

Trump pushes NATO on reopening Hormuz

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump is demanding NATO involvement in opening the Strait of Hormuz, saying the alliance's future could hinge on its actions regarding a vital Middle East chokepoint that Iran closed in retaliation for American and Israeli attacks.

In an interview Sunday with the Financial Times, Trump described the issue as a litmus test for the reliability of the alliance.

"If there's no response or if it's a negative response, I think it will be very bad for the future of NATO," he said.

When asked what specifically he was looking for from NATO, Trump said "whatever it takes," including minesweepers and "people who are going to knock out some bad actors that are along the (Iranian) shore."

Trump also called on China to give support as oil prices contin-

ue to rise in the wake of Iran shutting traffic through a waterway through which one-fifth of the world's oil travels.

A frequent critic of NATO, Trump additionally linked the situation in Iran to U.S. support for Ukraine in its war against Russia.

"We've been very sweet," Trump said. "We didn't have to help (the Europeans) with Ukraine. Ukraine is thousands of miles away from us ...but we helped them. Now we'll see if they help us because I've long said that we'll be there for them, but they won't be there for us."

NATO has not yet commented publicly on Trump's call for action from the alliance. However, the alliance's top official, Secretary-General Mark Rutte, earlier this month said the alliance was "not involved" in the military operations.

"But I can assure you that NATO will defend every inch of

NATO territory," he said during a March 3 stop in North Macedonia.

Since then, NATO has bolstered air defenses in member state Turkey to protect it against Iranian missile launches directed at the country.

Since the Feb. 28 start of the U.S. and Israeli bombing campaign in Iran, European reactions to the mission have varied.

For example, Spain has been critical of the effort and refused to allow its bases to be used as launching pads for the operation.

Other allies have sent mixed signals. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the start of the campaign signaled support for the U.S.-led effort, saying he was "on the same page" with Trump.

Pentagon installations in Germany such as Ramstein Air Base have seen an uptick in military air traffic related to the war.

But during a visit to Norway on Friday, Merz said he was concerned about economic upheaval the longer the crisis drags on.

"It is having a massive impact on our energy costs, and it has the potential to trigger large-scale migration," Merz said.

Meanwhile, Trump on Sunday spoke with Britain's prime minister Keir Starmer, whom he has criticized for what Trump considers insufficient support for the U.S. effort.

"The U.K. might be considered the number one ally, the longest-serving, etc., and when I asked for them to come, they didn't want to come," Trump told the Financial Times. "And as soon as we basically wiped out the danger capacity from Iran, they said, 'Oh, well we'll send two ships', and I said, 'We need these ships before we win, not after we win'. I've long said that NATO is a one-way street."

DOD families from Bahrain aided at Europe bases

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Hundreds of military dependents and civilians are heading west after the Pentagon ordered their departure from Bahrain as the war with Iran heads into its third week.

Numerous structures at U.S. Naval Support Activity Bahrain have been destroyed, including communications centers and warehouses, and Bahraini authorities say they are continuing to intercept incoming missiles and drones.

The hasty exits amid the chaos require impromptu navigation of travel reimburse-

ments, school enrollment and housing challenges. As host of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and U.S. 5th Fleet, the base in the Bahrain capital of Manama has some 8,300 service members and is one of the few American military installations in the Middle East that offer accompanied tours.

The base and surrounding neighborhoods have taken heavy fire since the joint U.S.-Israeli campaign called Operation Epic Fury launched on Feb. 28. Two Bahraini residents have died as a result of the attacks, but no Americans in Bahrain are among the dead or injured.

Evacuees began arriving at European bases earlier this month, many of them en route to the U.S. The Pentagon has also authorized the Kaiserslautern area as an alternative safe haven location, allowing families to temporarily join the tens of thousands of Defense Department personnel assigned to the largest American military community overseas.

Across European bases, volunteers have been organizing donations for families often arriving with just the bare essentials. As of Monday, the Ramstein Military and Family Readiness Center was still accepting items such as bedding, kitchen

essentials, car seats and diapers.

Dependents who relocate to the Kaiserslautern Military Community will also be able to enroll their children in local Defense Department schools, according to Pentagon guidance released this month. They have until April 6 to do so.

It is unclear when evacuees might be able to return to Bahrain or retrieve their household goods. Officials at Ramstein are offering to assist families with both temporary and permanent housing options, according to guidance released by the Military and Family Readiness Center.

2 dead in capsizes near base on Okinawa

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA

Stars and Stripes

NAGO, Okinawa — A teenage girl and a boat captain died Monday after two vessels carrying Japanese students on a school trip overturned near the site of a planned Marine Corps airfield, according to Japan's coast guard.

Two motorboats — the 25-foot-long Heiwa-maru and the 20-foot-long Fukutsu — capsized off Henoko Cape near Camp Schwab at 10:10 a.m., the coast guard announced in a news release that day. The accident occurred about 1,500 yards from shore.

The boats were carrying juniors from Doshisha International Senior High School in Kyoto on a trip intended to “learn about peace,” a school

spokesman said by phone Monday.

