

MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2025

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US sharpening recon skills in Baltics

BY PHILLIP WALTER

WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

CAMP REEDO, Estonia — Staff Sgt. Abel Silva trudged through the morning snow with a large rip down the left leg of his pants. He was tired, hungry and only about 20 miles from the Russian border.

Silva and a dozen or so other U.S. soldiers from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division arrived in southeastern Estonia by helicopter the night before, rushing into a forest under a full moon to begin reconnaissance work.

Wind created by the helicopter rotor whirled up snow on the ground, creating a disorienting whiteout. In the forest, snowfall hid uneven terrain, and the depths of ditches were difficult to detect, the soldiers said.

"It was exhausting, and it was challenging, but that comes with every mission that we do," Silva said. "If it's not difficult, then we're doing something wrong."

In the latest in a series of training exercises, Silva and his fellow soldiers are confronting the realities of defending one of NATO's most vulnerable members, whose capital of Tallinn is a short distance by sea and land from Russia.

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump is scheduled to talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin as the United States seeks a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine that would be expected to include territorial concessions by Kyiv.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have strongly supported Ukraine since the 2022 Russian invasion, spurred by fears that a Russian victory could embolden Moscow elsewhere. The Baltic nations all were annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II and gained independence in 1991.

If Russia were to target the Baltics, those nations would rely on NATO's collective defense agreement.

Trump and others in his administration have often criticized the NATO alliance and particularly members who spend relatively little on defense.

But the Baltic nations are well above the alliance's spending benchmark and have vowed to increase their shares to at least 5% of gross domestic product, as Trump has called for.

Last month, Trump told reporters the U.S. is "going to be very committed" to the Baltics.

The ongoing U.S. exercises in Estonia are being executed by the 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade, the Army's most modernized reconnaissance squadron.

The emergency deployment exercise that began Friday played out in the dense forest adjacent to the recently constructed Camp Reed, where most of 5th Squadron operates.

The troops brought in by helicopter are from the smaller contingent of 5th Squadron sol-

diers based in Lithuania, near the border with Belarus.

They had 18 hours to study maps, pack their equipment and make all other preparations. The moment they got out, it became clear that planning is no substitute for experience.

"We had a lot of slips and falls with the terrain," Staff Sgt. Santiago Cueto said. "Obviously, there were some issues with the execution that we'll work on, but I'm glad they were highlighted and brought to our attention."

Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur in an interview this month described his country as a bulwark that prevents Russia from expanding further westward, with help from its allies.

"It has always been one of the top priorities to have U.S. forces here in Estonia because we all understand that troops on the ground is something which Russia takes very seriously," Pevkur said.

Navy destroyer deploys to southern border mission

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy destroyer has deployed to the Gulf of America on a mission usually reserved for the U.S. Coast Guard to help deter illegal crossings and drug trafficking as part the military's efforts to bolster security along the southern border.

The USS Gravely, a guided-missile destroyer, left from Naval Weapons Station Yorktown in Virginia on Saturday as part of the Defense Department's response to President Donald

Trump's executive order calling for a secure southern border. The deployment will support an operation being developed by U.S. Northern Command, a Navy official said Monday.

"We are currently building that [consolidated plan] now in coordination with NORTHCOM," Adm. Daryl Caudle, commander of U.S. Fleet Forces, told reporters. "The Navy is contributing substantially to that — greatly — really this being our first dedicated deployment for that."

The Gravely's deployment marks the latest example of the Trump administration using the U.S. military to fend off what Trump has described as an "invasion" at the border.

The Gravely will cruise the gulf predominantly under NORTHCOM's control, though the destroyer could venture into the U.S. Southern Command region, Caudle said. NORTHCOM's area of responsibility includes the continental U.S., Canada, Mexico, and surrounding waters out to approximately 500 nautical miles, while

SOUTHCOM's region encompasses Latin America south of Mexico, adjacent waters and the Caribbean Sea.

The Gravely's exact tasking, Caudle said, might be intelligence gathering initially but could expand. The ship will have a Coast Guard law enforcement team onboard.

"Those missions could blend a bit as we are focused on stopping transnational criminal trafficking activities and working with the Coast Guard to support them fully for homeland defense," Caudle said.

FAA closes helo route near DC airport

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Helicopters will be permanently restricted from flying near Washington, D.C.'s airport on the same route where a passenger jet and an Army helicopter collided in midair, killing 67 people, the Federal Aviation Administration said Friday.

The move comes just days after federal investigators looking into the cause of the crash recommended a ban on some helicopter flights, saying a string of near misses in recent years showed that the current setup

"poses an intolerable risk."

The FAA, which manages the nation's airspace and oversees aviation safety, has come under criticism after the National Transportation Safety Board said there had been an alarming number of near misses in recent years in the congested skies around Ronald Reagan National Airport.

The closure of the helicopter route near the airport makes permanent the restrictions put in place after Jan. 29 midair collision. The FAA order will allow a few exceptions for helicopter

use, including presidential flights along with law enforcement and lifesaving missions.

