

Navy looking to navigate 'Nimitz Gap'

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

BREMERTON, Wash. — The USS Nimitz sits in Sinclair Inlet, west of Seattle, its flight deck empty of aircraft and its hull showing scrapes and rust from its last official deployment across the Pacific that ended in December.

The first of its kind, launched mere days after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the namesake of the 10 "Nimitz-class carriers" is slated to retire this spring after more than 50 years with the fleet.

But military demands, delayed new carrier construction, protracted deployments and a congressional mandate to keep a minimum of 11 active carriers have cast doubt on whether the Nimitz is really going away.

Sticking to the Navy's timeline would create what critics call a rolling "Nimitz Gap" as the carrier retires in 2026 — up to a year before its replacement, the second Gerald R. Ford-class carrier, the USS John F. Kennedy, is scheduled for commissioning in 2027. The Kennedy would need additional shake-out cruises, meaning it likely wouldn't be ready for its first deployment until 2029.

The Navy would drop to 10 carriers at a time when demand around the world — from the Middle East to South America to the Indo-Pacific — is on the rise. Two carriers, the USS Gerald R. Ford and the USS Abraham Lincoln, are currently supporting Operation Epic Fury, the joint U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran that began Feb. 28.

The numbers problem would persist as other older Nimitz class carriers reach their expected 50-year lifespan before their replacements can be built,

delivered and ready for deployment. The carriers being constructed after the Kennedy — a new USS Enterprise and USS Doris Miller — are also suffering delays, pushing their delivery back by years.

Taking the Nimitz off the Navy's rolls would also, at least technically, mean breaking federal law. Congress in 2007 approved Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 8062(b), which explicitly says "the naval combat forces of the Navy shall include not less than 11 operational aircraft carriers."

The Navy would need to request a waiver from Congress to retire the Nimitz before the Kennedy joins the fleet. When it sought a similar waiver to retire the USS Enterprise in 2009 before its replacement, the Ford, was delivered, Congress said no.

Still, the Nimitz's retirement appears to be a go.

"USS Nimitz (CVN 68) is currently homeported at Naval Base Kitsap, Washington, and is preparing for an upcoming homeport shift to Naval Station Norfolk," U.S. Pacific Fleet headquarters in Hawaii said in a Feb. 24 statement.

Losing a carrier, even for a year, means one less platform that on average carries up to 90 aircraft — including F/A-18 Hornet and F-35C Lightning II attack-fighter jets, EA-18G Growler electronic warfare jets, as well as E-2 Hawkeye airborne early warning aircraft, C-2 Greyhound transport/reconnaissance aircraft and MH-60 Seahawk helicopters. Carriers have also operated U.S. Marine V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft.

It's a problematic situation made all the more difficult by the additional realities of simultaneous military operations

around the globe and a slow carrier development program that isn't likely to catch up as more Nimitz-class carriers age past the target retirement age of 50.

The Navy announced in 2023 that it planned to retire the Nimitz in 2025 and the second-oldest carrier, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, in 2027.

The Navy said last year that the "Ike", commissioned in 1977, will operate into the 2030s.

Mark Cancian, a former Marine officer who is now an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the Navy and Congress will be forced to bow to the twin realities of multiple international commitments and a domestic shipbuilding program that is chronically behind schedule.

"The Navy needs to extend all of the Nimitz class carriers at least one more deployment, if not more," Cancian said. "Trying to speed up production of Ford class carriers won't have any result for many years, even if such an acceleration were feasible."

Cancian and others have pointed to President Donald Trump's deployment of carriers to the Middle East, and to the waters off Venezuela for the operations that led to the extraction of President Nicolas Maduro.

"The carrier gap is concerning because we just got an example of its real-world effects," Cancian said. "When the administration sent the Ford to the Caribbean, there was no carrier in Europe/Middle East. Then, when Iran erupted and the president said 'help is on the way.' The United States didn't have the forces, particularly a carrier, to make that threat real. Now there are two carriers in the re-

gion, but no carrier at sea in the western Pacific."

Not even the 10 carriers take into account the reality of maintaining the carrier force. One carrier is almost always in the middle of a multiyear RCOH (Refueling and Complex Overhaul, a midlife maintenance process) that prepares the ships for the second half of its life span.

Ships also go through prolonged intermediate maintenance periods. The USS Ronald Reagan, for example, entered a 17-month overhaul at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in August 2025.

Bryan Clark, an analyst with the Hudson Institute, said the presence of two aircraft carriers in U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility in the Middle East created a shortage.

"With two carriers in CENTCOM, there is already a gap in Indo-Pacific carrier presence," Clark said.

Clark said the only carrier in the western Pacific is the USS George Washington, which is forward deployed at Yokosuka, Japan, and is unavailable to deploy.

"George Washington is in its annual maintenance period," Clark said.

Clark said that if and when the Navy goes down to 10 carriers, it will not be able to maintain more than two carriers deployed in a single area on a sustained basis.

"Which will mean future operations like this one or in Venezuela will take carriers away from traditional deterrence and security cooperation missions," Clark said. "However, the new national defense strategy suggests the administration intends this more fluid posture to be the norm."