A 17-year-old female student and the Fukutsu's male captain, in his 70s, were pronounced dead after being taken unconscious to a hospital on Okinawa, the coast guard said in an update.

The student was wearing a life jacket.

Authorities did not release the time of death for either victim, and their names are being withheld pending permission from their families.

Ten students and two crew members were aboard the Heiwa-maru, and eight students and one crew member were aboard the Fukutsu, the release said. All were pulled from the water by the coast guard, which dispatched 11 boats and a helicopter to the scene.

Four people, including the two who died, were injured and taken to hospitals, a coast guard spokesman said by phone. The conditions of the other two injured people were not immediately known.

Some Japanese government officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

The cause of the accident remains under investigation, the coast guard said.

Workers towed the two boats about two miles to Henoko Fishing Port in Nago city and pulled them from the water around 4:15 p.m.

The vessels had previously appeared in protests related to the airfield's construction project, according to the coast guard.

Images of both boats have been posted on the website of

Henoko Blue, a protest group that opposes the plan to reclaim land for the project.

The airfield is being built in waters off Camp Schwab to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which sits in the densely populated city of Ginowan. The relocation plan has been a source of long-running political tension on Okinawa, where many residents oppose the project despite support from the Japanese government.

A spokeswoman for Henoko Blue declined to comment by phone Monday.

Weather conditions at the time of the accident included winds of about 9 mph and waves of more than 1½ feet, according to the coast guard.

A wave warning had been issued for Okinawa's northern coast.

Marines moving to stricter aquatic regimen

BY LYDIA GORDON

Stars and Stripes

Marines will soon be expected to spend more time in the pool in line with the service's plans to overhaul its water survival requirements beginning later this year, according to a recent message to the force.

A new five-level qualification program, set to begin Oct. 1, will replace the current three-tier system of basic, intermediate and advanced swim qualifications.

Additionally, swimming proficiency level will now be factored into Marines' performance evaluations, the March 5 message said.

The change is intended to ensure that Marines are more comfortable in the water and better prepare them for am-

phibious missions, the service said.

The new progression will include a basic level for recruits, followed by the increasingly difficult novice, competent, proficient and advanced levels.

Recruits who do not meet the novice standard before graduation will require a waiver from the recruit depot's commanding general, and the basic qualification will be valid for only one year after completion, the announcement said.

Each qualification beyond the basic level introduces more demanding requirements than the previous system, including time increases for treading water and a greater number of swimming strokes and techniques, according to the Marine Corps' fitness site.

Third injured sailor flown off USS Ford after fire in ship's main laundry area

BY ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

A third sailor injured in a fire last week aboard the USS Gerald R. Ford was flown off the aircraft carrier to receive medical treatment, according to the Navy.

Ford is operating in the Red Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury, the ongoing joint American and Israeli military campaign against Iran.

The unidentified sailor reported to shipboard medical staff after the service's statement Thursday about the fire and two other injured sailors, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet spokesman Cmdr. Joseph Hontz said Satur-

day.

That sailor is in stable condition, Hontz said.

The two others finished medical treatment and were released for duty, he said, adding that an investigation into the fire is ongoing.

The blaze started in Ford's main laundry areas Thursday and subsequently was fully contained. It was unrelated to combat, the Navy said.

The carrier's propulsion plant was not damaged and the ship remained fully operational, the Navy said in a statement the same day.

Ford has been in the Red Sea since transiting the Suez Canal on March 5.

Allies airlift Marines into Finland in drill

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Marines were airlifted into Finland's Arctic by NATO allies during a military exercise that highlighted the ongoing cooperation of U.S. and European forces in the strategically vital High North.

The airlift on Wednesday carried a rifle company belonging to the 6th Marine Regiment from Bardufoss, Norway, to Rovaniemi, Finland, as part of exercise Cold Response, according to a Marine Corps statement Friday.

Two KC-130J Super Hercules aircraft operated by the Franco-German Binational Air Transport Squadron flew alongside a third KC-130J from Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 252, based at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., to transport the Marines north.

For the Marine Corps, the operation demonstrated how aviation and logistics units can

quickly move combat forces across the Arctic, where long distances, extreme weather and limited infrastructure complicate military operations.

"As we continue to shape the future of distributed aviation operations and maneuver warfare, long-range assault support platforms will play an increasingly pivotal role," said Marine Maj. Rich Webb, a KC-130J pilot and weapons and tactics instructor with VMGR-252.

Cold Response is a biennial exercise led by Norway that is designed to test how NATO forces operate together in Arctic conditions and defend the alliance's northern flank.

More than 20,000 troops are participating this year, including roughly 4,000 U.S. personnel from the Marines, Air Force and Army.

Last week's flight to Finland marked the first time the Franco-German squadron has transported U.S. Marines, the statement said.

The Arctic has taken on increased strategic importance in recent years, as the region grows more significant for security and shipping routes.

