

Iran defiant as Trump touts war gains

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump on Thursday said the war in Iran was “way ahead of schedule,” claiming the Middle Eastern country’s military capabilities have been “obliterated,” even as Tehran insists it is not interested in negotiations to end the conflict.

“We estimated it would take approximately 4-6 weeks to achieve our mission, and we’re way ahead of schedule if you look at what we’ve done in terms of the destruction of that country,” Trump said during a White House Cabinet meeting.

In its latest update, U.S. Central Command said it has significantly degraded Iran’s military capabilities, destroying large portions of its navy and missile production sites as the war approaches the one-month mark.

The U.S. has struck more than 10,000 targets, destroying 92% of Iran’s largest naval vessels and damaging or destroying two-thirds of its missile and drone production sites and shipyards, Adm. Brad Cooper, commander

of U.S. Central Command, said Wednesday on X.

The command has also claimed that Iran’s drone and missile launch rates are down by more than 90%, drastically reducing its ability to attack American forces and regional neighbors.

“My operational assessment continues to be: Iran’s combat capability is declining as U.S. combat capability continues to increase,” Cooper said.

The White House says it is engaged in talks to end the joint U.S.-Israeli operation, which has resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. troops and killed more than 2,400 people in Iran and Lebanon, according to those governments’ figures.

The Islamic Republic is waiting for a response to its rejection of a U.S. 15-point plan to end the war, the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported. Tehran has a string of its own conditions, Tasnim said, one of which is a guarantee that the United States and Israel won’t resume their attacks.

Iran’s conditions to agree to a ceasefire include the payment of reparations for war damages and recognition of Iran’s authority over the Strait of Hormuz, Tasnim said, citing an informed source.

U.S. officials, including Trump, insist the talks are still on.

“They are begging to make a deal, not me,” Trump said on Thursday, adding: “In the meantime, we’ll just keep blowing them away, unimpeded, unstoppable.”

The U.S. is preparing to send thousands more troops to the region, including Marines and paratroopers, as Iran continues its airstrikes and retains a chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz. Israel on Thursday said it had killed the commander of Iran’s navy, Alireza Tangsiri, whom Israeli officials said was directly responsible for the blockade of the strait.

Iran is looking to formalize a transit fee for the Strait of Hormuz, with lawmakers working on a draft bill to impose a toll in exchange for providing security to ships passing via the key water-

way, according to the Fars news agency.

Trump is under pressure to persuade Tehran to reopen the critical waterway for oil and gas flows, a step needed to arrest a global supply shock. On Thursday, he said Iran allowed 10 boats of oil to sail through the strait as a gesture of goodwill.

Trump had set a deadline for Iran to negotiate an agreement to end the war by the end of the week, though the ongoing impasse has raised questions about the likelihood for a deal in that time frame. Asked for an update Thursday, Trump would only say “we’ll see.”

Vice President JD Vance may travel to Pakistan for Iran talks this weekend, CNN reported.

Since the war started on Feb. 28, Iran has effectively shuttered the conduit for about a fifth of the world’s oil and liquefied natural gas, triggering a global supply shock. The Islamic Republic is still able to export its own crude from the strait, likely earning hundreds of millions of dollars of extra income.

Coast Guard is operating with a ‘grim uncertainty’

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The 40-day shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security has led to several missed paychecks for the Coast Guard’s civilian employees and a “grim uncertainty” of potential missed pay for its military members.

It has prevented the service from paying more than 5,000 utility accounts, putting the Coast Guard’s critical infrastructure in “imminent danger” of widespread utility shutoffs and refusals of fuel deliveries.

And it has stalled the processing of more than 16,000 merchant marine credentials, with the backlog growing by 300 per day.

Those are just some of the effects the fund-

ing lapse has had on the Coast Guard, which operates under the department in peacetime, the service’s vice commandant, Adm. Thomas Allan, told lawmakers on Wednesday.

“These realities erode the sacred trust our men and women have in the nation they serve,” Allan said in testimony to the House Committee on Homeland Security. “Every day the shutdown drags on moves us closer to a tipping point.”

It takes the Coast Guard two and a half days to recover from each day it is in a shutdown, he said, meaning if the shutdown were to end Wednesday, the service would not catch up with bills and other affected activities until July 3.

Negotiations to end the shutdown, which be-

gan on Feb. 14, took on more urgency this week as lawmakers pushed to resolve the impasse before leaving for a two-week recess on Friday.

But a bipartisan deal has yet to emerge.

Senate Republicans sent a proposal to Democrats on Tuesday to fund the entirety of the department except for parts of Immigration and Customs Enforcement involved in the Trump administration’s deportation crackdown.

Democrats, who have unsuccessfully offered bills to separate funding for the department from ICE and Customs and Border Protection, sent a counteroffer with ICE reforms on Wednesday morning, according to Sen. Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York.

Deal hastens anti-missile seeker production

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Anti-missile seekers would quadruple in production under an agreement signed between the Pentagon and the anti-missile defense system's builders, the Defense Department announced Wednesday.

BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin agreed to prioritize the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, a key weapon in fighting missiles and drones fired by Iran at U.S. and allied targets during the current Middle East conflict.