Storms reshape Japan island defense training

By KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

TANEGASHIMA, Japan — Japan's only amphibious unit carried out a beach-landing drill this week in heavy rain and rough seas, adjusting operations as part of a joint exercise with U.S. Marines aimed at strengthening defense of the country's remote islands.

Monday's training, held on Tanegashima, an island south of Kyushu, was part of the three-week Iron Fist exercise, which includes at-sea maneuvers, amphibious assaults and ground combat operations at multiple sites across Japan through March 9.

The Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade — a Japan Ground Self-Defense Force unit established in 2018 and modeled in part on the U.S. Marine Corps — tweaked its plans Monday because of worsening weather conditions. Strong winds and high waves forced commanders to cancel a scheduled joint boat landing involving both U.S. and Japanese troops.

"The boat landing was canceled due to weather, taking into consideration the size of the waves," Lt. Col. Masanobu Takahashi, spokesman for Japan's Ground Component Command, said before the drill.

Anchored offshore were the

U.S. Navy amphibious transport dock USS New Orleans and the amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli, alongside the Japanese transport ship JS Osumi and helicopter destroyer JS Ise.

"Both the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade commanders are on board the Tripoli and the Ise, respectively, reviewing weather and sea conditions to create training plans, and both commanders make their own decisions," he added.

Five Marines remained ashore to observe as Japanese forces proceeded with limited landing operations.

Two Japanese landing craft air cushions, or LCACs, departed from the Osumi, roughly eight miles offshore, and approached Nakayama Beach at about 9 a.m.

The first craft unexpectedly turned away about 500 feet from shore before attempting another approach.

Capt. Sean Powell, the Marine expeditionary brigade's exercise control officer-in-charge at Tanegashima, said such adjustments are not unusual.

"It might have been the landing spot," he said. "The pilot may have been thinking of landing there, but decided against it and tried again."

Military begins search for POWs in Subic Bay 'hell ship' wreckage

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has commenced a multiyear mission to account for Americans lost in the World War II sinking of a Japanese prisoner transport ship in the Philippines.

The agency last month announced one of its "largest and most complex recovery efforts to date" to account for service members lost in the sinking of the Oryoku Maru in Subic Bay in December 1944.

"This mission represents our solemn commitment to provide the fullest possible accounting to families and the nation," U.S. Army Capt. Barrett Breland, leader for the recovery, said. "We carry this responsibility with compassion and integrity, and our success depends on strong partnerships and unwa-

vering respect for the fallen."

The Oryoku Maru was part of a fleet of "hell ships," requisitioned merchant vessels that the Japanese navy overloaded with prisoners for transport to camps.

"The holds were floating dungeons, where inmates were denied air, space, light, bathroom facilities and adequate food and water — especially water," Naval History and Heritage Command states on its website.

The Oryoku Maru set off from Manila on Dec. 13, 1944, with 1,600 POWs. Most had been in custody since the Bataan campaign of 1942 and survived death marches

Navy dive bombers from two American aircraft carriers — the USS Hornet and USS Cabot — sank the Oryoku Maru in Subic Bay two days after it departed Manila.

Manila says US-shared bases not connected to fighting in Middle East

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

Philippine officials said this week that military facilities shared with U.S. forces are not involved in the escalating conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran, rejecting suggestions that the sites could become targets.

Some groups are using the Middle East conflict to sow "fear and apprehension" among Filipinos, Department of National Defense spokesman Arsenio Andolong told the state-run Philippine News Agency on Monday.

The U.S. and Israel launched airstrikes Saturday on Iran, killing its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and prompting Iran to retaliate with missile strikes against neighboring countries, including Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait and the

United Arab Emirates.

Six Americans have died in the conflict so far, according to the Pentagon.

In the Philippines, attention has focused on sites covered under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, or EDCA, a 2014 deal that grants U.S. forces access to nine Philippine military facilities.

"Certain groups are using the events in the Middle East to justify their disdain for EDCA sites in the Philippines, completely ignoring the fact that EDCA sites are not U.S. bases, but Philippine facilities, developed and used jointly for training, [humanitarian assistance and disaster relief], and the defense and security of our country," Andolong said.

The U.S. vacated its permanent bases in the Philippines in 1992.

Minnesota sues over held Medicaid funds

Associated Press

Minnesota on Monday sued President Donald Trump's administration in an attempt to stop it from withholding \$243 million in Medicaid spending, warning it may have to cut health care for low-income families if the funding is held back.

The lawsuit asked a U.S. court in Minneapolis to issue a temporary restraining order to block the withholding for Medicaid, which is the health care safety net for low-income Americans.

The move came after Vice President JD Vance said last week the administration would "temporarily halt" some Medicaid funding to Minnesota over fraud concerns, as part of what he described as an aggressive crackdown on misuse of public funds.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said his office has a strong track record of fighting Medicaid fraud and has won more than 300 convictions and \$80 million in judgments and restitution during his time in office.

"Trump's attempts to look like he's fighting fraud only punish the people and families who most need the high-quality, affordable healthcare that all Minnesotans deserve," Ellison said in a statement. "As long as I am attorney general, I will do everything in my power to defend our tax dollars, both from fraudsters and from the Trump administration's cruelty."