Russia has strengthened its military presence there, and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 pushed two European countries famous for their neutrality to join the alliance.

Finland was granted NATO membership in 2023, followed by Sweden in 2024, strengthening NATO's presence in Russia's backyard.

After landing in Finland, the contingent from Echo Company, 2nd Battalion linked up with equipment and supplies that had been moved into position by Combat Logistics Battalion 6, which completed a multiday convoy through Norway, Sweden and Finland.

The airlift was coordinated by the NATO Combined Air Operations Centre in Bodo, Norway, which oversees air operations across the Nordic region, the Baltic Sea, the north Atlantic Ocean and the Barents Sea.

Zelenskyy says nation ready for talks to be set

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine—Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in comments released Sunday that he was ready for the next round of trilateral peace talks to end Russia's more than 4-year-old invasion of Ukraine, but that it was up to Washington and Moscow to agree on where and when to meet.

Zelenskyy said the U.S. had proposed hosting the next meeting between American, Ukrainian and Russian negotiating team, but Moscow had refused to send a delegation.

"We are waiting for a response from the Americans. Either they will change the country where we meet, or the Russians must confirm the U.S.," Zelenskyy said in a media briefing Saturday. "We are not blocking any of these initiatives. We want a trilateral meeting to take place."

The U.S. has postponed its sponsored talks between the two sides due to the Iran war, which has drawn the international spotlight away from Ukraine's plight as it strives to hold back Russia's bigger army.

Speaking to journalists, Zelenskyy also warned of a "very high" risk that the Iran war could drain the air defense stockpiles Ukraine depends on to counter Russian missile strikes.

Army chaplain's coffee quest led to rescue efforts at Austrian rest stop

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy—A twice-thwarted attempt to satisfy a craving for cappuccino ended up turning an Italy-based U.S. Army chaplain into a godsend for two men seriously injured in a truck fire along an Austrian highway.

Chaplain (Maj.) Brian Bailey credited the timing to divine providence in explaining what recently led him to a rest stop in Angath, Austria, where a parked semi-truck had exploded into flames.

On March 8, Bailey was returning to U.S. Army Garrison Italy in Vicenza after attending a training class in Germany. He pulled into a roadside commercial area seeking a cappuccino. The establishment was jammed with travelers, so Bailey drove on. To his disappointment, the next rest area where he stopped did not offer cappuccino.

He continued down the highway, pulling into a third rest area at Angath Nord, about 42 miles northeast of Innsbruck, when he soon saw black smoke billowing near the building.

A closer look revealed a panicked scene, with the cab of a semi-truck in flames, its badly burned driver lying on the pavement and a second injured man closer to the burning vehicle. That's when the 41-year-old Iraq War veteran's experience kicked in.

"The training that I've received in the Army

and the relationships I've had from people in my life, I felt like those were driving me to get out of the car," Bailey said.

Soon, Bailey was helping a Polish passer-by move the second injured man to safety. The 37-year-old Lithuanian had injured his leg while trying to rescue the truck driver, Bailey said. Using his medical training, Bailey checked both men's vital signs and stabilized them while directing bystanders to call emergency services.

Fearful that the truck driver might go into cardiac arrest, Bailey ran into the rest stop asking in his "best German" for an automated external defibrillator, he said. He obtained the device and went back to rendering first aid.

Eventually, the truck driver was flown by helicopter to a Bavarian hospital. The injured Lithuanian man, who also suffered burns, was taken by ambulance to a local hospital, the online news site Unsertirol24.com reported March 9. Their conditions are unknown.

After the injured were evacuated, Bailey called his wife to explain what had happened and continued back to Italy.

He also relived the experience, thanking God for the injured Lithuanian man who pulled the driver from the burning truck and other people who helped at the scene.

"In that moment, you realize how fragile life can be," Bailey said.

Snow, wind hit Eastern US and Midwest

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Chaotic weather coast to coast in the U.S. — from unusual heat in California to damaging winds around Washington, D.C. — put over 100 million people in the path of extreme conditions on Monday.

Storms across the nation's eastern half forced airlines to cancel more than 2,000 flights nationwide Monday, and many schools closed early in the mid-Atlantic states where high winds and tornadoes were in the forecast.

Blizzards buried parts of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota while torrential rains flooded homes and washed out roads in Hawaii.

In Washington, the House of Representatives postponed votes because of difficulty traveling with inclement weather.

Airport delays and cancellations could pile up Monday in some of the nation's largest airports — including those in Washington, New York and Chicago.

"This is what happens in March and April," said Brian

Hurley, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. "It's a clash in the air masses. Winter, not wanting to let go from the North, and then obviously the sun's getting a little stronger, it's warming up in the South."

The storm system that dropped snow by the foot in the Midwest is barreling toward the East Coast with dangerously high winds and potential for "producing strong and long track tornadoes," the weather service warned Monday.

"Today, it's the wind that's

really the threat," said Northern Illinois University meteorology professor Victor Gensini.