The FAA also said it is studying cities with airports where there are a high number of different types of aircraft sharing the same space, including eight metro areas with busy helicopter routes: Boston, New York, Baltimore-Washington, Detroit, Chicago, Dallas, Houston and Los Angeles.

It also is looking at offshore helicopter operations along the Gulf Coast. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said last week

that the FAA will use artificial intelligence to analyze data to look for similar danger areas.

But first Duffy vowed to adopt the NTSB's recommendations for reducing airspace congestion near Reagan National and stop helicopters from "threading the needle" by flying under landing planes.

The Army supports the FAA's efforts to improve aviation safety around the nation's capital and will use "alternative routes to mitigate impacts on training and readiness," spokesman Matt Ahearn said Friday.

Military entrance exam testing back at full capacity

BY ZADE VADNAIS

Stars and Stripes

Sites across the United States that administer the military's entrance exam have reopened following a shutdown that resulted from broad restrictions on federal civilian worker travel.

The U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command, which oversees Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery testing

for the Defense Department, has resumed sending civilian proctors to testing sites, command spokesman Marshall Smith said.

Most locations reopened Friday and the remainder restarted testing as of Monday, Smith said. Testing for high schoolers also resumed Friday.

The command announced March 7 that it had reduced hours at or closed some of its 161

testing sites and suspended testing at certain high schools, but it didn't specify how many testing sites or high schools were affected.

The disruption in ASVAB testing followed a Pentagon policy restricting civilian travel that is not mission-essential.

Although the military stations recruiters across the country, department regulations prevent

them from administering the ASVAB in the communities they serve.

The test must be given by Military Entrance Processing Command personnel, about 80% of whom are civilians, Smith said.

It remains unclear how the reversal came about; however, the Pentagon does have latitude in determining what it deems essential.

Hiring freeze impacts mental health support office

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — A federal hiring freeze ordered in January by President Donald Trump is affecting an office that provides mental health support to airmen and their families at this airlift hub in western Tokyo.

Yokota's Integrated Resilience Office has paused hiring for one position while another employee is preparing to depart, director Julie Wilbanks said Thursday after a town hall meeting for civilian workers at the base's Friendship

Chapel.

Every U.S. military base is required to have a resilience office to oversee programs aimed at preventing suicide, sexual assault, child abuse and domestic violence, Wilbanks' supervisor, Gloria Bryant, said by phone Monday.

The freeze is affecting people trying to move or leave jobs on installations throughout Japan, said Bryant, chief of the five-person office.

"The hiring freeze is an issue, not only for resilience offices, but throughout the Department of Defense," she

said. "Any time there is a stop in the flow, that impacts how our teams work together."

Trump's Jan. 20 order required each executive agency to draft a plan within 90 days to trim its workforce, after which the hiring freeze may expire, except for the IRS.

However, the proposed job cuts — targeting tens of thousands of positions in the Departments of Education and Veterans Affairs, among others — are part of Trump's broader plan to restructure the federal workforce.

The commander of Yokota's

374th Airlift Wing, Col. Richard McElhaney, addressed about 200 people at last week's town hall regarding concerns over Trump's executive orders affecting federal employees.

Stars and Stripes was barred from reporting on what was said during the gathering.

"I requested a forum with Yokota Air Base civilian employees to synchronize information on all the policy updates that affect the civilian workforce," McElhaney said in comments provided Friday by base spokeswoman Capt. Emma Quirk.

US deports hundreds despite judge's order

Associated Press

The Trump administration has transferred hundreds of immigrants to El Salvador even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring the deportations under an 18th century wartime declaration targeting Venezuelan gang members, officials said Sunday. Flights were in the air at the time of the ruling.

U.S. District Judge James E. Boasberg issued an order Saturday temporarily blocking the deportations, but lawyers told him there were already two planes with immigrants in the air—one headed for El Salvador, the other for Honduras. Boasberg verbally ordered the planes be turned around, but they apparently were not and he did not include the directive in his written order.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, in a statement Sunday, responded to specula-

tion about whether the administration was flouting court orders: "The administration did not 'refuse to comply' with a court order. The order, which had no lawful basis, was issued after terrorist TdA aliens had already been removed from U.S. territory."

The acronym refers to the Tren de Aragua gang, which Trump targeted in his unusual proclamation that was released Saturday.

In a court filing Sunday, the Department of Justice, which has appealed Boasberg's decision, said it would not use the Trump proclamation he blocked for further deportations if his decision is not overturned.

Trump sidestepped a question over whether his administration violated a court order while speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday evening.

"I don't know. You have to speak to the lawyers about that," he said, although he defended the deportations. "I can tell you this. These were bad people."

Asked about invoking presidential powers used in times of war, Trump said, "This is a time of war," describing the influx of criminal migrants as "an invasion."

Trump's allies were gleeful over the results.