Under the agreement, annual construction of seekers would follow a January deal that saw Lockheed agree to try to increase production of THAAD interceptors from 96 to 400 per year.

The Pentagon released no financial details of the agreement.

Guided by BAE Systems' seekers, THAAD interceptors lock onto ballistic missiles flying as fast as 17,000 mph.

The interceptor strikes the target with sufficient kinetic energy — speed and force — to destroy the incoming warheads.

The system can intercept targets inside and outside Earth's atmosphere.

THAAD can defend a larger geographic area than the Patriot missile, according to a Congressional Research Service report last year. It's part of an anti-missile system used by the United States that also includes the AEGIS Missile Defense System and the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense System.

Michael Duffey, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, said the THAAD deal would ensure the speed and scale needed for anti-missile defense now and in the future.

"We are providing the certainty our partners need to invest, expand and hire. This is how we place the industrial base on a wartime footing," Duffey said.

BAE Systems signed on to a seven-year "framework" to increase production fourfold and accelerate delivery of the infrared seeker for THAAD.

"The THAAD seeker provides critical sensing and guidance capabilities to help protect the United States and its global allies from ballistic missiles," BAE Systems said in a statement

Wednesday.

BAE Systems said the THAAD seeker production work would be done at their facilities in Nashua, N.H., and Endicott, N.Y.

Each THAAD battery consists of 90 soldiers, six truck-mounted launchers, 48 interceptors (eight per launcher), one Army/Navy Transportable Radar Surveillance and Control Mode 2 (AN/TPY-2) radar and a Tactical Fire Control/Communications component, according to the congressional report.

The president of South Korea earlier in March opposed the removal of parts of a THAAD system from his country to the Middle East but said the move would not significantly affect deterrence against Pyongyang.

Army shelves 'Valkyrie' anti-missile laser system

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army has shelved its "Valkyrie" laser anti-missile system, shifting instead to the newer Joint Laser Weapon System, to be built with the Navy as part of the Pentagon's Golden Dome missile defense strategy, according to a congressional report.

The Indirect Fire Protection Capability-High Energy Laser system, or IFPC-HEL, nicknamed "Valkyrie," is designed to deliver 300 kilowatts of energy that developers had hoped could knock cruise missiles and drones out of the sky.

A March 9 report by the Congressional Research Service said the Army's decision to move on from the Valkyrie system reflects technical challenges researchers have encountered with a continuous-wave beam capable of tracking and holding a fast, hardened cruise missile tar-

get long enough to destroy its warhead or scramble its inertial guidance system.

The newer Joint Laser Weapon System "represents the next step in the evolution of counter-cruise missile laser weapons," the CRS report states.

President Donald Trump announced the Golden Dome anti-missile "shield" last year. Congressional estimates put the initial cost of the system at \$185 billion, with an operational target of about 2035. If the entire system, including space-based interceptors, were built, the cost would be over \$1 trillion over several decades, according to Aviation Week magazine.

The "Valkyrie" program has been reduced to a single prototype for testing only, according to the CRS report. The prototype isn't expected to be fully delivered to the Army until September.

AFRICOM works to shield troops from drone attacks

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. military is testing a new way to shield troops deployed to Africa from unmanned aerial attacks, relying on commercial technology to produce swarms of counter-drones and sensors that serve as a protective wall.

The U.S. Africa Command initiative, dubbed Curtain Call, comes as American troops in Africa contend with a growing drone threat at forward locations.

"The (drone) threat exists in the AFRICOM AOR today, and we've been posturing to enable an integrated force protection architecture that can handle those threats," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jared Bindl, AFRICOM chief innovation officer, in an interview Wednesday. "This concept and its associated capability are one of many we are looking at to reduce the risk to our joint forces."

While Bindl didn't specify where precisely U.S. forces have dealt with drone threats, AFRICOM has long been involved in supporting Somalia in its battle against Islamic extremist groups. Over the years, U.S. troops have been drawn into combat after coming under attack there and near Somalia's border in Kenya.

The Stuttgart-based AFRICOM said it is developing Curtain Call in collaboration with a Joint Staff innovation program.

In January, AFRICOM ran its first trial during a field exercise in the United States in which engineers worked on technical problems. The command is now taking lessons learned from that drill and applying them to a second test happening in the coming weeks.

The effort currently utilizes as many as 25 flying counter-drones but has the potential to be built up into a swarm of hundreds, defense officials said.

Instagram, YouTube found liable in lawsuit

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — After a grueling seven weeks of court proceedings and more than 40 hours of tense deliberations across nine days in one of the country's most closely watched civil trials, jurors handed down a landmark decision in Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday, finding Instagram and YouTube responsible for the suffering of a Chico woman who charged the platforms were built to addict young users.

Kaley G.M., the 20-year-old plaintiff, arrived in court just before 10 a.m. wearing the same rose-colored maxi dress she'd donned to testify in February.

She remained stoic as the verdict, the \$3 million damages award and the decision warranting punitive damages were read out.

A companion fought back tears, her chin quivering. Sever-

al observers wept silently despite Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl's repeated warning not to respond.