A stretch from parts of South Carolina to Maryland appeared most likely to experience the greatest damaging winds Monday afternoon, the weather service said. That could include Raleigh, N.C.; Richmond, Va.; and the nation's capital.

North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein urged residents to enable emergency alerts on their phones ahead of expected wind gusts topping 70 mph.

CEOs demand DHS funds restored, pay for workers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The CEOs of the nation's top airline companies, including American, Delta, Southwest and JetBlue, are imploring Congress to restore funding to the Department of Homeland Security and embrace a bipartisan solution to pay federal aviation workers including airport security officers during the partial government shutdown.

"Once again, air travel is the political football amid another government shutdown," the ex-

ecutives wrote in an open letter to Congress that was published Sunday online and in The Washington Post.

The letter, which was also signed by the CEOs of the cargo companies UPS, FedEx and Atlas Air, said that Congress should pass the Aviation Funding Solvency Act and the Aviation Funding Stability Act, which would guarantee air traffic controllers are paid regardless of the government's funding status, as well as the Keep America Flying Act. That mea-

sure would offer the same protections to Transportation Security Administration officers tasked to provide security and to screen all travelers.

"It's difficult, if not impossible, to put food on the table, put gas in the car and pay rent when you are not getting paid," the letter said.

The current partial shutdown affects only the Department of Homeland Security, which includes TSA. Democrats in Congress refused to fund the department over ob-

jections to its immigration enforcement tactics.

The lapse marks the third shutdown in less than a year to leave TSA workers temporarily without pay — and once the government reopens, to have to wait for back pay.

Democratic lawmakers have said DHS won't get funded until new restrictions are placed on federal immigration operations following the fatal shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good in Minneapolis earlier this year.

Trump's mass deportation agenda is at a crossroads

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Department of Homeland Security will soon be under new management, an opportunity to reset President Donald Trump's immigration agenda or to double down on his signature campaign promise to conduct the largest deportation operation in American history.

The White House's political director recently encouraged party lawmakers during a retreat at the Republican president's golf club in Florida to focus on immigration enforce-

ment against criminals, a pivot from the mass deportation agenda he ran on. House Speaker Mike Johnson said the aggressive operations have created a "hiccup" for the party, which is now embarking on a "course correction."

Yet all indications are that Trump's mass deportation operation is not stalling out but intensifying, with billions of dollars being spent to hire Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, build warehouse detention sites and meet the administration's goal of rounding

up and removing some 1 million immigrants from the U.S. this year.

"We are at an interesting moment where it has been an inflection point — the public has finally seen what mass detention and mass deportation mean," said Sarah Mehta, who tracks the issue at the American Civil Liberties Union.

"This is not an agency that's slowing down," she said. "They're really going forward with some of the cruelest policies."

White House spokeswoman

Abigail Jackson said the president's policies have sent immigrants out of the U.S., either through forced deportations or on their own, and sealed up the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Nobody is changing the administration's immigration enforcement agenda," she said.

The questions put Homeland Security at a crossroads. Secretary Kristi Noem is on her way out, and Trump's nominee to replace her, Sen. Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma, appears this week for Senate confirmation hearings.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ruptured pipe that leaked waste back in operation

DC WASHINGTON — The massive sewage pipe that ruptured and leaked millions of gallons of raw waste into the Potomac River returned to operation Saturday after emergency repairs.

DC Water, the utility that runs Washington's water and sewage systems, reported that it had completed testing to determine whether the 72-inch pipe could handle the flow.

The Potomac Interceptor ruptured on Jan. 19, sending 250 million gallons of untreated sewage into the river just north of the nation's capital over the first five days.

The utility worked with the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies to repair the leak and monitor the ecological impact on the river. Other work on the pipe and system could take months.

Zoo visitors told to leave after second bomb threat

FL MIAMI — Zoo Miami abruptly closed Saturday afternoon after a bomb threat for the second day in a row, according to a social media post from the zoo.

More than 100 cars were stuck in traffic on the road leading out of the attraction.

The zoo also had a bomb threat on Friday. The zoo closed after "an anonymous phone call reporting a bomb threat," the facility said.

The Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office sent deputies, including specialized units, to conduct a "thorough sweep of the property," the agency said Friday.

The sheriff's office told the Miami Herald that the Friday call was likely a hoax, but deputies were nevertheless checking the area.

Ex-lawmaker admits to security guard romance

NC RALEIGH — Former U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema acknowledges having a romantic relationship with a member of her security detail that began while she was a lawmaker, according to legal documents. But she also contends she shouldn't be subject to a lawsuit by the man's ex-wife who blames Sinema for the marriage breakup.

The North Carolina federal court litigation seeks financial damages from Sinema, who represented Arizona in the U.S. House and later the Senate for one term that ended early last year. Heather Ammel contends in a lawsuit that she and husband Matthew had "a good and loving marriage" and "genuine love and affection" existed between them before Sinema interfered, pursuing him despite knowing he was married.

North Carolina is one of a handful of states that allow jilted spouses to sue for "alienation of affection" to seek damages from a third party responsible for the breakup of their marriage.