The lawsuit names the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as well as Dr. Mehmet Oz, in his offi-

cial capacity as CMS administrator, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in his official capacity as HHS secretary.

The threatened cuts amount to roughly 7% of Minnesota's quarterly Medicaid funding, Ellison's office said in a news release.

Minnesota could be required to significantly cut health care services for low-income families or other government services if the cuts take effect, it said.

Medicaid, which is known as Medical Assistance in Minnesota, provides health insurance to 1.2 million Minnesotans who would otherwise be unable to afford it.

A family of four may qualify for Medical Assistance with an income at or under \$42,759, the attorney general's office said.

The lawsuit said the adminis-

tration violated due process procedures because it was taking hundreds of millions of dollars without proving Minnesota's noncompliance with Medicaid regulations through discovery and an evidentiary hearing.

It alleged the administration failed to provide Minnesota with details about its decision, in violation of federal law.

It cited legal precedents, including one that said Congress may impose conditions on states' acceptance of federal funds, but "the conditions must be set out unambiguously."

The administration said it would hold off on paying \$259.5 million to Minnesota for Medicaid spending in the fourth quarter of 2025. Minnesota's lawsuit challenges the withholding of \$243 million of this money.

Ga. school shooting suspect's father convicted of murder

Associated Press

WINDER, Ga. — A Georgia man who gave his teenage son the gun he's accused of using to kill two students and two teachers at a high school was convicted of second-degree murder and involuntary manslaughter Tuesday.

Jurors took less than two hours to find Colin Gray guilty of all charges in the September 2024 shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, northeast of Atlanta. Gray is one of a number of parents prosecuted after their children were accused in fatal shootings across the country.

Colin Gray was found guilty of second-degree murder in the deaths of two 14-year-old students, Mason Schermerhorn and Christian Angulo. Georgia law defines second-degree murder as causing the death of a child by committing the crime of cruelty to children. Gray was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in the killings of teachers Richard Aspinwall, 39, and

Cristina Irimie, 53.

Another teacher and eight other students were wounded. Gray was also convicted of multiple counts of reckless conduct and cruelty to children.

He showed little emotion as the verdict was read and then as he watched each juror being polled by the judge. He will be sentenced at a later date. Second-degree murder is punishable by at least 10 but no more than 30 years in prison, while involuntary manslaughter carries a penalty of one to 10 years in prison.

Prosecutors said Gray gave his son, Colt, access to a gun and ammunition "after receiving sufficient warning that Colt Gray would harm and endanger the bodily safety of another."

Colt Gray, who was 14 at the time of the shooting, was indicted on a total of 55 counts, including murder. He has pleaded not guilty and the judge in his case has set a status hearing for mid-March.

2 rescued from hot-air balloon entangled on a tower in Texas

Associated Press

LONGVIEW, Texas — Crews in East Texas rescued two people stranded hundreds of feet in the air after a hot-air balloon became entangled on a communications tower over the weekend.

Firefighters responding to the tower on Saturday morning found the balloon entangled more than 900 feet above the ground, according to officials in Longview, a city of more than 80,000 about 120 miles east of Dallas.

The complex, hourslong rescue involved more than a dozen firefighters stationed at various heights along the tower. It took them about an hour to climb up to the man and woman in the Cameron Z-77 balloon's basket and to give them ropes and harnesses to help them escape.

It was another hour before they were secured inside the tower and could begin their descent, which took nearly two more hours, Longview Fire Marshal Marcus Delaney said at a news conference. Both were taken to a

hospital as a precaution, Delaney said.

Images and video from the scene show the balloon's multi-colored fabric ripped in places and wound around the guidewire and tower with the basket hanging below. Each balloonist can be seen climbing out of the basket in a harness and swinging over to the tower to the waiting rescuers.

"I think they felt better once we had harnesses on them," Lt. Stephen Winchell said at a news conference, noting that the basket was swaying in the breeze.

"As we teach rope classes, this is exactly one of the scenarios we talk about as kind of the Super Bowl of rope rescue," Winchell said. They've talked before about the logistical challenges posed by this tower, one of the tallest in the area, and what to do if a hot-air balloon gets stuck in a power line or a tree.

"We just didn't expect today that both of those scenarios would get combined into one very tall rescue," he said.

US sanctions Rwandans over M23 support

Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo — The U.S. imposed sanctions Monday on the Rwandan Defence Forces and four of its senior officials for supporting the March 23 Movement, an armed group responsible for human rights abuses in the central African nation of Congo.

The latest penalties come after a U.S.-mediated peace agreement was signed in December by Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame in Washington, alongside President Donald Trump.

Trump at the time praised the leaders for their courage, as the deal also opened the region's critical mineral reserves to the U.S. government and U.S. companies.

Despite the agreement, fighting between the two parties continues on several fronts in eastern Congo, claiming numerous civilian and military casualties.

M23 is the most prominent of about 100 armed factions vying for control in eastern Congo, near the border with Rwanda. The conflict has created one of the world's most significant humanitarian crises, with more than 7 million people displaced, according to the U.N. agency for refugees.