"We need to have no reaction to the jury's verdict — no crying out, no reactions, no disturbance," Kuhl warned. "If there is we will have to have you removed from the courtroom, and we sure don't want to have to do that."

Attorneys for Snapchat and TikTok also appeared in court Wednesday morning to hear the decision. The two platforms settled with Kaley out of court for undisclosed sums before the trial.

"We respectfully disagree with the verdict and are evaluating our legal options," a spokesperson for Instagram's parent company Meta said.

The verdict arrived less than 24 hours after a New Mexico jury found Meta liable for \$375 million in damages related to

Attorney General Raúl Torres' claim it turned Instagram into a "breeding ground" for child predators — a decision the platform has vowed to appeal.

The Los Angeles jury took much longer to deliberate. On Friday, jurors preempted their pizza lunch break to ask Kuhl whether all of them should weigh in on damages, or only those who'd agreed on liability. On Monday they told Kuhl they were struggling to agree about one of the defendants.

Kuhl told the jury to keep trying.

Kaley said she first got hooked on YouTube and Instagram in grade school. Jurors were charged with determining whether the companies acted negligently in designing their products and failed to warn her of the dangers.

Their verdict will echo through thousands of other pending lawsuits, reshaping the

legal landscape for some of the world's most powerful companies. Experts say the payout will likely set the bar for future awards.

It comes on the heels of a Delaware court decision clearing Meta's insurers of responsibility for damages incurred from "several thousand lawsuits regarding the harm its platforms allegedly cause children" — a ruling that could leave it and other tech titans on the hook for untold future millions.

Kaley's test case was chosen from among scores of suits currently consolidated in California state court. Hundreds more are moving together through the federal system, where the first trial is set for June in San Francisco.

Collectively, the suits seek to prove that harm flowed not from user content but from the design and operation of the platforms themselves.

DOJ to pay ex-Trump adviser Michael Flynn

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Justice Department has reached a financial settlement with Michael Flynn, a conservative activist and former official in the first Trump administration who sought millions of dollars from the government for what he alleged was a wrongful prosecution effort.

Lawyers for the government and for Flynn notified a federal judge in Florida on Wednesday that they had reached an agreement and that it would involve the payment of "settlement funds," but didn't disclose the amount or any other terms of the deal.

The settlement marks a complete reversal by the Justice Department, which had successfully fought Flynn's case in the

past.

The Trump administration has faced scrutiny for how officials are handling demands for payouts from its political allies as well as the president himself.

The Justice Department in a statement described the settlement as an "important step in redressing" the "historic injustice" of former Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and, separately, whether there was a connection to Trump's campaign.

Flynn briefly served as Trump's first national security adviser. In a 2023 lawsuit for \$50 million, he alleged he was the victim of a politically motivated probe and prosecution by Mueller's team.

Postal Service to hike prices as war drives up fuel costs

Bloomberg News

The U.S. Postal Service plans to raise prices to offset rising transportation expenses including the cost of fuel, a sign that the beleaguered mail carrier is feeling the strain of higher oil prices as war in Iran continues.

The USPS will increase prices by 8% on some packages until mid-January of next year, the USPS said in a statement Wednesday.

The change will apply to its Priority Mail, Priority Mail Express, USPS Ground Advantage and Parcel Select offerings. Other products such as First-Class Stamps won't be affected, it said. If approved by a USPS oversight body, the increase will take effect on April 26.

The plan highlights how soaring oil and fuel prices stoked by the war in Iran are reverberat-

ing across the global economy. The rapid gains have stoked concern about the impact to consumers and companies alike.

Although temporary, the increase will act as a bridge to "a permanent mechanism" to adjust prices to reflect market conditions. The change will help the USPS fulfill its obligation to service every address in the country "in a more financially sustainable manner going forward," the agency said.

Steiner earlier this month said that the USPS might need to implement a fuel surcharge if the cost of diesel stays high.

While private carriers like United Parcel Service Inc. and FedEx Corp. commonly use surcharges to offset higher fuel costs, the postal service has not done so in its recent history.

Report: Europe's reliance on US air defenses poses risk

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Europe's dependence on American air defenses is becoming a strategic liability, as U.S. stockpiles are stretched by war and as Washington and its NATO allies prepare for different future fights, a new think tank report says.

An analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies warns that the ongoing U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran is burning through interceptor missiles at a pace that Western industry cannot quickly replace. At the same time, the U.S. is attempting to focus more on countering China, which could leave Europe exposed, the report said.

"Europe now faces a looming crisis: The U.S.-made interceptors it needs, both for Ukraine today and for its own rearmament against Russia, may simply not be available," said the CSIS report published Monday.

The report calls for European states to launch an emergency program to rapidly expand production of European-made air defense systems and interceptors.

Europe's challenge is not the lack of air defense technology but production scale, especially for interceptors to counter ballistic and advanced cruise missiles, the report noted. Expanding interceptor production would require cooperation across the European industrial base.

CSIS recommended that the European Union commit around \$10 billion to a dedicated fund for air defense interceptor production, which would send a demand signal large enough to justify new production lines and supply chain investment.