State's national parks set new attendance record

CA LOS ANGELES — Despite morale-sapping staff layoffs, bizarre executive orders and a 43-day federal government shutdown last fall, the grandeur and serenity

of national parks in California remain irresistible to outdoors lovers looking to unwind.

The nine national parks in the Golden State — including Yosemite, Death Valley and Joshua Tree — attracted nearly 12 million recreational visits in 2025, according to statistics from the National Park Service.

That's up more than 800,000 visits from 2024 and up more than 300,000 from the previous record set in 2019, according to the data, which stretches back to 1979.

Nationally, visits were high, at 323 million, but down a couple of percentage points from the record set in 2024, according to a park service news release.

Charges against vet who burned flag to be dropped

DC WASHINGTON — The Justice Department has moved to dismiss charges against an Army veteran who set fire to an American flag near the White House last year to protest President Donald Trump's executive order on flag burning.

Jay Carey, 55, of Arden, N.C., who has said he served in the Army from 1989 to 2012 and was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, was arrested on Aug. 25 after he set fire to a flag in Lafayette Park, which the National Park Service oversees. Earlier that day, Trump signed an executive order requiring the Justice Department to investigate and prosecute people for burning the American flag.

Carey was charged with two misdemeanors that aren't focused on the act of burning a flag: igniting a fire in an undes-

ignated area and lighting a fire causing damage to property or park resources. He pleaded not guilty in September. Friday's filing did not explain the decision to move to dismiss and the U.S. Attorney's office for the District of Columbia did not immediately respond on Saturday to an email seeking comment.

The Supreme Court has ruled that flag burning is a legitimate political expression protected by the Constitution. Trump's order asserted that burning a flag can be prosecuted if it "is likely to incite imminent lawless action" or amounts to "fighting words."

Gutted 9/11 program now reassigning staff to ICE

NY NEW YORK — Staffers at the federal World Trade Center Health Program — which has already seen more than a 25% drop in personnel — have been reassigned to work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Indian Health Service, advocates for the 9/11 community said.

They are demanding a hearing with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert Kennedy to discuss concerns about delays and cutbacks at the vital agency.

At least two staffers, including the deputy director of the program, have been temporarily reassigned to ICE and the Indian Health Service, Rep. Nick LaLota, R-N.Y., wrote in a letter to Kennedy requesting a "congressional briefing" about how "operational challenges are limiting access to care for responders and survivors."

— From wire reports

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Miami (Ohio) just squeezes into men's bracket

Associated Press

The team that went undefeated in the regular season, racked up more victories than anyone but Duke and Arizona — and fewer losses than any team at all — is anything but your run-of-the-mill basketball behemoth.

In fact, Miami (Ohio), despite that 31-1 record and maybe because of a little chip that's been placed on its shoulder, is one of those plucky underdogs that makes the NCAA Tournament what it is.

Welcome to March Madness with a twist.

While the Blue Devils (32-2) took the overall top seed on Selection Sunday, with the Wildcats (32-2), Michigan (31-3) and defending champion Florida (26-7) also on the top line, the RedHawks barely scratched their way into the bracket.

They are an 11 seed and have to play a First Four game against

SMU on Wednesday. But after all the debate and hand-wringing that came with their single loss last week, which immediately turned them from sure thing into bubble team, they now enjoy the same privilege as the other 67 teams in the field.

They will have a chance to win and advance, with no selection committee, bracketologists or former coaches-turned-TV experts deciding their fate.

"I was very confident," Miami forward Eian Elmer said. "I think it's hard to leave a team that's 31-0 in a regular season out. It just wouldn't look right for the sport, diminishing something like that, something that's very rarely done."

After the First Four, the full slate of games begins Thursday and Friday, with the national champion set to be crowned in Indianapolis on April 6.

The chair of the selection com-

mittee, Keith Gill, tried to explain how the RedHawks of the lightly regarded Mid-American Conference ended up where they did. Miami, he said, was not the last of the 37 at-large teams slotted into the field.

But, he said, the RedHawks were ranked last of those 37 teams because once they got in, they were compared against other teams close to them, and things like their 339th-ranked strength of schedule and zero wins (in fact, zero games) against top-caliber, or Quadrant 1, opponents worked against them.

Other factors worked for them, including having the nation's second-ranked scoring offense, along with a "strength of record" in the top 30 and "wins above bubble" in the top 40 (each of those statistics would take a small pamphlet to explain).

"They have some really

strong resume metrics that show their accomplishments," Gill said.

For what it's worth, Miami is an 8½-point underdog against SMU and a 2000-1 longshot to win it all, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

Unlikely, indeed, but still better odds than the much-cited 9.2 quintillion-1 odds a person has of filling out a perfect bracket.

The favorite to win the national championship, according to BetMGM, is Michigan, which was listed at 13-4 shortly after the bracket came out, just a tad ahead of Duke, which was 10-3.