"Oopsie ... Too late," Salvadorean President Nayib Bukele, who agreed to house about 300 immigrants for a year at a cost of \$6 million in his country's prisons, wrote on the social media site X above an article about Boasberg's ruling. That post was recirculated by White House communications director Steven Cheung.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who negotiated an earlier

deal with Bukele to house immigrants, posted on the site: "We sent over 250 alien enemy members of Tren de Aragua which El Salvador has agreed to hold in their very good jails at a fair price that will also save our taxpayer dollars."

Steve Vladeck, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, said that Boasberg's verbal directive to turn around the planes was not technically part of his final order but that the Trump administration clearly violated the "spirit" of it.

"This just incentivizes future courts to be hyper specific in their orders and not give the government any wiggle room," Vladeck said.

The immigrants were deported after Trump's declaration of the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which has been used only three times in U.S. history.

Survivors pick through ruins after monster storm in US

The Washington Post

The inclement weather was supposed to pass around midnight late Friday, so Christopher Mattox figured his trailer home in Poplar Bluff, Mo., was safe. When his wife, Dolores, asked whether he was worried, he recalled responding: "No, baby, I sleep real good when it storms."

Lounging in his flannel pajamas and sipping a Pepsi, Mattox flicked on the news. Then came the sound of hail pounding his roof. Suddenly, the three-bedroom mobile home shook, and Mattox gripped his mattress. Mirrors and his TV were flung across the room as the home tipped a few inches off its base.

"It felt like I was literally on a carpet ride," Mattox, 68, told *The Washington Post*.

When the tornado passed a few seconds later, Mattox's home was destroyed. He shined a flashlight through a shattered window to make out dismantled mobile

home parts littering his neighborhood's gravel. Mattox heard his neighbors calling for help, but he could barely move himself.

A flurry of questions swirled in his mind: Where am I going to live? What am I going to do next? How do I move on from losing everything?

Survivors have been asking similar questions in more than a half-dozen states after a monster storm system spawned tornadoes that pulverized homes, dust storms that caused freeway pileups, and fires that scorched hundreds of structures over the weekend. At least 40 people have been killed. The storms were caused by two strong low-pressure systems—one that tracked across the Plains on Friday and another in the Deep South on Saturday. The systems drew unseasonably warm and humid air from the Gulf of America, causing high levels of atmospheric instability, which is thunderstorm fuel.

His stated goal is clear: to revive American manufacturing and win compromises along the way. But people and nations whose fortunes rise and fall on trade are trying to divine a method to his machinations. So far, he's spurred fears about slower growth and higher inflation that are dragging down the stock market and consumer confidence.

Trump's zigzagging on tariffs, trade gives many whiplash

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A gobsmacked planet is wondering what's next from President Donald Trump on the tariff spree he's set in zigzag motion.

In recent weeks, Trump has announced punishing tariffs against allies and adversaries alike, selectively paused and imposed them, doubled and then halved some and warned late last week that he'll tax European wine and spirits a stratospheric 200% if the European Union doesn't drop a 50% tariff on U.S. whiskey.

His stated goal is clear: to revive American manufacturing and win compromises along the way. But people and nations whose fortunes rise and fall on trade are trying to divine a method to his machinations. So far, he's spurred fears about slower growth and higher inflation that are dragging down the stock market and consumer confidence.

"His tariff policy is erratic, more erratic than April weather," Robert Halver, head of capital markets analysis at Germany's Baader Bank, said from the floor of the Frankfurt stock market. "So, there is no planning certainty at all."

The same goes for Exit 9 Wine & Liquor Warehouse in Clifton Park, N.Y., where owner Mark O'Callaghan is waiting to see if the prohibitive taxes on European wine (over a third of his business) happen. He's mindful of Trump's seemingly whack-a-mole approach on which countries and goods to hit and how hard.

"It changes by the hour now, right?" O'Callaghan said. "You know, it's hard to navigate and manage, and everything changes so quickly."

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly said: "If the U.S. can do this to us, their closest friend, then nobody is safe."

Russia: Putin planning to talk to Trump

Bloomberg News

The Kremlin confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is due to speak to President Donald Trump on Tuesday amid the U.S. push for a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine.

“Such a conversation is being prepared for Tuesday,” Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov told reporters Monday, according to the Interfax news service. He declined to comment further on the planned discussions.

Trump had first announced the call to reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday, saying there was “a very good chance” for a deal.

“We are doing pretty well I think with Russia,” he said. “We’ll see if we have something to announce maybe by Tuesday.”

The United States is pressing for Russia to agree to a 30-day ceasefire that Ukraine has said it’s ready to accept.

While Putin has said Russia is willing to consider a truce in principle, he has insisted on a number of conditions before he’ll commit to any halt to the invasion he started three years ago.

The date of the planned call is loaded with symbolism for Putin, who has declared March 18 as the annual day of Russia’s “reunification” with Crimea to mark the 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Black Sea peninsula.

At a concert on Red Square last year marking the 10th anniversary of the seizure, Putin told Russians “the same is true” for areas of eastern Ukraine that Russia has occupied since

he ordered the 2022 full-scale invasion.

The Russian leader is also due to speak to Trump a year after he celebrated getting 87% of the vote for a fifth term in a March 17 election that was tightly controlled by the Kremlin.