Congo, the U.S. and U.N. experts accuse Rwanda of backing M23, which has grown from hundreds of members in 2021 to around 6,500 fighters, according to the U.N.

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control alleged that M23's of-

fensives would not have been possible without the active support of the Rwandan government and key senior officials.

Included in Monday's sanctions are Vincent Nyakarundi, the RDF's army chief of staff; Ruki Karusisi, a major general; Mubarakh Muganga, chief of defense staff; and Stanislas Gashugi, special operations force commander.

Rwandan government spokesperson Yolande Makolo said in a statement Monday that the sanctions "unjustly" target Rwanda and "misrepresent the reality and distort the facts of the conflict" in eastern Congo. She accused Congo of violating the peace agreement by allegedly conducting "indiscriminate" drone attacks and ground offensives.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in a statement that the department "will use all tools at its disposal to ensure that the parties to the Washington Accords uphold their obligations.

"We expect the immediate withdrawal of Rwanda Defence Force troops, weapons and equipment," Bessent said.

Thomas Pigott, a U.S. State Department spokesman, said M23 "is responsible for horrific human rights abuses, including summary executions and violence against civilians, including women and children."

M23 is already under U.S. sanctions since 2013.

The Congolese government and M23 are in peace negotiations, mediated by Qatar and the U.S.

Pakistan-Afghanistan border clashes continue into 5th day

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — Afghan forces attacked Pakistani military positions along the border early on Tuesday, triggering intense clashes that left 67 Afghan troops and one Pakistani soldier dead, officials in Islamabad said as cross-border fighting between the two countries entered its fifth day.

The Taliban defense ministry in Kabul, the Afghan capital, rejected Pakistan's claim. A ministry spokesman said Afghan forces in the past 24 hours repelled Pakistani attacks, destroying about a dozen military posts and killing four Pakistani soldiers.

The latest Afghan-Pakistan escalation erupted last week with Afghanistan launching attacks on Thursday in retaliation for Pakistani airstrikes the previous weekend. Since then, Pakistan has carried out operations along the border and declared it was in an "open war" with Afghanistan, alarming the international community.

On Tuesday, Pakistan said Afghan forces attacked Pakistan's military in two sections of the two countries' border.

It said 16 locations were attacked along the southern part of the border, in the southwestern districts of Qilla Saifullah, Nushki and Chaman in Pakistan's Balochistan province.

Pakistani troops killed 27 members of the Afghan forces there and "successfully repelled these multiple attacks," Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said.

Tarar said on X that another wave of attacks hit 25 locations along the northern part of the border, in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where Pakistani troops killed 40 members of the Afghan security forces. The spokesman did not say where the Pakistani soldier was killed.

In Kabul, defense ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khawarazmi slammed the Islamabad statements as "baseless."

Israel ramps up airstrikes in Iran; US embassy attacked

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Israel stepped up airstrikes against Iranian missile launchers and factories Tuesday, and Iran retaliated across the Gulf region, disrupting energy supplies and travel. As explosions rang out in Tehran and in Lebanon — where Israel said it struck Hezbollah militants — the American embassy in Saudi Arabia came under drone attack.

Four days into a war that President Donald Trump suggested would last several weeks but perhaps longer, hundreds of people have been killed, the vast majority in Iran, where information has been limited because of poor communications, round-the-clock airstrikes and tight restrictions on journalists.

The spiraling nature of the war raised questions about when and how it would end. Trump seemed to leave open the possibility for more extensive U.S. military involvement, telling the New York

Post on Monday that he was not ruling out the possibility of boots on the ground.

The administration has given various objectives. While the initial U.S.-Israeli strikes killed Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Trump urged Iranians to overthrow their government, senior administration officials have since said regime change was not the goal.

Trump said Monday the military campaign's four objectives were to destroy Iran's missile capabilities, wipe out its navy, prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon and ensure that it cannot continue to support allied armed groups.

Across Iran's capital, explosions rang out throughout the night into Tuesday, with aircraft heard overhead.

The Israeli military said it conducted a wave of airstrikes on sites that produce and store ballistic missiles, in Tehran and Isfahan.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

9 people are wounded in nightclub shooting

OH CINCINNATI — A shooting early Sunday at a crowded Cincinnati nightclub and concert venue wounded nine people, police said. There were no immediate arrests.

The shooting victims were taken to hospitals with non-life-threatening injuries, Adam Hennie, the city's interim police chief, said at a news conference.

About 500 to 600 people were in the Riverfront Live nightclub when shots rang out at 1 a.m., Hennie said.

Cartel security boss charged with smuggling

IL CHICAGO — A reputed high-ranking member of the Sinaloa drug cartel has been indicted on federal charges in Chicago alleging he ran security and helped the sons of Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman-Loera smuggle and distribute large quantities of narcotics into the U.S.

Jesus Omar Ibarra Felix, also known by the alias “El Chuta,” was charged in the four-count indictment made public Friday with distribution of methamphetamine and fentanyl, using machine guns to facilitate drug trafficking, and providing material support for a foreign terrorist organization.

In addition to facilitating the movement of drugs into the U.S., Felix led an armed security group known as Las Fuerzas Especiales de Chuta, or “The Special Forces of Chuta,” which protected the conspiracy and “engaged in armed conflict” on behalf of the Guzman faction of

the cartel, according to the indictment.