The Wolverines took a mini-hit in the seedings, dropping a notch to overall No. 3 after an eight-point loss to Purdue in the Big Ten title game. The Boiler-makers are a 2 seed instead of a 3 with the win, heading to St. Louis to play tournament first-timer Queens.

UConn edges UCLA as top seed in women's tournament

Associated Press

UConn edged UCLA as the No. 1 overall seed in women's NCAA Tournament when the bracket was announced Sunday night.

Having the top spot in March Madness didn't really matter to Huskies coach Geno Auriemma as he looks to lead the team to another undefeated season with the school's 13th national championship.

"We have been in that situation before, not that much different than being a No. 2 seed or a No. 1 seed somewhere else," Auriemma said. "I think it is important that we recognize that there are a lot of good teams out there and there are times I felt like we deserved a No. 1 seed based on our wins, our record, who we have beaten and it didn't pan out that way. This year it did."

UConn (34-0) needs six more victories to complete the seventh undefeated season in school history. The Huskies are trying to become the first team to repeat as champion since the program won four in a row from 2013-16.

UConn was joined by UCLA, Texas and South Carolina as No. 1 seeds.

The Huskies, who are led by stars Sarah Strong and Azzi Fudd, open the tournament at home against 16th-seeded UTSA and will play

in the Fort Worth Regional. If seeds hold, they could face No. 2 Vanderbilt, which is coached by former UConn great Shea Ralph. This is the 23rd time UConn has earned a No. 1 seed and first since 2021.

"When you break it all down, in the next three weeks, if we are lucky enough to play all three weeks, you have to beat the best teams," Auriemma said. "It doesn't matter if you are the 1, 2, 3 or whatever (seed) you are. There are some teams in there that we have already played or just recently played. Everybody is going in front of the media and say our bracket is the toughest, what our matchups are and it is just pointless."

UCLA (31-1) was just behind the Huskies as the second overall seed in the tournament. The Bruins have won 25 straight games in dominant fashion after their lone loss against Texas on a neutral court.

"The debate was pretty close the whole time between the two teams," said NCAA selection committee chair Amanda Braun. "Went to a committee vote, watched a lot of UCLA and UConn — the vote went to UConn. The observable component, the way we watched UConn win throughout the year. UCLA did a lot of winning as well. The committee felt the ob-

servable component gave UConn the edge."

The Bruins reached the Final Four last year before losing to the Huskies. Cori Close's team ran through the Big Ten and has an experienced group led by center Lauren Betts looking to win the school's first NCAA championship.

UCLA will try to win the first women's national championship for the Big Ten Conference since 1999. The Bruins are one of 12 Big Ten teams in the field. That matches the record they set last season for most teams in the tournament. The SEC has 10, the ACC nine and Big 12 eight.

Other top teams in UCLA's region are No. 2 LSU, No. 3 Duke and No. 4 Minnesota.

Texas (31-3) earned the third No. 1 seed after winning the SEC Tournament title. The Longhorns beat South Carolina in two of the three meetings this season. Texas will play in Fort Worth Regional 3. Other top teams in the Longhorns' region are No. 2 Michigan, No. 3 Louisville and No. 4 West Virginia.

The Gamecocks (31-3) are the No. 1 seed in the Sacramento Regional 4 and have been a No. 1 seed for six consecutive seasons. They will be joined by No. 2 Iowa, No. 3 TCU and No. 4 Oklahoma.

US defeats Dominicans to reach final

Associated Press

MIAMI — Team USA's celebration after beating the Dominican Republic on Sunday night in the World Baseball Classic semifinals was electric and brief.

NL Cy Young award winner Paul Skenes roared "Let's go!" after the final out. Closer Mason Miller let out a yell and pointed toward the sky. Players and coaches embraced on the field.

Moments later, the smiles were gone and the message was clear: They've got more work to do.

"Got the job done. That's it," Miller said. "That's all we're here to do is do our job."

The loaded U.S. team — led by Skenes and featuring stars Bryce Harper and Aaron Judge — outdueled the Dominican Republic 2-1 to reach its third straight WBC title game. The Americans won in 2017 and fell to Shohei Ohtani and Japan in 2023. They will face the winner of the second semifinal Monday

night between Italy and Venezuela in the title game Tuesday night.

Even though the Americans were favored to get back to the final, the run hasn't been quite as dominant as expected.

A shocking loss to Italy in pool play left the Americans needing help to advance to the quarterfinals, where they beat Canada, but manager Mark DeRosa still believes his lineup has another gear to reach.

"I'm still waiting for our offense to explode," he said. "But it's tough to explode against a pitching staff like that"

The U.S. didn't need an offensive outburst to beat a talented Dominican squad.

Junior Caminero gave the Dominicans a 1-0 lead in the second with the country's tournament-record 15th home run, driving Skenes' 1-2 sweeper 401 feet to left.

Gunnar Henderson, starting at third base over Alex Bregman, answered in the fourth

with a tying solo shot off Luis Severino. Roman Anthony followed later with the go-ahead homer against Gregory Soto.