This would be the second phone call between Trump and Putin.

The first, on Feb. 12, was followed days later by a meeting between top U.S. and Russian officials in Saudi Arabia at which they agreed to revive diplomatic ties.

Russian and U.S. officials held further talks in Istanbul last month.

U.S. envoy Steven Witkoff met with Putin in Moscow last week, though he didn’t disclose

what they discussed. It was the second time they had held talks.

Ukraine accepted U.S. proposals for a 30-day truce at talks between the two sides in the Saudi city of Jeddah last week.

The flurry of engagement between Washington and Moscow has made European leaders worried that Trump may concede too much on Ukraine’s behalf in a direct exchange with Putin.

Putin has deflected efforts to stop the fighting as his forces make incremental battlefield gains, including pushing Ukrainian forces back from most of the parts of Russia’s Kursk region that Ukraine seized in a surprise offensive last year.

Trump said much of the planned Tuesday call will be about territory.

Club fire leaves North Macedonia grieving

Associated Press

KOCANI, North Macedonia — As families gathered outside a hospital for updates, Tomco Stojanov had already been given the devastating news. His 25-year-old son, Andrej, had been killed Sunday in a nightclub fire that left dozens dead, many trampled during a desperate bid to escape.

“Thank you for your condolences, but my pain is incurable. The wound is incurable,” Stojanov said, holding up a photograph of his son. “He died while returning and entering to save other people.”

North Macedonia is grappling with the loss of dozens of young lives in Sunday’s nightclub inferno in the eastern town of Kocani, while trying to hold those responsible to account and prevent another calamity.

Fire tore through the over-crowded Club Pulse during a live concert, leaving 59 people

dead and more than 150 injured from burns, smoke inhalation and being trampled in the panicked escape toward the building’s single exit.

Videos showed sparkling pyrotechnics on the stage hitting the club’s ceiling and igniting the blaze as a band played.

The fire that shook the nation of 2 million was the latest in a string of deadly nightclub fires around the world.

People as young as 16 were among the casualties, and the nation declared seven days of mourning.

Authorities said they are investigating allegations of bribery surrounding the nightclub that was crammed with young revelers and at double capacity. And North Macedonia’s government ordered a sweeping three-day inspection to be carried out at all nightclubs and cabarets across the country, starting Monday.

Iran rejects Trump on nuclear talks attempt

The Washington Post

Days after a letter from President Donald Trump reached Iran’s supreme leader, giving him a choice between negotiating a deal to end Iran’s nuclear program or U.S. military action to destroy it, the two sides remain far apart on the conditions that would allow such a conversation, let alone an agreement.

“All options are on the table,” White House national security adviser Michael Waltz said Sunday on ABC’s “This Week.” If Iran doesn’t “hand over … the missiles, the weaponization, the enrichment” of nuclear materials, “they can face a whole series of other consequences.”

Waltz’s remarks followed a massive U.S. strike Saturday on Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen, who last week vowed to resume their attacks on maritime traffic in the Red Sea. If Tehran doesn’t end its support for them “IMMEDIATELY,”

Trump said in a social media post, “America will hold you fully accountable and, we won’t be nice about it.”

Iran quickly responded in kind. “If threatened, Iran will give appropriate and crushing responses,” said Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iran’s foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, in a Sunday post on X, wrote, “The United States government has no authority, or business, dictating Iranian foreign policy. That era ended in 1979,” the year of the Islamic revolution that began with the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

In response to the Yemen strikes, the Houthis claimed Sunday to have fired 18 ballistic and cruise missiles and a drone at the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, located with its escort ships in the Red Sea.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Prosecutor won't charge cop in mom, infant death

MO INDEPENDENCE — A prosecutor has declined to file criminal charges against a Missouri police officer who shot and killed a woman and her infant child last year.

Independence police officers had responded to a reported assault in November at an apartment building. They were figuring out how to arrest the woman, who was nonverbal and communicating with nods and gestures, when she grabbed a butcher knife from a bedside table and moved toward the officers while holding the child, Jackson County Prosecutor Melesa Johnson's office said.

One officer backed away, but the other was against a closet and couldn't escape, Johnson's office said. He fired four shots as the woman moved toward him with the knife, the office said. The shots struck and killed the woman and her child, identified by KCUR news as Maria Pike, 34, and her 3-month-old daughter, Destinii.

Johnson's office said the officer's use of deadly force "falls within the protection of the law."

Man sentenced for sneaking turtles to China

CA LOS ANGELES — The packages in a California mail facility were labeled as almonds and chocolate cookies. But inside were dozens of turtles wrapped in socks to keep them from moving and alerting authorities.

They were among around 2,100 turtles federal authorities said Sai Keung Tin, a Chinese

citizen, had trafficked over more than five years as part of what the U.S. Department of Justice called the illegal Asian pet trade. Tin pleaded guilty in December to four counts of exporting merchandise contrary to federal law.

In downtown Los Angeles, U.S. District Judge Josephine Staton sentenced Tin to nearly three years in prison for his role in smuggling the protected turtles out of the country.

