third round of the 2019 draft. He went 8-4-1 in 13 starts in his first go-round with Pittsburgh, including a 3-0 run to end the 2023 season in which he helped lead the Steelers to the playoffs.

■ Safety Damar Hamlin is returning to Buffalo, and the Bills also continued restocking their defensive front by agreeing to sign tackle Larry Ogunjobi. Buffalo announced reaching an agreement to sign Hamlin to a one-year contract. A person with knowledge of the deal, meantime, confirmed Ogunjobi agreed to a one-year contract that includes \$8 million guaranteed.

■ Six-time Pro Bowl corner-

back Darius Slay is heading to the other side of Pennsylvania. The veteran cornerback, who won a Super Bowl with the Philadelphia Eagles last month, is signing a one-year deal with Pittsburgh, a person with knowledge of the agreement said.

■ Seattle filled two big holes by agreeing to a one-year deal worth up to \$5.5 million with speedy receiver Marquez Valdes-Scantling and a three-year, \$42 million contract with former Dallas Cowboys pass rusher DeMarcus Lawrence. The Seahawks were in dire need of adding receivers after releasing Tyler Lockett in a cost-cutting move last week and agreeing to a trade to send D.K. Metcalf to Pittsburgh. Seattle also needed help on the defensive front after releasing Dre'Mont Jones and Roy Robertson-Harris last week.

■ Minnesota made another major move on interior redesign, agreeing to terms with two-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman Javon Hargrave on a two-year, \$30 million contract with \$19 million guaranteed, according to agent Drew Rosenhaus. The agreement followed Hargrave's release by the San Francisco 49ers. He played in only three games for them in 2024 before suffering a torn triceps muscle that required surgery.

■ The Cleveland Browns and defensive tackle Maliek Collins agreed on a two-year, \$20 million contract that includes \$13 million fully guaranteed, Rosenhaus told the AP. Collins started 17 games for the 49ers after spending his first eight seasons with Dallas, Houston and Las Vegas. Collins, who turns 30 next month, has 30½ sacks, including five last season.

■ Tight end Evan Engram and the Denver Broncos agreed on a two-year, \$23 million contract, a person with knowledge of the deal told the

AP. Engram's deal includes \$16.5 million guaranteed.

■ Guard Kevin Zeitler and the Tennessee Titans agreed on a one-year, \$9 million contract, a person with knowledge of the deal said on condition of anonymity because the team hasn't announced the move.

■ Detroit and run-stuffing defensive tackle Roy Lopez agreed to a \$4.65 million, one-year contract, according to a person familiar with the deal said on condition of anonymity because the agreement had not been announced. Lopez gives the Lions' defense another tackle with four years of experience, joining veterans Alim McNeill and DJ Reader, to bolster a line that was hit hard by injuries last season.

■ Quarterback Mac Jones will finally join San Francisco four years after the team nearly drafted him third overall. Jones agreed to a two-year deal worth \$7 million with \$5 million guaranteed to join the Niners, a person familiar with the deal said.

■ Washington retained veteran quarterback Marcus Mariota to back up Jayden Daniels. The Commanders agreed to re-sign Mariota on Wednesday, according to a person familiar with the deal.

Trading places

The Cowboys made two trades on Wednesday. Dallas acquired linebacker Kenneth Murray Jr. from Tennessee. The Cowboys are also getting a seventh-round draft pick this year while sending a sixth-round to the Titans.

Dallas also acquired cornerback Kaiir Elam from Buffalo, adding depth to a position with some questions as the Bills decided to move on from their 2022 first-round draft pick. The Bills acquired two draft picks — a 2025 fifth-round selection and a 2026 seventh-rounder — while giving up a 2025 sixth-round choice to the Cowboys.

Montana earns 1st NCAA bid in 6 years

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Kai Johnson scored six of his 23 points late to help No. 2 seed Montana pull away and beat top-seeded Northern Colorado 91-83 in the Big Sky Championship title game on Wednesday night.

The Grizzlies lead by as many as 14 points early in the second half, but the Bears later used an 18-9 surge to pull within 74-73 with 3:35 remaining. Johnson answered with a three-point play and a 3-pointer to stretch Montana's lead to 80-73 with 2:24 left. Northern Colorado got within five points twice but didn't get closer.

The Grizzlies (25-9), who have won 14 of their last 15 games, collected their first NCAA Tournament bid since 2019 and its 12th overall to extend their conference record. Montana also won its 51st Big Sky Tournament game, surpassing Weber State for the most in league history.

Brandon Whitney added 18 points for the Grizzlies, who

shot 65% (30-for-46) overall and 24-for-28 (86%) from the free-throw line. Joe Pridgen chipped in with 17 points and Malik Moore had 15.

Jaron Rillie scored 24 points and had six assists to lead the Bears (25-9). Langston Reynolds added 18 points, Brock Wisne had 15 and Isaiah Hawthorne had 14.