Felix, 45, is not in custody and is believed to be at large in Mexico. A warrant has been issued for his arrest.

Triceratops skeleton ‘Trey’ to hit auction block

NY NEW YORK — A triceratops skeleton that stood in a Wyoming museum for decades will be auctioned off, a rare instance of a museum-exhibited dinosaur going to the auction block just as the market for the prehistoric giants has hit record highs.

The fossil, dubbed “Trey,” will be open for bidding from March 17 to 31 on Joopiter, an online auction platform founded by Grammy-winning artist and producer Pharrell Williams. It has a preauction estimate of \$4.5 million to \$5.5 million.

Dating back more than 66 million years to the late Cretaceous period, Trey was discovered near Lusk, Wyo., in 1993 by Lee Campbell and the late Allen Graffham, a commercial paleontologist who made numerous significant finds over his lifetime.

The 17-foot-long herbivore greeted visitors at the 1995 grand opening of the Wyoming Dinosaur Center in Thermopolis and remained there on loan until 2023.

Mosquitoes back with a bite even in the winter

CA LOS ANGELES — Irked residents across Southern California have recently complained to their vector control districts about an onslaught of mosquito activity, many sporting ankle bites to

prove it. Local mosquito experts blame the unseasonable weather pattern and a thriving invasive species for the surge in itchy bites.

Southern California's mosquito season typically begins in early May, with the insect's activity tapering off around October. But local officials say the season is getting longer as temperatures stay warmer further into the year.

Between January and February, Orange County saw “five times as many mosquitoes here over the five-year average,” said Brian Brannon, public information officer for Orange County's Vector Control District.

Unseasonably hot temperatures in January in between rainstorms accelerated the life cycle of mosquitoes and led to an increase in mosquito activity, said Susanne Klueh, general manager for the Greater Los Angeles County Vector Control District.

Dozens of vehicles moved to planned ICE facility

MD HAGERSTOWN — Local advocacy groups are raising concerns over a warehouse in Washington County that is slated to become a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement processing facility after dozens of black SUVs were added to the warehouses parking lot on Sunday.

In late January, Washington County issued a news release stating that on Jan. 14, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security sent a letter to the county's historic district commission and department of planning and zoning regarding the property.

The letter indicated that DHS

was analyzing the potential purchase of the warehouse at 16220 Wright Road in Williamsport for the purpose of establishing a “new ICE Baltimore processing facility” that is capable of housing 1,500 people at a time.

Elements of the new facility that were mentioned in the letter included the construction of holding and processing spaces; office space; public-facing visitor space and installation amenities like cafeterias, bathrooms and health care spaces, the county said.

\$117M paid in 2025 for police misconduct suits

NY NEW YORK — It cost taxpayers more than \$117 million in 2025 to resolve lawsuits accusing NYPD officers of misconduct, the fourth straight year payouts surpassed \$100 million, according to a new report.

The Legal Aid Society, which analyzed city data and released its findings Monday, said the ramifications of police misconduct will continue to be a problem because the NYPD too often fails to discipline officers and supervisors — especially if the allegations don't make headlines.

According to the analysis, 1,044 cases were resolved in 2025, most of them settled before trial, the payouts totaling \$117,251,230.82.

An NYPD spokesman said NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch has taken steps to cut down on misconduct allegations, including by strengthening the department's vehicle pursuit policy, limiting chases to the most serious criminals.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting World, National and Military News

No. 1 Duke wins ACC title in blowout win

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Star freshman Cameron Boozier scored 26 points and top-ranked Duke shot 55.2% to beat N.C. State 93-64 on Monday night, securing the outright Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title.

The Blue Devils (28-2, 16-1) clinched the No. 1 seed for next week's ACC Tournament with a weekend rout of No. 13 Virginia. Duke followed that by overwhelming the Wolfpack, both by hitting from outside against N.C. State's zone and then getting into the paint area that has become a trademark strength.

Boozier finished 8 for 10 from the field and 9 for 11 from the

foul line while grabbing nine rebounds — along with accumulating multiple long, thick scratches wrapping around his right shoulder amid physical second-half play.

Dame Sarr added 14 of his 16 points before halftime for the Blue Devils, who made 11 of 28 3-pointers.

Duke ran off a 9-0 burst to push to a double-digit lead late in the first half, followed by getting opposite corner 3s — Sarr from the right side, then Nik Khamenia from the left — for a 47-30 halftime lead.

The Blue Devils made their last five shots before halftime, then hit their first five out of the break to eliminate any lingering doubt, including a 3-pointer

from Isaiah Evans that made it 56-32 at the 17:32 mark.

Darrion Williams had 17 points for N.C. State (19-11, 10-7), which continued a late-season slide in coach Will Wade's debut season. The Wolfpack shot 35.4% and made 7 of 29 3s en route to a fifth loss in six games, a run that includes a 41-point defeat at then-No. 24 Louisville and last week's 29-point loss at Virginia.

No. 2 Arizona 73, No. 6 Iowa State 57: Jaden Bradley scored 17 points, Motiejus Krivas added 13 and the host Wildcats clinched the outright Big 12 regular-season title with a win over the No. 6 Cyclones.