"The war in Iran has laid bare the fragility of Western interceptor stockpiles and Europe's strategy for sustaining Ukraine," the report said.

While the Trump administration has halted new tranches of military aid to Kyiv, a NATO agreement allows Europe to purchase American weapons systems, such as Patriot interceptors, for shipment to Ukraine. But that program's effectiveness "is entirely contingent on available American supply," the report said.

Underscoring that challenge, The Washington Post on Thursday reported that the Pentagon is considering diverting some of those same U.S.-supplied weapons — including air defense interceptors intended for Ukraine under the NATO arrangement — to the Middle East, though the report stressed that no final decision has been made.

"Given the shortfalls in U.S. stockpiles, the Pentagon will inevitably prioritize rebuilding its own arsenal over supplying foreign partners ... Combined with a greater prioritization of Gulf countries, as well as Asia and the threat posed by China, Europe may well receive almost no deliveries of U.S. air defense interceptors in the near term," said the report, which was issued before the Post story.

European efforts to break its dependency could have political ramifications. Washington has taken issue with the EU's 2025 security plan that calls for more than \$150 billion in overall defense investments.

The State Department has raised concerns that the EU initiative could limit American industrial access to European markets.

NATO head Rutte defends his support for Iran war

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte doubled down Thursday in his support for the Iran war after coming under recent criticism that he overstepped his role in the alliance when he endorsed President Donald Trump's approach to the conflict.

Rutte, speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels where he unveiled the alliance's annual report, drew attention in Europe this week for his Sunday comments on CBS News in which he said Trump was making the world safer by attacking Iran.

On Thursday, he was repeatedly questioned by reporters about his remarks on the war and whether it was appropriate given that NATO is not directly involved in the joint U.S.-Israeli campaign.

"Let's not be naive about it," Rutte said of the nuclear and missile threat posed by Iran.

"And what the United States is doing now is degrading that capability. And yes, I applaud it."

Rutte said there will always be differing views in an alliance of 32 nations.

He added that NATO has been officially opposed to the notion of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon for many years.

Still, Rutte's stance puts him in a difficult position. The role of the secretary-general in NATO has always been primarily about keeping the alliance united and managing the relationship with the United States, the bloc's undisputed leader.

In the case of the Iran war, several leaders in Europe have raised alarms about the bombing campaign and its consequences, saying Europe was not properly consulted beforehand and should not risk being drawn into any prolonged conflict.

Trump, however, has repeatedly blasted NATO members for not doing more.

US hits another alleged drug boat in Caribbean

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces on Wednesday conducted a strike in the Caribbean Sea, killing four people, according to U.S. Southern Command.

"Intelligence confirmed the vessel was transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Caribbean and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations," SOUTHCOM said in a post on X.

SOUTHCOM did not provide evidence that the vessel was ferrying drugs. It posted a 15-second video that showed a small boat being blown up as it moved on the water.

No U.S. forces were harmed in the operation.

The latest operation comes less than a week after a strike in the Eastern Pacific Ocean that left two dead and one survivor recovered by the Coast Guard.

The U.S. Coast Guard coordinated with Maritime Rescue Coordination Center Costa Rica, and Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf was diverted from its patrol to survey the site of the attack, the Coast Guard said in a statement last Friday. The Bertholf recovered two dead and one survivor, who were all transferred to the Costa Rican Coast Guard.

The death toll from the campaign against alleged traffickers has risen to at least 163 people since the strikes began in early September.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Trial starts for accused MS-13 gang leaders

NV LAS VEGAS — A federal trial began Monday for a group of men whom prosecutors have linked to 11 killings and accused of being officials in the MS-13 gang.

Prosecutors have said the defendants would be subject to removal proceedings if they were released from custody.

Jose Luis Reynaldo Reyes-Castillo, David Arturo Perez-Manchame and Joel Vargas-Escobar face counts including murder, RICO conspiracy and possessing a firearm during a crime.

The Justice Department has asserted the defendants were part of MS-13's command structure in Las Vegas and California and "exercised significant leadership roles in the organization's operations."

Council probes education budget for cost savings

NY NEW YORK — The New York City Council on Monday challenged Chancellor Kamar Samuels to find savings in the Department of Education's \$38 billion proposed budget—the largest of all city agencies.

Mayor Zohran Mamdani in January ordered the school system, like the rest of local government, to appoint a "chief savings officer" tasked with making their department more efficient.

The education budget in a typical year is about a third of the city's total financial plan, which has historically failed to account for actual spending. To right that wrong and still balance the budget, school officials

said their submission included a "wide range of options," such as adjusting noninstructional programs or cutting duplicative spending.

One of the areas where school officials hope to bring down costs is private special education spending by serving more students with disabilities inside the public school system. Those costs are reflected more accurately in Mamdani's proposed budget plan than they were in years past.

Woman pleads guilty to theft in student aid scam

MI DETROIT — A Detroit woman pleaded guilty to collecting more than \$2.5 million through a federal student aid scam at Wayne County Community College.