Montana took the lead for good midway through the first half and led 48-39 at the break. Moore scored seven points during an 11-6 spurt to give Montana a 59-45 advantage with 16:22 to play.

Patriot League

American 74, Navy 52: At Washington, Matt Rogers scored 25 points and second-seeded Eagles defeated the Midshipmen.

American (22-12) has made three previous trips to the NCAA Tournament, the last in 2014.

Geoff Sprouse, Rogers and Colin Smalls all made 3-point-

ers as the Eagles pushed their lead to 56-38 with 12 minutes left. The lead reached 20 on a tip-in by Rogers with about four minutes left and his 3-pointer with two minutes remaining made it 72-48.

Smalls finished with 11 points. Sprouse made 3 of 4 3-pointers and scored nine points off the bench. He had three assists.

Austin Benigni had 18 points and Donovan Draper had 11 points and 12 rebounds for Navy. It was the fourth double-double and ninth double-digit rebound game of the season for Draper.

American led all the way and shot 55% in the first half, including 6-for-13 from the 3-point line. The Eagles led 37-28 at halftime. It was 20-15 before Sprouse's 3-pointer kick-started an extended 13-6 run that gave American a 33-21 lead with three minutes left in the half.

The fifth-seeded Midshipmen, who defeated No. 1-seed Bucknell 83-77 in the semifinals, finish the season at 15-19 overall.

Southland

McNeese 63, Lamar 54: At Lake Charles, La., Quadir Copeland scored 18 points and Cowboys defeated the Cardinals in a cold-shooting, defensive battle, giving McNeese back-to-back championships.

The top-seeded Cowboys (27-6) will make their fourth appearance in the Tournament.

McNeese led wire-to-wire. The lead was 31-22 with two minutes remaining in the first half before 3-pointers by second-seeded Lamar's Andrew Holifield and Alexis Marmolejos sparked an 8-2 run. The Cowboys led 33-30 at halftime.

The defensive battle continued as McNeese went 5-for-15 and the Cardinals 5-for-23 in the first 12½ minutes of the second half. The Cowboys led 47-41 at the under-8 timeout.

Christian Shumate's dunk with three minutes remaining gave McNeese a 53-46 lead, and it finished with a series of 10 made free throws.

Garland gets winner as Canucks beat Flames in SO

Associated Press

CALGARY, Alberta — Elias Pettersson tied it with 6:44 left and scored in the first round of a shootout, Conor Garland added the winner in the fourth round and the Vancouver Canucks beat the Calgary Flames 4-3 on Wednesday night.

Pius Suter and Jake DeBrusk also scored for Vancouver, and Kevin Lankinen stopped 20 shots. Playing their lone road game in an eight-game stretch, the Canucks rebounded from consecutive home losses — the last a 4-2 setback against Montreal on Tuesday night.

Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice for Calgary in a 2:03 span late in the second period and had the Flames' lone shootout score — in the third round. Na-

zem Kadri also scored, and Dustin Wolf made 28 saves.

Red Wings 7, Sabres 3: Patrick Kane had two goals and three assists as host Detroit snapped a six-game losing streak with a win over Buffalo.

Marco Kasper scored twice, and Moritz Seider, Vladimir Tarasenko and Alex DeBrincat also scored for the Red Wings. DeBrincat and Dylan Larkin added three assists each.

Petr Mrazek made 23 saves in his first start back with Detroit after being acquired from Chicago on Friday. He was selected by the Wings in the fifth round of the 2010 draft and played with the team for more than five seasons.

Josh Norris scored his first goal since being traded to the

Sabres on Friday. Zach Benson and Tage Thompson also scored. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 22 shots.

Utah 3, Ducks 2: Dylan Guenther broke a tie on a power play at 7:03 of the third period as host Utah beat Anaheim.

Guenther beat goalie Ville Husso with a one-timer from the left side off a feed from defenseman Mikhail Sergachev. Guenther has a career-high 24 goals this season.

Jack McBain and Alexander Kerfoot also scored to help Utah move within two points of the second wild card in the Western Conference. Karel Vejmelka made 19 saves.

Alex Killorn and Mason McTavish scored for the Ducks, and Husso stopped 36 shots.

Kraken 5, Canadiens 4 (OT):

Brandon Mountour had the fastest goal in NHL overtime history, scoring his second goal of the game four seconds into overtime to give host Seattle a comeback victory over Montreal.

Chandler Stephenson won the faceoff, with the puck going to Mountour. He streaked in on goalie Jakub Dobes and beat him with a shot to the upper-right corner. The goal matches the fastest to start any period in NHL history.

The Kraken overcame a two-goal deficit to tie it in the third period. Jani Nyman, making his NHL debut, scored on a power play with 9:07 left, and Matty Beniers tipped in a hard shot by Vince Dunn on a power play with 2:12 left to tie it at 4.