The eastern box turtles, known for the vivid yellow-orange markings on their shells, were bound from the East Coast for Hong Kong and were intercepted in Torrance, prompting the case to be prosecuted in California. Department of Justice attorneys said the native North American species is coveted by a rising middle class and are worth at least \$2,000 each on the black market.

Racer credits sled dogs for first Iditarod win

AK JUNEAU — Bunched-up well-wishers lined a street along the Bering Sea coastline in the early morning darkness, cheering musher Jessie Holmes as he won Alaska's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

Holmes pumped his fist as he ran alongside his sled with a headlamp beaming from his forehead, as he and his 10-dog team finished the 1,128-mile race across the Alaska wilderness in the Gold Rush town of Nome. The distance for this year's running was the longest in the Iditarod's 53-year history.

He said his win felt "magical" and he gave credit — and hugs — to his dogs, whom he described as family.

Holmes said he bred the 10 dogs that took him to victory, adding that he had held each of them in his hands as puppies.

"I'm really proud of these dogs and I love them. And they did it. They deserve all the credit," he said.

Governor criticizes Trump's FBI HQ plan

MD BALTIMORE — Maryland Gov. Wes Moore is no fan of President Donald Trump's plan to build the new FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., instead of in his state.

In a social media post, Moore touted the 61-acre site promised to Greenbelt in 2023 as "build ready" and criticized Trump for "turning this into a partisan issue." According to a Moore statement from 2023, the Greenbelt FBI headquarters would bring "more than 7,500 jobs" to Maryland.

In justifying his D.C. headquarters plan, Trump called Maryland a "liberal state" and suggested a Washington location would allow the FBI to be closer to the Department of Justice and other federal law enforcement agencies. He said FBI Director Kash Patel advised him the agency could use a former Department of Commerce building in the nation's capital as its headquarters.

State proposes teaching election 'discrepancies'

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — Teachers in Oklahoma would be instructed to have high school students "identify discrepancies in 2020 election results" under new academic standards for social studies approved by the state

education board.

The standards, which were obtained by the Oklahoma journalism not-for-profit NonDoc and published in full last week, must be approved by the Oklahoma legislature.

They stipulate that students should review information relating to the election, including "the sudden halting of ballot-counting in select cities in key battleground states, the security risks of mail-in balloting, sudden batch dumps, an unforeseen record number of voters, and the unprecedented contradiction of 'bellwether county' trends."

Lawmaker introduces bill to clarify abortion limits

TX AUSTIN — A Texas lawmaker who helped pioneer the state's restrictive abortion laws introduced a bill on Friday to clarify medical exceptions allowed under the law, representing a pivot from Republican legislators who have defended the state's abortion ban in the face of lawsuits and medical scrutiny.

The bill, introduced by Republican state Sen. Bryan Hughes, still requires that patients have a medical emergency for a physician to perform an abortion but strikes language that it be a life-threatening condition. The bill would also require doctors and lawyers to receive training about the law.

Texas law currently prohibits abortions except when a pregnant patient has a life-threatening condition. Doctors who are convicted of providing an illegal abortion can face up to 99 years in prison, a \$100,000 fine and the loss of their medical license.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

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Auburn, UNC picks highlight men's bracket

Associated Press

A sleepy Selection Sunday this was not.

North Carolina barely slid into this year's version of March Madness, a development that led its athletic director to remind everyone that he had nothing to do with that choice even though he's the head of the group that sets the bracket.

Texas also made it in — barely — giving the Southeastern Conference a record 14 teams in the tournament, including overall top seed Auburn. The Tigers received higher billing than Duke even though they've lost three of their last four games.

And coach Rick Pitino's reward for leading St. John's back to prominence: a journey back to where his coaching career took off with his first Final Four — Providence, R.I. — and a juicy potential second-round matchup against another coaching firebrand, John Calipari of Arkansas.

"There were," Tar Heels AD Bubba Cunningham said, "a number of challenges" in putting together a bracket that hoops fans can only hope provides as many thrills on the court as it did during the 60-minute bracket show.

Auburn beat out the Blue Devils to receive top billing in the tournament despite those three losses over the past two weeks, and despite also dropping a game to Duke back in December.

"We've got to get our mojo back a little bit," Tigers coach Bruce Pearl said.

No. 1 seed Florida, which captured the SEC tournament by winning three games with an average margin of 15 points, opens as a slight favorite to win it all at the Final Four in San Antonio on April 5 and 7, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

Clearly, one deciding factor in choosing Auburn over the Blue Devils was the Tigers' schedule, which was second-toughest in the country, largely on the strength of playing a conference that put so many teams in the field.

"The SEC had such an outstanding year, winning 88% of their nonconference games," Cunningham explained.

Houston was the remaining top seed and could face a second-round matchup against No. 8 Gonzaga, making its 26th straight trip to the tournament.

On a more "normal" Selection Sunday, the Longhorns making

the field with 15 losses might have been the biggest talking point.

Instead, it was North Carolina's inclusion that drew the most attention.