"I feel like we haven't played our complete game yet," Henderson said, "but we came through and battled each and every game, and I feel like that's just a testament to the guys in this room."

The Dominicans cruised through the early rounds and reached the semis for the first time since winning the WBC title in 2013.

They faced their biggest test of the tournament against Skenes (2-0), who gave up one run on six hits through 4½ innings, and the U.S. bullpen, which combined for 4½ innings of two-hit ball.

The Dominicans threatened in the ninth when Julio Rodríguez drew a walk and advanced to third against Miller. The closer secured a controversial final out against Geraldo Perdomo for his second save.

"I'm disappointed about the way the game (ended)," Dominican manager Albert Pujols said, "but I don't want to criticize any of that. It just wasn't meant to be for us."

The matchup between the two star-studded lineups delivered plenty of big moments.

In the third, Judge fired a 95.7 mph laser from right field that allowed Henderson to tag out Fernando Tatis Jr. at third. After taking one of Skenes' fastballs to the wrist, Rodríguez scaled the center-field wall to rob Judge of a home run in the fifth. In the bottom half, shortstop Bobby Witt Jr. turned an impressive double play to get the Americans out of a jam.

"The WBC has this magnetic way of just growing the game of baseball," DeRosa said. "I go back to the last time when Ohtani struck out Mike Trout, and baseball won that night. Whether we won or didn't win, baseball won. I think baseball won again tonight."

Hamlin overcomes early penalty for Cup win at Vegas

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Denny Hamlin returned to victory lane at Las Vegas Motor Speedway on Sunday for his first win since he lost the NASCAR championship four months ago, and first since the death of his father in a December house fire.

"I knew it took a few weeks to feel like driving," Hamlin said after his 61st career victory. "Over the last couple weeks, I definitely regained my love of it, got refocused. These are great opportunities for us."

Hamlin's 60th career victory was at Las Vegas last October, a win he dedicated to his father as it locked Hamlin into NASCAR's championship-deciding finale. His father was in poor health and Hamlin went into the race knowing it was probably his final chance to win a cham-

pionship while Dennis Hamlin was still alive.

Then Hamlin dominated last year's title-decider at Phoenix Raceway but the wrong call on the final pit stop cost him the Cup championship that has eluded the three-time Daytona 500 winner.

What followed was an emotional rollercoaster: Hamlin, as co-owner of 23XI Racing, was part of the winning team in a federal lawsuit against NASCAR last December. Weeks later, his father was killed in a fire that destroyed the home Hamlin purchased to thank his parents for getting him into NASCAR.

He returned for the start of his 21st season and went to victory lane as an owner with Tyler Reddick when the 23XI Racing driver won the Daytona 500 and

then set a NASCAR record by winning the first three races of the year.

Most of the attention went to 23XI co-owner Michael Jordan as Reddick won Daytona, Atlanta and Circuit of the Americas.

Hamlin did his part at Las Vegas to put himself back in the spotlight.

"It is just so satisfying, so gratifying. You just never know what can happen year over year if you still have it or not," said Hamlin. "I wasn't totally locked in for the first few weeks. We've just been hitting our stride now. This is our bread and butter, these are the tracks that we know we can go win, and we executed. This is a team win. The team did it."

The 45-year-old Virginia driver overcome an early speeding penalty and drove

from 31st through the field in a fairly dominating win for Joe Gibbs Racing and Toyota. He led a race-high 134 laps.

Hamlin was joined by his fiancée and their three children as he collected the checkered flag, and he was sure his father was smiling somewhere.

"This is a family sport. My family obviously had so much sacrifice to help me get here," said Hamlin.

Toyota has won four of the first five races.

Hendrick Motorsports teammates Chase Elliott and William Byron finished second and third in Chevrolets; JGR drivers Christopher Bell and Ty Gibbs were fourth and fifth to give JGR three cars in the top-five.

"It makes my job really easy when I can drive Toyotas that fast," Hamlin said.

Thunder top T-wolves for 8th straight win

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 20 points and 10 assists, and the Oklahoma City Thunder defeated the Minnesota Timberwolves 116-103 on Sunday for their eighth straight win.

Gilgeous-Alexander barely extended his record streak of games with at least 20 points to 128. He had just 10 points heading into the fourth, and he re-entered the game with 7:10 left after resting.

He scored on a stepback against Anthony Edwards with 1:46 remaining and was fouled to reach 19 points. With the crowd standing and chanting “M-V-P!” he drained the free throw to keep the streak alive and push himself further past Wilt Chamberlain’s old mark of 126.

Chet Holmgren had 21 points and nine rebounds and Isaiah Joe added 20 points for the Thunder, who improved to a league-best 53-15.

Julius Randle scored 32 points and Edwards added 19 for the Timberwolves.

The Thunder forced 22 turnovers while committing just seven. Oklahoma City attempted 101 shots while Minnesota tried 77.

Raptors 119, Pistons 108: Brandon Ingram had a game-high 34 points and host Toronto defeated Detroit.