Federal prosecutors allege the 48-year-old woman conducted a decade-long operation to steal money from the Department of Education by creating applications in more than 80 people's names. The woman obtained the high school diplomas on their behalf, submitted student aid applications and completed online course work at the community college to create the appearance of academic progress and extend their eligibility for aid across multiple semesters, according to the Detroit Free Press.

The Department of Education disbursed the aid money to the school, which deducted tuition costs before distributing the remainder of the funds to the students for living expenses. The money is typically sent to students via debit card, check or a direct deposit to their respective bank accounts. Students can receive varying amounts of

federal aid grants depending on their financial status.

The woman paid the students a portion of the aid money for the use of their identity, according to FOX 2. The woman agreed to pay the \$2.5 million in restitution money.

Judge: Town panel cannot oust controversial mayor

FL MIAMI — Commissioners in a Broward County town wanted to vote on removing their controversial mayor from office, but a judge ruled this week that they cannot.

Broward Judge Shari Africk-Olefson ruled on Tuesday that it is illegal for town commissioners in Pembroke Park to hold a vote at a commission meeting to remove Mayor Geoffrey Jacobs, who has been accused of breaking town charter rules. Instead, town officials must bring the matter to court.

Pembroke Park, a small town south of Hollywood, has been embroiled in controversy for months over questions about where Jacobs actually lives — Pembroke Park or Fort Pierce.

The town charter states that commissioners and the mayor must live within town limits.

Salt mine works overtime to meet winter road needs

OH CLEVELAND — Below Cleveland, in a subterranean world many surface dwellers don't know exists, miners extract a crucial winter mineral — salt.

The Whiskey Island salt mine, owned by food giant Cargill, helps supply road salt across the Northeast and Great Lakes, where a colder, snowier-than-usual winter has driven

demand. Many municipalities exhausted supplies that typically last through spring, said Cargill spokesperson Emily Tange-man.

"Our teams have been working overtime since September to support customers across the snowbelt," Tange-man said, noting that early, persistent winter weather boosted demand across the industry.

The mine beneath Lake Erie, one of the world's largest, produces 3 million to 4 million tons annually.

Lawmaker wants official designation for surf spots

CA SACRAMENTO — A Southern California lawmaker hopes to create a new designation for the state's iconic wave breaks through the creation of "surfing reserves."

Excepting perhaps Hawaii, California's coastline is home to more world-famous waves than any state. Breaks dot the coast, from renowned Malibu and San Diego beaches to the monstrous Mavericks big wave spot near Half Moon Bay to dozens of lesser-known waves (including some consciously kept secret by local surfers) running from the Mexico to Oregon borders.

Assembly member Jacqui Irwin, D-Thousand Oaks, seeks to officially recognize popular breaks, particularly as they face threats from rising seas, coastal erosion and pollution. She's introduced a bill that would create a process for local governments to designate treasured breaks as "surfing reserves" with the California Ocean Protection Council — a conservation body the Legislature created in the 1970s.

— From wire reports

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Fried, Yankees shut out Giants in opener

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Aaron Judge went hitless on opening day for the first time and struck out four times for the first time since September 2024, but the New York Yankees still produced plenty of offense and beat San Francisco 7-0 Wednesday night in the debut of Giants manager Tony Vitello as the major league season began.

José Caballero drove in the go-ahead run with an RBI single in a five-run second and also lost the first challenge taken to the newly implemented Automated Ball-Strike System, unsuccessfully

appealing a strike by Logan Webb in the fourth.

Max Fried (1-0) allowed two hits in 6⅓ innings to become just the fifth New York pitcher since 1969 with at least 6⅓ shutout innings on opening day, joining Catfish Hunter (1977), Ron Guidry (1980), Rick Rhoden (1988) and David Cone (1996). The Yankees won an opener with a shutout on the road for the first time since 1967.

Webb (0-1) started the fourth inning with a 90.7 mph sinker on the upper, inner corner that was called a strike by Bill Miller, a major league umpire since 1997.

Caballero tapped his helmet, and the 12 Hawk-Eye cameras of the ABS upheld Miller's decision in a graphic shown on the Oracle Park scoreboard.

Caballero singled in the second and Ryan McMahon followed with a two-run single before Austin Wells' single prompted a mound visit for Webb. Trent Grisham hit a two-run triple and was checked by medical staff after a hard slide into third.

Judge was booed before the game and during each at-bat as he began his 11th big league season. The California native had been pursued by San Francisco during

free agency in 2022, but he ultimately chose New York's \$360 million, nine-year contract offer.

Webb, a 15-game winner last season making his fifth opening day start, was tagged for six earned runs—seven in all—and nine hits over five innings.

The 47-year-old Vitello became the first MLB manager to jump from college to the major leagues after coaching the University of Tennessee.

The teams resume the series Friday afternoon, with RHP Cam Schlichter starting for the Yankees opposite Giants lefty Robbie Ray.

ABS will create new winners, losers at plate and on mound

Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — Kevin Gausman got 709 called strikes over the past decade on pitches out of the strike zone, tied for the third-highest total in the major leagues.