Arizona (28-2, 15-2) secured at least a share of the confe-

rence crown by using big runs in each half to beat No. 14 Kansas 84-61 on Saturday.

The Wildcats earned it outright by smothering Iowa State defensively to give Tommy Lloyd his 140th victory, the most in NCAA history in a coach's first five seasons.

Coming off their first home loss of the season, the Cyclones (24-6, 11-6) labored against Arizona's physical defense, shooting 29% from the floor, including 7 of 30 from 3-point range.

Tamin Lipsey led Iowa State with 17 points, but leading scorer Milan Momcilovic was held to five on 2-of-8 shooting. The nation's best 3-point shooter at 51%, he went 1 for 5 from the beyond the arc.

Celtics defeat Bucks, spoiling Antetokounmpo's return

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Payton Pritchard scored 25 points, rookie Hugo González had career highs of 18 points and 16 rebounds, and the Boston Celtics beat Milwaukee 108-81 on Monday night to spoil Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo's return from a right calf strain.

Derrick White also scored 18 points for Boston, which has won three straight and seven of eight. White and Pritchard each had nine assists.

Antetokounmpo had 19 points and 11 rebounds in 25 minutes in his first action since getting injured Jan. 23. Milwaukee went 8-7 during his absence.

Overall this season, the Bucks are 15-16 with Antetokounmpo and 11-18 without him.

The Celtics were missing five-time All-Star Jaylen Brown due to an illness. They also rested Neemias Queta, who scored a career-high 27 points in a 114-98 victory over Philadelphia on Sunday night.

González started for just the third time. The 28th overall pick in the 2025 draft came in ave-

raging 3.9 points and 3.3 rebounds.

Nikola Vucevic had 10 points, seven assists and five rebounds in his first start since Boston acquired the two-time All-Star from Chicago at the trade deadline.

The Celtics went on a 24-5 run that started late in the first quarter and carried over to the second as they turned a 15-14 deficit into a 38-20 lead. They stayed in control the rest of the way.

Boston led by 22 before carrying a 57-43 edge into halftime. Milwaukee cut the margin to nine early in the second half, but the Celtics responded with 15 straight points.

The Bucks have lost their last three games, all by at least 23 points.

Rockets 123, Wizards 118: Alperen Sengun had 32 points and 13 rebounds, Kevin Durant scored 30 and visiting Houston beat Washington.

Durant made all 11 free throws and added seven assists and six rebounds in his only game close to his Maryland

home this season.

Bilal Coulibaly scored 23 points and Sharife Cooper had 21 for the Wizards.

Trae Young was ejected from the game after leaving the bench to come on the court to complain to a referee, days before he is expected to make his Washington debut.

Clippers 114, Warriors 101: Kawhi Leonard had 23 points, eight rebounds and four assists, and visiting Los Angeles erased a 17-point deficit to beat short-handed Golden State.

Darius Garland scored 12 points in his Clippers debut, coming off the bench to play nearly 23 minutes in his first game since being acquired from Cleveland at the trade deadline last month in a deal that sent James Harden to the Cavaliers.

Garland had been nursing a toe injury, then he went down with 1:26 left in the second quarter after a collision with Moses Moody when they both went for a loose ball and Moody's right shoulder appeared to get Garland in the

face. Both players were shaken but stayed in the game.

Brandin Podziemski scored 22 points for the Warriors with Stephen Curry sidelined for an 11th straight game with a right knee injury.

Nuggets 128, Jazz 125: Jamal Murray scored 45 points and made the go-ahead free throws with 31.8 seconds remaining to help visiting Denver hold off depleted Utah.

The Jazz's Keyonte George scored 36 points, but was denied two free throws that could have given them the lead on what would have been Nikola Jokic's sixth foul with 16.3 seconds remaining — a shooting foul that was reversed to a blocked shot after a lengthy review.

Jokic, who had 22 points and 12 rebounds, made two free throws with 6.1 seconds left and George missed a last-second 3-pointer as the Nuggets escaped with the win. Cam Johnson was a late scratch with a hurt ankle, but Julian Strawther scored 15 points and Jonas Valanciunas added 13 for Denver.

OPS taking priority over batting average

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Batting average was a priority for Andrew Benintendi when he first broke into the major leagues in 2016. He batted .312 in the minors on the way to his debut.

Going into his fourth season with the Chicago White Sox and 11th overall, he is more focused on his OPS and power numbers.

“The game kind of changes where the money is, I guess,” Benintendi said. “So players obviously will chase that.”

The significance of batting average has been in decline for years, replaced by on-base percentage and slugging percentage, along with the OPS metric that combines the two. Batting average treats all hits as the same, while OPS accounts for power and other methods of reaching base.

But the diminished importance of what was once one of the majors’ marquee statistics was thrown into sharp relief by the free agency of Luis Arraez over the winter.

Arraez, a three-time batting champion who turns 29 in April, hit a career-low .292 with eight homers and 61 RBIs in 154 games for San Diego last season. The infielder also led the NL in hits for the second straight year. But he doesn’t hit

for power or walk very much, and he has defensive limitations.