CBS analyst Seth Davis acknowledged it right away when he opened his interview with Cunningham by wondering "whether North Carolina may have gotten a little bit of an advantage with its AD as the chair."

Cunningham's vice-chair, Keith Gill, who, in an unusual move, was also brought in for the interview, insisted it had not.

"As vice-chair, I managed all the conversations we had about North Carolina, and we had quite a few," Gill said. He confirmed that Cunningham was not allowed to participate in any vote about his own school.

The Tar Heels were the last team in, based not on their 1-12 record against Quad 1 teams, but on their 8-0 mark against Quad 2, along with other favorable metrics, Gill said.

"You take all those things in consideration, and the committee felt they should earn that last spot," Gill said.

Both North Carolina (vs. San Diego State) and Texas (vs. Xavier) are playing in the First

Four, which kicks off the action Tuesday. The tournament gets into full swing Thursday and Friday with 32 games at eight sites around the country.

Elsewhere in the bracket, Pitino leads his unprecedented sixth program into the tournament, and what a road he would have to take to get back to the Final Four.

First, he will travel to Providence, the same building where the coach led the Friars to a surprise Final Four trip back in 1987, to lead second-seeded St. John's in a first-round game against Omaha. Pitino's second game could come against the Razorbacks and Calipari in what would be a titanic matchup between two of the game's biggest coaching names. Calipari's first game in Providence is against none other than Bill Self and seventh-seeded Kansas.

Another coaching icon, Tom Izzo, leads Michigan State to its 27th straight tournament. The Spartans are seeded second and will face America East champion Bryant in its opener.

There's also UConn, seeking the sport's first threepeat since the early '70s but seeded eighth with a potential second-round game against Florida next weekend.

Berry races to first NASCAR Cup Series victory

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Josh Berry spent much of his career content as a journeyman racer who would probably never make it beyond the local short-track scene.

When he got a break in NASCAR — Hall of Famer Dale Earnhardt Jr. has believed in Berry for years — he made the most of it by winning five Xfinity Series races for JR Motorsports. That led to a shot in the Cup Series, then a full-time job last year with Stewart-Haas Racing.

But when SHR decided to shutter at the end of last season, Berry was dumped into the free agent market and immediately grabbed by Wood Brothers Racing. In his fifth race with his new team, Berry scored the first Cup Series victory of his career by

taking NASCAR's oldest team to victory lane Sunday at Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

"I'm just thankful to be in the situation I am driving fast race cars," Berry said. "With my experience on the short tracks, you think that's where you're going to win. But if I've learned anything in this sport it is that you never know when it's going to be your day."

Berry, driving the famed No. 21, had the first victory for a Ford team through five races this season. William Byron opened the year with a Daytona 500 victory in a Chevrolet and Christopher Bell in a Toyota won the next three races.

Berry, meanwhile, had to run down Daniel Suarez following a restart with 19 laps remaining to take control. Although Harrison Burton won at Daytona last summer for

the Wood Brothers, Berry's victory is the first not at a superspeedway since Ryan Blaney won for the team in 2017 at Pocono.

"This one was legit," team president Jon Wood said. "You know sometimes they'll put an asterisk besides a speedway race and say 'Well, it's speedway racing.' But (Berry) dominated those last 20 laps."

The Wood Brothers are celebrating their 75th season in NASCAR.

"Everybody with Wood Brothers Racing gave me a great car and we just battled and battled, and man, it was our day," Berry said. "I just can't believe it. It was such a battle with Daniel there at the end. Beating and banging at a mile-and-a-half (track) is crazy. But whoever was going to get out front was probably going to win."

Big Ten, SEC powers are women's top seeds

Associated Press

UCLA had one of the best seasons in school history and was rewarded with the top overall seed in the women's NCAA Tournament.

The Bruins were joined by South Carolina, Southern California and Texas as the No. 1 seeds the NCAA revealed Sunday night.

It's the first time in school history UCLA is the top team in the tournament. It had two losses on the season, both of which came to the Trojans.

"It's a testament to how hard everyone in this program has worked. An overall No. 1 seed doesn't get us to the Final Four, doesn't get us to a national championship," Bruins guard Kiki Rice said. "We have to go out there and earn it."

One of UCLA's wins this season came over the Gamecocks. South Carolina's coach, Dawn Staley, felt her team should have gotten the top seed and with it the extra day of rest if they advance to the Final Four.

"I mean I'm a little bit surprised because we manufactured our schedule and put ourselves in position to be the No. 1 overall seed," she said. "Do the blind test and put our resume against any other team in the field, you'd pick us. It's plain and simple."

Unlike last year, when the Gamecocks finished off an undefeated season with a national title, this team has three losses heading into March Madness.

"Two key factors between UCLA and South Carolina. One was the head-to-head matchup," NCAA selection committee chair Derita Dawkins said. "The other was one of our criteria is competitive in losses and South Carolina suffered a 29-point loss to UConn. Those were the two key differences in those resumes."