"I would have thought maybe I was top 20 maybe but top five is kind of kind of crazy," the Toronto Blue Jays right-hander said. "I guess the book is kind of still out. We'll see what happens and how we have to adjust."

There will be winners and losers under the Automated Ball-Strike System, which made its regular-season debut Wednesday night when the New York Yankees faced the Giants in San Francisco. Using Hawk-Eye technology, 12 cameras measure whether a pitch crosses the strike zone with accuracy of about one-sixth of an inch.

Kyle Hendricks led the majors with 777 called strikes over the past decade on pitches that should have been balls, according to MLB Statcast. He was followed by Aaron Nola (747), Gausman and Zach Davies (709 each), Kyle Gibson (697), Patrick Corbin (694), Marcus Stroman (671), Zack Greinke (667), Martín Pérez (647) and Kyle Freeland (631).

"I guess that's a good thing because you make balls look like strikes," Nola said. "There's going to be some maybe good and bad to it, but I think the good parts and the big situations and big games, I that's going to help out a lot. We've seen over the years our side lose games on a bad call."

Conversely, Corbin topped the major leagues on balls that should have been called strikes with 470. He was followed by

Chris Sale (461), Nola (460), Carlos Rodón (450), Yu Darvish (442), Sonny Gray (439), José Berríos (438), Steven Matz (436), and Jon Gray and Justin Verlander (435 apiece).

"All umpires always had like — they give a little bit here, they're a little tight there. You know this as a hitter and a pitcher," said Verlander, a three-time Cy Young Award winner back with the Detroit Tigers for the start of his 21st big league season. "But it's all because of the way they set up and they see certain areas better than others. And now I think they're put in a situation where they have to call this like theoretical zone, instead of creating their own strike zone that they're probably much more consistent at."

Mookie Betts led batters on called strikes that should have been balls at 714.

"He knows the strike zone as well as anyone, and it does seem that he gets the short end of a lot of calls," Los Angeles Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "He's a guy I certainly would trust to challenge a call."

Betts was followed by Eugenio Suárez (684), José Ramírez (657), Paul Goldschmidt (656), Aaron Judge (653), Marcus Semien (631), Xander Bogaerts (625), Alex Bregman (603) and Christian Yelich (594).

"When we didn't have a challenge system, you just try to do the best you could and understand that there's stuff that's out of your control," Goldschmidt said. "Definitely the guys that are a little bit more patient are always going to have that. We just understand that's kind of the nature of it."

Giancarlo Stanton had 440 called strikes

on pitches out of the strike zone and 351 balls on pitches that should have been strikes.

"The challenge, you could change the whole game right there," the Yankees designated hitter said. "If you overturn one call, it could grow 15, 20 more pitches on a pitcher."

Carlos Santana received the most balls that should have been called strikes with 636. He was followed by Mike Trout (612), Suárez (558), Ramírez (554), George Springer (539), Andrew McCutchen (513), Cody Bellinger (487), Freddie Freeman (471), and Ryan McMahon (466).

Statcast has been calculating based on the rule book strike zone at the front of home plate and using a batter's stance. Starting this year, it will compute with the ABS strike zone measured at the middle of the plate and based on a batter's height.

Teams tried to prepare players by using ABS for batting practice and having the scoreboard signal ball/strike decisions.

A 1-1 pitch can often swing a plate appearance. Nola saw ABS in use last August when he made three injury rehabilitation starts at Triple-A Lehigh Valley.

"We're just going to have to see what the umpires do," he said, "if they're really going to be that tight as they were down there."

Statcast showed 1.6% of pitches out of the zone were called strikes last year, down from 2.1% in 2024 and the most accurate since 4.2% when tracking started in 2008.

Only 2.1% of pitches in the zone were ruled balls, up slightly from 1.7% in 2024 but well below 4.3% in 2008.

NHL East teams tussle for playoff spots

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Connor McDavid called the Pacific Division path to the playoffs “a bit of a pillow fight right now.”

The same race down the stretch in the NHL’s Eastern Conference is anything but.

No team has clinched a berth, and only three — Carolina, Tampa Bay and Buffalo — are strong bets to get in. That means five spots up for grabs among seven contenders who just keep winning to up the ante on each other.

Montreal, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Boston, Ottawa, Detroit and the New York Islanders have combined to go 54-29-17 since play resumed following the Olympic break, a points percentage of .617. Two of them are guaranteed to miss the playoffs and could tie or break the record for the most standings points of any team that failed to qualify.

“It just heightens the urgency mentally,” Senators forward Lars Eller said.

“There’s no cushion, and every game it’s a fight for your life just staying in the race.”

Eller and his teammates have gone 10-2-2 out of the break to take over the conference’s second and final wild-card position with 85 points and 11 games remaining. The Islanders also at 85 points have slipped out of the top eight in the East after losing three of four but still have more than Anaheim, atop the Pacific with 84, with Edmonton at 79 and Vegas at 78 points comfortably in the field.

Beastly East

There’s nothing comfortable about the stretch run in the East, where even a brief slide can make a big difference.

“You’re always watching what other teams are doing, but at the same time, we can’t rely on other teams losing in order for

you to get in. You want to win to get in.” Islanders center Bo Horvat said.