So even with his .317 career batting average — tops among active qualified players — Arraez was on the market until right before spring training, when he agreed to a \$12 million, one-year deal with San Francisco. Arraez said he had some multiyear offers, but the Giants gave him an opportunity to play second base.

“I don’t care who (is throwing). I don’t care if he’s a Cy Young (Award winner),” he said. “I have a bat, and I want to go up there and compete.”

The MLB-wide batting average has remained fairly steady since the pandemic-shortened 2020 season. It was .248 in 2023 — marking a successful debut for a package of rule changes that included a pitch clock, bigger bases and limits on infield shifts — .243 in 2024 and .245 last year, according to Sportradar.

While New York Yankees star Aaron Judge won the 2025 AL batting title with a .331 average, just seven qualified big leaguers hit .300 or better, matching the previous year for the fewest since a record-low six in 1968. Philadelphia’s Trea Turner won the NL batting title

with a record-low .304 average.

“We look at more of the advanced metrics and the expected outcomes based on the quality of the at-bat, the process metrics, but you can start with batting average and say this guy’s doing something well,” said Chris Young, the president of baseball operations for the Texas Rangers. “It’s a preliminary indicator, but we dig pretty deep in terms of understanding the profile of a player and what we can expect and predict.”

Batting average is “not something that we look at at the beginning of an evaluation,” said Jed Hoyer, the president of baseball operations for the Chicago Cubs.

“I think there’s a lot of things that are much more important,” Hoyer said, “but I do think that a guy like a Nico Hoerner or Luis Arraez, I do think in a world that values a strikeout, in a world that has so much incredible stuff, I think that the players that can truly put the ball in play at an elite level, I do think there’s something to that.”

Hoerner hit .297 for the Cubs last year, helping the team reach the playoffs for the first time since 2020. He batted a team-high .371 with runners in

scoring position.

The 28-year-old Hoerner, who is going into the last year of his contract, said he thinks players still take some pride in their batting average.

“I think it’s telling that if you ask the player what he hit last year, he still understands that that’s batting average, right?” Hoerner said. “They don’t say like, oh, I hit .840 OPS. I hit .270 or whatever it is.

“Players are aware of what’s valued and what gets them on the field and yeah, I don’t think batting average is particularly high on that list. But I do think it is a reflection of quality of contact that guys make.”

The future of batting average also belongs to the game’s youngest players, and it still holds some allure to them as well.

Cincinnati infielder Sal Stewart, one of the preseason favorites for NL Rookie of the Year, hit .309 over two minor league stops last year before making his Reds debut in September. Stewart said batting average didn’t come up very often during his development process, but it means something to him.

“I mean I’m not like, ‘Oh average is the king,’ you know, but I look into it,” he said. “But I really like on-base the most.”

Lions to trade RB Montgomery to Texans for Scruggs

Associated Press

The Detroit Lions traded running back David Montgomery to the Houston Texans for offensive lineman Juice Scruggs along with fourth and seventh-round picks, according to a person familiar with the situation.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on Monday on the condition of anonymity because the deal had not been announced.

Detroit dealt a veteran running back who wanted more

carries for much-needed depth on the offensive line and extra selections in next month’s NFL draft.

The Lions later released 33-year-old offensive lineman Graham Glasgow, who started 14 games last season and has started 136 games in Detroit and with the Denver Broncos since 2016.

In Houston, Montgomery should have a chance to start. He was a backup with little chance to play behind Jahmyr Gibbs, a Pro Bowl player in

each of his first three NFL seasons.

Montgomery finished with career lows in rushing attempts (158) and yards rushing (716). He still scored eight touchdowns and his 4.5 yards per carry trailed only his career-best 4.6 yards per attempt in 2023 when he had 1,015 yards and 13 touchdowns on the ground during his first season with the Lions.

The 28-year-old Montgomery has 6,115 yards rushing

and 59 touchdowns along with 1,890 yards receiving over four seasons with the Chicago Bears and three with Detroit.

The Lions will likely look to add a backup running back in free agency or the draft.

The Texans drafted Scruggs in the second round in 2023. He might start at center or guard in Detroit, where revamping a once-powerful offensive line is a top priority this offseason after the weakness of the unit led to the team missing the playoffs.

Kraken end Hurricanes' point streak at 12

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Ben Meyers scored his career-high sixth goal and the Seattle Kraken ended Carolina's point streak at 12 games by beating the Hurricanes 2-1 on Monday night.

Kaapo Kakko also scored for Seattle, and Joey Daccord was superb in net with 35 saves. Kraken defenseman Adam Larsson had two assists.

Carolina had won five straight games and seven of eight. It was the first defeat for the Metropolitan Division leaders since a 4-3 overtime loss at Washington on Jan. 31, and their first in regulation since getting blanked 3-0 in St. Louis on Jan. 13.

Seattle avenged a 3-2 loss to Carolina in January and moved into third place in the Pacific Division, one game ahead of Edmonton with a game in hand on the Oilers.

Meyers, who signed a two-year contract extension with the Kraken last week, snuck a backhand shot around goalie Frederik Andersen to give Seattle a 2-0 lead midway through the second period.