Staley's team is looking to be the first team to repeat as champion since the Huskies won four straight from 2013-16. UConn, which is a two-seed, is looking to end that drought with star Paige Bueckers. It'll have to go out west if it reaches the Sweet 16 and a potential rematch with Ju-Ju Watkins and USC could be waiting in the Elite Eight.

The path won't be easy for anyone: This year there's more parity in the sport. This NCAA Tournament will be only the second one in the past 19 years to have no teams entering March Madness with zero or one loss. The other time was in 2022.

The Trojans and Bruins, newcomers in the Big Ten this season, will try to win the first national championship for the

conference since 1999, when Purdue won the lone one. A record 12 teams from the Big Ten are in the field. The SEC has 10 and the ACC eight. The Big 12 has seven.

The Ivy League received three bids to the tournament for the first time in conference history. Last season, Columbia earned the second at-large bid in league history. The Lions are back again as well as Princeton. Both are 11 seeds and will be competing in play-in games. Harvard, which won the conference tournament, is a 10 seed.

Duke, TCU and N.C. State joined the Huskies on the 2-seed line. Notre Dame boasts wins over Texas, USC and UConn but slumped the last few weeks of the season and fell to a three-seed.

William & Mary is one of six teams set to make its first appearance in the tournament. The others are Arkansas State, Fairleigh Dickinson, George Mason, Grand Canyon and UC San Diego. Four teams are headed to the men's tournament for the first time: High Point, Omaha, SIU Edwardsville and UC San Diego.

The Tribe (15-18) are the first sub-.500 team since Incarnate Word in 2022 to make the field.

Virginia Tech, James Madison, Saint Joseph's and Colora-

do were the first four teams left out of the field.

Payout time

For the first time in NCAA history, there will be a financial incentive for women's teams. They will finally be paid for playing games in the NCAA Tournament just like the men have for years.

So-called performance units, which represent revenue, will be given to women's teams for each win they get. A team that reaches the Final Four could bring its conference roughly \$1.26 million over the next three years in financial performance rewards.

This comes a year after the women's championship game in which South Carolina beat Caitlin Clark and Iowa had better TV ratings than the men's title game.

Tournament tidbits

One team that didn't make the field was Stanford, which ended the Cardinal's 36-year streak of playing in the NCAA Tournament. It's the first time since 1987 that Stanford won't play in the NCAAs. While that streak is over, Tennessee continued its NCAA Tournament run of appearing every year in the field since the first NCAA Tournament in 1982. The Vols are a five-seed.

McIlroy cruises in drama-free playoff to win The Players

Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — The playoff was only three holes. Rory McIlroy needed only three swings. And yet his victory Monday over J.J. Spaun in The Players Championship revealed so much about the state of his game and the cruel nature of the notorious TPC Sawgrass.

McIlroy delivered an early knockout against J.J. Spaun with his best drive of the week that set up a simple birdie, followed by a three-quarter 9-iron into a cold, cackling wind that found land on the island green at the par-3 17th.

"By no means did I have my best stuff this week," McIlroy said after becoming the

eighth multiple winner of The Players. "But I was still able to win one of the biggest tournaments in the world. That's a huge thing."

It's the first time in his career he has won twice going into the Masters, the major that for more than a decade has kept him from joining golf's most elite group with the career Grand Slam.

Spaun thought he had the perfect answer until he saw his 8-iron sail over the island on the second playoff hole, ending his hopes of the biggest win of his career.

"Can I watch this?" Spaun said as he sat at a table, his eyes trained on a television in the back of the media center showing a replay of

his tee shot on the 17th. It was his first time seeing where the ball landed — just beyond the wooden frame and into the water. He only heard groans from the gallery.

And he still couldn't believe it.

"I never thought it was long," he said quietly. "I never thought it was long."

So ended a memorable week at golf's richest tournament, where thousands of spectators showed up in the cold and wind for 47 minutes of golf between McIlroy — among the most celebrated players who now has 39 worldwide wins — and Spaun, a 34-year-old with one PGA Tour title who until this week had never broken 70 on the TPC Sawgrass.

Magic end Cavs' winning streak at 16

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Paolo Banchero scored 24 points, Franz Wagner added 22 and the Orlando Magic stunned the Cavaliers 108-103 on Sunday to end Cleveland's winning streak at 16 games.

The Cavs lost for the first time since Feb. 4 as the Eastern Conference leaders were unable to put away the Magic in the final minutes. Cleveland missed five shots — three by All-Star Donovan Mitchell — in the final minute.

Banchero's 16-foot jumper put Orlando ahead 104-103, and after a badly missed 3-pointer by the Cavaliers' De'Andre Hunter, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope made two free throws with 31 seconds left to give the Magic a three-point lead.

Max Strus missed a potential tying 3-pointer on Cleveland's next possession and Orlando's defense swarmed Mitchell, who misfired on a pair of 3s.

Banchero shot just 6-for-22 but added 11 rebounds and seven assists. Wendell Carter Jr.

added 16 points and 14 rebounds for the Magic.

Mitchell returned after missing two games with a sore groin and finished with 23 points. Jarrett Allen added 20 points and 12 rebounds for the Cavs, who were denied becoming the first team since Phoenix in 2021 to win 17 straight.