The traditional line to get in has for a long time been 94 points. Since 16 teams began qualifying in 1979-80, just four teams have reached 96 and missed: the Bruins in 2014-15, the Panthers in 2017-18, the Canadiens in 2018-19 and the Flames last season. Those left out this time could pass that mark.

New York’s Jean-Gabriel Pageau noticed the standings tightening up in the fall, when it was obvious this wasn’t a normal pace.

“After 15, 20 games, you could see that it was tight and it stayed tight the whole way,” Pageau said. “I think it kept everyone, every team on their toes and I thought it’s brought some good hockey from every team.”

Scoreboard watching

A veteran of more than 1,300 regular-season NHL games and 101 more over 10 playoff runs, Ottawa’s Claude Giroux acknowledges he does a lot of scoreboard watching this time of year.

“It’s hard not to,” Giroux said. “I mean, I do. I’m not going to lie. I feel like every team is winning all the time. But at the end of the day it, doesn’t matter.”

His coach, Travis Green, does the same, even as he preaches to players the sports cliché that they can only control what they can control.

“We all watch,” Green said. “We do it every night. It’s an exciting time of the season right now. Some nights I put it on, and if good things are happening, I keep it on. And if not, I change the channel.”

Islanders coach Patrick Roy, a Hall of Fame goaltender now in his second job running an NHL bench, is trying to keep his team’s focus on the road ahead. He’s fully

aware of the pitfalls in it, from judging opponents to projecting where everyone will end up.

“I think we all get guilty at some point to look at the schedule: ‘Oh, they have a tough schedule. Oh, they have this.’ I feel like there’s no tough and there’s no easy schedule. You have to play your games, and you have to worry about what you have to do, not worry about who’s playing next, who does what. Just worry about ourselves.” Roy said.

Unlikely runs

This season has shown the improbable is possible.

The Sabres are on the verge of ending the league’s longest active playoff drought despite losing 18 of their first 28 games. They moved from last in the conference on Dec. 13, a couple of days before general manager Kevyn Adams was fired and replaced by Jarmo Kekalainen, to first in the Atlantic Division on March 8.

The Blue Jackets were last in the East on Jan. 12 when they changed coaches from Dean Evason to Rick Bowness and have since gone 19-3-4 to climb to second in the Metropolitan Division. The Senators were languishing near the basement in mid-January before going 15-3-2 since beginning their run on Jan. 25 to get back into the picture.

It’s not over yet, and it could come down to the final games on April 14 and 15. The West wraps on April 16, and the playoffs begin on April 18.

“It’s just everybody being on the same page and everybody working hard for that goal at the end,” Ottawa’s Tim Stützle said. “It’s been fun. It’s been a lot of fun just grinding back with this group. It’s a pleasure to be able to play in this position.”

Maple Leafs eliminate Rangers from playoff contention

Associated Press

TORONTO — Dakota Joshua had a goal and an assist, Joseph Woll made 40 saves and added an assist, and the Toronto Maple Leafs topped the Rangers 4-3 on Wednesday night, eliminating New York from playoff contention.

Jake McCabe, Nick Robertson and John Tavares had the other goals for Toronto and Matias Maccelli added two assists. Woll picked up the second assist on

Joshua’s goal for his first NHL point.

Mika Zibanejad scored two goals and Alexis Lafreniere had a goal and two assists for the Rangers, while Igor Shesterkin stopped 14 shots. Adam Fox chipped in two assists.

New York, which will finish below the postseason outline for a second straight season, sits second-to-last in the overall standings. Toronto ranks 21st and is on the way to missing the playoffs for

the first time since 2016.

Bruins 4, Sabres 3 (OT): Paval Zacha scored 38 seconds into overtime, David Pastrnak had a goal and two assists and Boston rallied for a road win over Atlantic Division-leading Buffalo.

Casey Mittelstadt scored with six minutes remaining to tie the game, and Viktor Arvidsson also scored. Boston bounced back from a 4-2 loss to Toronto a night earlier, and moved into a tie in points with Montreal for third in

the Atlantic Division standings — and three points ahead of eighth-place Ottawa.

Jason Zucker scored twice and Zach Benson also scored for Buffalo, which is 12-1-2 in its past 15. The Sabres still earned a point to tie Carolina atop the Eastern Conference and move within 10 points of clinching their first playoff berth in 15 years.

The Bruins won after both teams squandered one-goal leads in the third period.

76ers' George returns from drug suspension

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Paul George returned to the 76ers' lineup following a 25-game suspension for a failed drug test and scored 28 points Wednesday night in Philadelphia's 157-137 win over Chicago.

Playing for the first time since Jan. 29 due to a violation of the NBA's drug policy, he missed 8 of 10 field goals in the opening half and had five points but scored 23 points in the second half.

"I felt pretty explosive, pretty strong," George said. "I felt good."

George was cheered throughout, especially after converting on three consecutive possessions early in the fourth quarter.

"That was bringing back classic moments in my scoring bag, where I can be explosive as a scorer and put points up quick," he said. "That's just me in the flow."

George finished 11 of 22 from the field and 6 of 13 from long range.