Nikolaj Ehlers scored for the

Canes to make it 2-1, ripping a wrist shot past Daccord with 1:30 remaining in the second.

Flyers 3, Maple Leafs 2 (SO): Matvei Michkov and Trevor Zegras scored in a shootout and visiting Philadelphia extended its winning streak to three games with a victory over Toronto.

William Nylander scored on the Maple Leafs' first shootout attempt, but Auston Matthews and Max Domi failed to convert as Toronto's losing streak reached four games.

Noah Cates converted a pass from Bobby Brink with 5:18 remaining in regulation time to give the Flyers a 2-1 lead. The Maple Leafs tied the game when Nylander slammed in a feed from John Tavares on the power play with 2:30 left.

Blue Jackets 5, Rangers 4: Kirill Marchenko scored his second goal of the game 1:04 into overtime and visiting Columbus edged New York after squandering a four-goal lead.

The Blue Jackets built a 4-0 advantage through the first two periods before the Rangers staged a furious comeback, scoring four unanswered goals,

including Gabe Perreault's tying goal with 4:46 remaining in the third to force OT.

Marchenko also added an assist for Columbus, which snapped a two-game skid. Adam Fantilli, Sean Monahan and Mathieu Olivier also scored for the Blue Jackets, and Charlie Coyle had two assists. Elvis Merzlikins stopped 27 of the 31 shots he faced.

Stars 6, Canucks 1: Lian Bichsel scored twice and visiting Dallas beat Vancouver.

Colin Blackwell, Jason Robertson and Matt Duchene each had a goal and an assist for the Stars (37-14-9), who extended their winning streak to a franchise-record nine games.

Adam Erne added a goal for Dallas and Miro Heiskanen and Sam Steel had two assists apiece. Jake Oettinger made 13 saves.

Nikita Tolopilo stopped 31 of the 37 shots he faced in the Canucks' net as they lost a sixth straight game (0-4-2).

Avalanche 4, Kings 2: Devon Toews scored the tiebreaking goal late in the third period, Martin Necas added an empty-netter to go with two assists and visiting

Colorado defeated Los Angeles.

Toews got free in the slot and converted Nathan MacKinnon's pass with 4:55 remaining to help the Avalanche (40-10-9) become the first NHL team with 40 wins this season.

Brandt Clarke had a power-play goal, Angus Booth scored in his NHL debut, and Anton Forsberg made 35 saves for the Kings, who were playing their first game since firing coach Jim Hiller on Sunday and replacing him on an interim basis with D.J. Smith.

Red Wings 4, Predators 2: Alex DeBrincat and Lucas Raymond each scored a goal and added an assist and Cam Talbot made 18 saves in relief of John Gibson to lead visiting Detroit over Nashville.

Gibson did not return for the second period because of an upper-body injury. He stopped 10 of the 11 shots he faced. Emmitt Finnie and Albert Johansson also scored for the Red Wings, who have two of three.

Filip Forsberg and Jonathan Marchessault scored and Juuse Saros made 27 saves for the Predators, who are 1-2-2 in their past five.

Oilers acquire defenseman Murphy from Blackhawks

Associated Press

The Edmonton Oilers are fortifying their defense ahead of the NHL trade deadline as they look to make another deep run in the playoffs.

The back-to-back Western Conference champions acquired dependable defenseman Connor Murphy from Chicago on Monday for a 2028 second-round pick. The Blackhawks are retaining half of Murphy's \$4.4 million salary as part of the deal finalized 93 hours before the deadline Friday.

Edmonton ranks 26th out of the league's 32 teams in goals against this season, including a couple of losses since the Olympic break ended that can be chalked up to shoddy defensive play. The Oilers got beat 6-5 by Anaheim on Wednesday and 5-4 by San Jose on Saturday, defeats to rivals in the Pacific Division that have threatened their

precarious place in the standings.

Murphy, who turns 33 on March 26, is a reliable defender who should slot in on the blue line on the third pair. He's averaging 16½ minutes of ice time through 60 games with Chicago this season, his 13th overall and 12th full one since making his debut in 2013.

He leads the Blackhawks with 87 blocked shots.

Edmonton general manager Stan Bowman has a long history with Murphy. He was GM of Chicago when they acquired Murphy from Arizona in 2017, and Bowman also signed Murphy's current \$17.6 million, four-year contract that expires June 30.

The Oilers are coming off losing the Stanley Cup Final to Florida in consecutive years, with keeping the puck out of the net a

considerable reason for each defeat. Bowman in December made a goaltending swap with Pittsburgh, sending Stuart Skinner to the Penguins for Tristan Jarry as part of a four-player trade that also involved a 2029 second-round pick.

Jarry's .864 save percentage with Edmonton ranks 44th out of 49 goalies who have appeared in at least 10 games since the move on Dec. 12, which also included Brett Kulak being sent to Pittsburgh. The Oilers acquired Spencer Stastney that same day, and getting Murphy is the latest step in piecing together a more solid defense.

To make room for Murphy, Edmonton sent forward Andrew Mangiapane and defenseman Alec Regula to Bakersfield of the American Hockey League after they cleared waivers. Mattias Janmark went on long-term injured reserve.