76ers 130, Mavericks 125: Quentin Grimes scored 28 points in his first game against his former team and visiting Philadelphia beat Dallas in a matchup of injury-depleted clubs.

Defending Western Conference champion Dallas dropped a season-worst three games under .500.

Lakers 107, Suns 96: Luka Doncic had 33 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists, and host Los Angeles snapped its four-game losing streak with a victory over Phoenix.

Kevin Durant scored 21 points and Devin Booker had 19 for the 11th-place Suns, who remain 1½ games behind Dallas for the West's final play-in spot.

Nets 122, Hawks 114: Cam Johnson scored 28 points, Keon Johnson added 22 and host Brooklyn beat Atlanta.

Tyrese Martin had 16 points for the Nets, who won for just the second time in 12 games.

Trae Young had 28 points and 12 assists for the Hawks, who have dropped two in a row after winning four straight.

Trail Blazers 105, Raptors 102: Anfernee Simons scored 12 of his 22 points in the fourth quarter, Toumani Camara finished with 21 and host Portland rallied from a 16-point deficit to beat Toronto to snap a five-game skid.

The Trail Blazers made 18 3-pointers, with Simons hitting six — four in the fourth quarter — and Camara tied his career high with five.

Timberwolves 128, Jazz 102: Anthony Edwards scored 41 points as host Minnesota won its eighth straight, beating Utah.

Jaden McDaniels had a double-double by halftime and finished with 20 points and 12 rebounds, while Donte DiVincen-

zo had 11 points and seven assists for the Timberwolves, who are in a tight battle with the Warriors for sixth place in the Western Conference.

Collin Sexton led the Jazz with 22 points. Utah has lost nine in a row.

Edwards hit 16 of 27 shots, topping 40 points in a game for the seventh time this season.

Clippers 123, Hornets 88: James Harden had 31 points and 10 rebounds, Kawhi Leonard scored 23 points and host Los Angeles beat Charlotte.

Ivica Zubac added 17 points and 14 rebounds for the Clippers.

Mark Williams scored 18 points and grabbed 15 rebounds for the Hornets.

Thunder 121, Bucks 105: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 31 points and eight assists as Western Conference-leading Oklahoma City defeated host Milwaukee.

Isaiah Hartenstein added 24 points and 12 rebounds to help the Thunder win for the 10th time in 11 games.

Makar nets winner after Avs let Stars rally to force OT

Associated Press

DENVER — Cale Makar scored 34 seconds into overtime and Colorado recovered after squandering a late two-goal lead to win 4-3 over the Dallas Stars on Sunday in the return of former Avalanche forward Mikko Rantanen.

Leading 3-1 in the third, the Avalanche saw the Stars rally to tie the game on goals from Mavrik Bourque and Matt Duchene in a 20-second span.

In overtime, Makar weaved through the Dallas defense and beat Jake Oettinger with a wrist shot. It was a three-point performance for Makar as Colorado won its ninth straight home game.

Valeri Nichushkin, Jonathan Drouin and Martin Necas also scored for the Avs. Scott Wedge-

wood made 19 saves.

A fan favorite, Rantanen spent nearly a decade with Colorado. He was traded as part of a three-team deal on Jan. 24 that landed him in Carolina — and brought Necas to Colorado — and then dealt to the Stars.

Jason Robertson scored the game-opening goal on an assist from Rantanen.

Red Wings 3, Golden Knights 0: Petr Mrazek made 18 saves for his first shutout of the season as host Detroit blanked Vegas.

Mrazek was making his third start since he was acquired at the trade deadline.

Rookie defenseman Albert Johansson scored his second career goal at 7:58 of the second period to give the Red Wings the lead.

Jets 3, Kraken 2 (OT): Dylan

Samberg scored 1:47 into overtime and visiting Winnipeg rallied from two goals down to beat Seattle.

Cole Perfetti had a goal and an assist, and Kyle Connor also scored for the Jets.

In the extra period, Perfetti skated wide around the right side and drove toward the net before passing across the crease to Samberg.

Oilers 3, Rangers 1: Viktor Arvidsson scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period and visiting Edmonton beat New York.

Corey Perry and Connor McDavid also scored for the Oilers, who won their second-straight to complete a four-game trip. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had three assists and Stuart Skinner finished with 21 saves.

Blues 7, Ducks 2: Brayden Schenn and Pavel Buchnevich each scored in the first 90 seconds, and host St. Louis beat Anaheim.

Jordan Binnington made 22 saves as St. Louis won for the eighth time in 11 games (8-2-1) to pull into a tie with Vancouver for the second wild card in the Western Conference.

Islanders 4, Panthers 2: Marc Gatcomb kicked off the scoring in the third period and host New York scored three more times to defeat Florida.

Utah 3, Canucks 1: Logan Cooley scored the winner as visiting Utah edged Vancouver.

The result held playoff implications for both teams as they battle the Calgary Flames and St. Louis Blues for the Western Conference's final playoff spot.