RJ Barrett added 27 points and six rebounds for Toronto, which has won back-to-back games.

The win helped the Raptors hang on to sixth in the Eastern Conference.

Cade Cunningham had 33 points and nine assists as the first-place Pistons had their three-game win streak snapped.

Bucks 134, Pacers 123: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 31 points and pulled down 14 rebounds before leaving the game with an injury, and host Milwaukee beat Indiana.

Antetokounmpo landed awkwardly as he completed a dunk late in the third quarter. He briefly remained in the game and dunked again on Milwaukee’s next possession. He got fouled the possession after that

and attempted a pair of free throws before heading to the locker room.

Antetokounmpo also had eight assists while Bobby Portis scored 29 points and added 10 rebounds.

Mavericks 130, Cavaliers 120: Cooper Flagg scored 27 points, Naji Marshall added 25 and visiting Dallas bounced back from a 33-point loss to Cleveland two days ago to defeat the Cavaliers.

The Mavericks, who were routed 138-105 on Friday night, pulled away in the second half to snap a seven-game losing streak against the Cavaliers.

It was the 12th time this season Flagg has scored at least 27 points. The top overall pick in the 2025 NBA Draft was 10 of 17 from the field and also had 10 assists and six rebounds in 33 minutes.

Knicks 110, Warriors 107: Jalen Brunson had 30 points and nine assists, and host New York rallied from a 21-point deficit against a patchwork Golden State lineup to beat the Warriors.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 17

points and 12 rebounds for the Knicks, while OG Anunoby and Jordan Clarkson both had 14 points.

The Knicks took a while to wake up in their return home from a five-game road trip but picked up their third straight victory.

76ers 109, Trail Blazers 103: Quentin Grimes scored 14 of his season-high 31 points in the fourth quarter as short-handed host Philadelphia beat Portland.

The Sixers were playing without Joel Embiid, Tyrese Maxey and Kelly Oubre Jr. due to injuries.

Kings 116, Jazz 111: DeMar DeRozan scored a season-high 41 points and had 11 assists to help host Sacramento hold off Utah.

DeRozan, who passed Hall of Famer Tim Duncan last week for 18th place on the NBA’s career scoring list, was 11-for-21 from the floor while reaching 40 points for the first time since Feb. 2, 2025. It’s the 417th time he has scored 20 or more points while shooting at least 50%.

Fleury ends 2-year goal drought, lifts Jets past Blues

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Haydn Fleury scored his first goal in more than two years and added an assist, Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele each had their 31st goal and the Winnipeg Jets edged the St. Louis Blues 3-2 on Sunday.

Eric Comrie made 29 saves in his career-high 21st start of the season and first since Feb. 25 to give him a personal-best 11 wins. The victory also extended the backup’s winning streak to five games, the longest for a Jets goaltender this season. Starter Connor Hellebuyck had a four-game run in October.

Fleury gave Winnipeg a 1-0 lead at 2:31 of the first period, scoring his first goal in his 64th game since signing with the Jets as a free agent in July 2024. Fleu-

ry last scored on Dec. 19, 2023, while with Tampa Bay.

The assist was also the first of the season for Fleury, who has played in 25 games this season. He had seven assists last season in 39 games for Winnipeg.

Dalibor Dvorsky and Dylan Holloway scored for the Blues, who lost in regulation for the first time in March (6-1-1), snapping their seven-game points streak.

Senators 7, Sharks 4: Drake Batherson scored twice, including the eventual game winner, as host Ottawa beat San Jose.

With the game tied at 4, Batherson put the Senators (34-23-9) ahead when an Artem Zub shot bounced in off him when he turned to protect himself.

Mario Ferraro, Tyler Toffoli, Collin Graf and Michael Misa

scored for San Jose.

Kraken 6, Panthers 2: Bobby McMann had a power-play goal and added an assist in his second game for the Kraken, and host Seattle beat Florida on Sunday night to move into the second wild-card spot in the West.

Two-time defending champion Florida is in danger of becoming the first Cup-winning team to miss the playoffs the following season since Los Angeles in 2014-15.

The Panthers are 11 points out of the final wild card in the East.

Ducks 4, Canadiens 3: Cutter Gauthier scored with 2:30 left, Leo Carlsson had two goals and an assist and visiting Anaheim beat Montreal to regain the Pacific Division lead.

Nick Suzuki had a goal and an

assist for Montreal; Alex Newhook and Cole Caufield also scored.

Oilers 3, Predators 1: Connor McDavid had three assists, linemate Leon Draisaitl scored but was injured soon after, and host Edmonton beat Nashville to end a two-game losing streak.

Draisaitl took a hard early hit from Ozy Wiesblatt. The Edmonton star came back for a couple of shifts, but didn’t return for the start of the second period.

Maple Leafs 4, Wild 2: Bo Groulx scored twice and Toronto held on for a road victory over Minnesota.

Morgan Rielly also scored and Matthew Knies added an empty-net goal for Toronto as Minnesota pushed to rally from a three-goal deficit after two periods.