"I think he just needed to get the feel back a little bit," Sixers coach Nick Nurse said.

Philadelphia went 13-12 in his

absence and began the day at 39-33 and in seventh place in the Eastern Conference.

George was suspended in late January for violating the terms of the NBA's anti-drug program.

In his first public remarks since the suspension, George apologized Tuesday to the team, its fans and his family for the poor judgment that led to his flunked test.

"To let people down hurt more than kind of anything," George said.

He said his choice to take a

banned substance was connected to a mental health issue that developed because of an off-season knee injury that limited his production this season.

"The most difficult thing is when your body isn't where you know it needs to be or where it once was," George said. "That leads and bleeds into the mental side of things, knowing that you're limited. But for me, I feel good, my body is feeling great. Mentally, I know I'm capable of doing what I can do and what I've been able to on the court for years."

Hawks snap East-leading Pistons' 4-game win streak in OT

Associated Press

DETROIT — CJ McCollum scored 27 points, making the tie-breaking three-point play in overtime, and the Atlanta Hawks beat the Detroit Pistons 130-129 on Wednesday night.

Jalen Johnson also had 27 points and came close to another triple-double, finishing with 12 assists and eight rebounds.

The surging Hawks improved to 15-2 since the All-Star break, the best in the Eastern Conference, and snapped Detroit's four-game winning streak.

Jalen Duren had 26 points and 14 rebounds for the Pistons, who lost for the first time since All-Star Cade Cunningham sustained a collapsed left lung. Tobias Harris scored 22 points and Daniss Jenkins had 19 points and 10 assists for the East leaders.

Lakers 137, Pacers 130: Luka Doncic scored 43 points to lead Los Angeles to a road victory over Indiana.

With Indiana Fever star Caitlin Clark snapping pictures on the sideline as a credentialed photographer, Doncic sank 15 of 30 shots and hit 9 of 10 free throws. Austin Reaves scored 25 points, LeBron James scored 23 and Jaxson Hayes had 21 points and 10 rebounds for Los An-

geles.

Celtics 119, Thunder 109: Jaylen Brown scored 14 of his 31 points a pivotal third quarter and host Boston rallied to beat Oklahoma City, snapping the defending champions' 12-game win streak.

Jayson Tatum recovered from back-to-back rocky performances to add 19 points and 12 rebounds while also contributing seven assists as Boston earned a split in the two regular-season matchups between the past two NBA champs.

Heat 120, Cavaliers 103: Norman Powell scored 19 points, Tyler Herro added 18 and Miami got contributions from everyone while stopping a five-game losing skid with a road win over Cleveland.

The Heat squandered a 17-point lead in the third quarter before recovering in the fourth. Miami led by nine with five minutes left before Bam Adebayo converted a three-point play and Kel'el Ware scored on a layup in an 11-second span.

Spurs 123, Grizzlies 98: Victor Wembanyama had 19 points, 15 rebounds and seven blocks as San Antonio built an early lead and coasted to a road victory over Memphis.

Devin Vassell matched Wembanyama's 19 points, while Stephen Castle and Keldon Johnson finished with 15 points each, as seven Spurs finished in double figures.

Wizards 133, Jazz 110: Juju Reese had 26 points and 17 rebounds, Will Riley added 19 points and 10 boards, and Washington snapped a 16-game skid with a road win over Utah.

It was Washington's first win since Feb. 20 against Indiana.

Timberwolves 110, Rockets 108 (OT): Julius Randle hit the go-ahead jumper with 8.8 seconds left in overtime to cap a game-closing 15-0 run by Minnesota for a home victory over Houston.

Minnesota overcame a 13-point deficit in overtime, the biggest comeback since detailed play-by-play throughout the game began in 1997.

Nuggets 142, Mavericks 135: Jamal Murray scored a season-high 53 points, Nikola Jokic had 23 points, 21 rebounds and a season-high 19 assists, and host Denver held off Dallas.

Jokic entered the night with 5,992 assists and reached the milestone when he fed Murray for a layup with 4:56 left in the second quarter. It was part of a

33-point first half for Murray, who was 11 of 16 from the field and scored 14 straight points in one stretch.

Warriors 103, Nets 106: Gui Santos scored a career-high 31 points, Draymond Green made two clutch free throws with 6.9 seconds remaining and host Golden State beat Brooklyn to clinch a play-in spot.

Brandin Podziemski had 22 points, six rebounds and five assists for the Warriors (35-38), who won their first game at Chase Center since returning from a grueling 2-4 road trip.

Trail Blazers 130, Bucks 99: Scoot Henderson had 23 points and host Portland routed Milwaukee as Giannis Antetokounmpo remained sidelined with a left knee injury.

Jerami Grant and Deni Avdija each had 18 points for the Blazers, who have already clinched a play-in spot. Portland has won five of its last six games.

Clippers 119, Raptors 94: Kawhi Leonard had 27 points, Darius Garland added 24, and host Los Angeles beat Toronto.

Benedict Mathurin had 23 off the bench and Brook Lopez scored 11 of his 14 points in the first quarter for the Clippers, who have won three in a row.