

Pentagon mulling new extremism rules

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Pentagon officials are considering new restrictions on service members' interactions with far-right groups, part of the military's reckoning with extremism, but the measures could trigger legal challenges from critics who say they would violate First Amendment rights.

Under a review launched by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Defense Department officials are reexamining rules governing troops' affiliations with anti-government and white supremacist movements, ties that currently are permissible in limited circumstances.

Austin, who has pledged zero tolerance for extremism, ordered the review after the events of Jan. 6, when rioters including a few dozen veterans — and a handful of current service members — stormed the U.S. Capitol.

A newly formed extremism task force, which includes officials from across the Defense Department, has until July to make recommendations on potential changes to military justice, rules on extremism and related issues that apply to uniformed military personnel, the Coast Guard and Defense Department civilians.

One step the task force is examining

would alter a regulation that prohibits troops' "active" participation in extremist organizations — activities such as fundraising, attending rallies and distributing propaganda — but permits what officials have called "passive" membership, which could include being admitted to groups or possessing their literature.

Officials said Austin, a retired general whom President Joe Biden appointed as the country's first African American head of the Pentagon, intends to ensure that the basic rights of military personnel are preserved.

"But keep in mind that we have also taken oaths, and we also have a set of values that we as a military and we as a department espouse," a senior defense official said. "And if that speech isn't in line with our values, then it makes it arguably impossible for that individual to be a good teammate and to be in line with the good order and discipline of units."

Current and former officials have said that Pentagon lawyers, also part of the task force, are likely to take a cautious approach in considering new restrictions on service members' First Amendment rights, especially in an area of the law that many experts characterize as untested.

"That's why this is challenging," one for-

mer senior Pentagon official said. "It's not just that it's about constitutional rights. It's that constitutional scholars don't always agree."

The deliberations reflect a larger debate on the proper balance between Americans' constitutional right to voice opinions, even if many people find them offensive, and the threat posted by far-right movements espousing racist, misogynistic and anti-democratic ideas that sometimes advocate violence to achieve their goals.

Military officials have said that they have little reliable data about the extent of service members' involvement in such groups, in part because cases that come to light are handled by different military services and many cases are not sent to military courts.

But even before Jan. 6, a spate of reported cases highlighted what appears to be an alarming rise. Sometimes it has taken over a year to discharge individuals known to support extremist causes, as occurred in the case of an airman who belonged to the white supremacist group Identity Evropa.

Uniformed personnel are already subject to some limits on freedom of speech enjoyed by other Americans, on the basis of what courts have ruled is the vital mission of the military and the importance of order in the ranks.

Navy announces reduced workplace capacity rates

BY CAITLIN DOORBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Nearly a year after the Navy first encouraged teleworking to prevent spreading the coronavirus, the service has issued new guidance restricting in-person staffing levels for commands at certain installations around the world.

Navy workplaces should be staffed at no more than 50% of its regular capacity at installations under Health Protection Condition Bravo, meaning areas with a daily average of two to 15 new coronavirus cases per 100,000 people, according to the memorandum released by Vice Adm. Phillip Sawyer, deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans and strategy.

That rate decreases to 40% under HPCON-

Bravo+, which includes areas with a daily average of 16-30 new cases per 100,000 people in a seven-day period, 25% for those under HPCON-Charlie with an average of 31-60 new cases for 100,000 and 15% for those in HPCON-Delta with more than 60 new cases per 100,000 during the same amount of time.

Full capacity is allowed for units under HPCON-Alpha, but that requires a daily average of fewer than two new cases per 100,000 people during seven consecutive days, according to the memo.

The order is a "significant change" from guidance issued last year, the service said in its memo. That guidance, issued May 20, 2020, instructed commanders to "encourage telework and consider split shifts when feasible," but made no formal instruction regarding capacity rates.

The new policy, expected to last throughout the pandemic, "limits the number of personnel in the workplace by maximizing remote work, flexible scheduling and other methods, synchronized with the HPCON level," the Navy said in its memo.

But capacity reduction is not feasible for all units. Commanders can request greater capacity levels in "cases where required occupancy for mission success exceeds the limits," according to the document.

Further, those at medical treatment facilities, first-responder units, "forces supporting critical national capabilities, Navy operational units, command headquarters, shipyards, fleet readiness centers and units providing essential mission support" are exempt from the limits, according to the memo.

Tons of US military gear removed from Afghanistan

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — U.S. military officials said they had removed some 60 plane-loads of gear from Afghanistan and identified about 1,300 pieces of equipment for destruction by Tuesday as the Pentagon works to exit the country where American troops have been at war for nearly 20 years.

The drawdown effort to remove U.S. forces and the warfighting gear that they have spread across Afghanistan since invading in October 2001 was roughly 2% to 6% completed by Tuesday, U.S. Central Command said in a statement. The formal retrograde process began Saturday as the Pentagon works to remove more than 3,000 troops, thousands of U.S. contractors and their equipment by Sept. 11, the date that President Joe Biden decided he wanted all American forces to be out of the country.

Air Force C-17 cargo jets, which the service said can carry about 17,900 pounds of cargo, are running near around-the-clock missions to move military equipment out of Afghanistan in the Pentagon's largest drawdown effort since it left Iraq in 2011, officials said.

The CENTCOM statement on Tuesday indicated officials intended to provide regular updates on retrograde progress but would give only an estimated range of the completion for security reasons.

CENTCOM also said it had turned over one base to the Afghan National Army — Camp New Antonik in southern Helmand province.

While U.S. forces will leave some gear behind for the Afghan troops and government and destroy some of its gear, the equipment it removes from Afghanistan will largely be moved elsewhere to bolster other military operations around the globe, officials said.

For the Army, gear could return to units in the United States, go to depots for repairs and upgrades, or be sent to other regions where soldiers are operating, said Curt Higdon, the chief of war plans and strategy for Army Materiel Command, which is responsible for the Army's Afghan drawdown operations.

Much of the gear deemed not cost-effective to move is expected to be handed off to the Afghans or stay with U.S. officials manning the American embassy in Kabul. The rest, including gear American officials worry could end up in Taliban hands, will be destroyed.

Report: Taliban likely to curtail women's rights

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence agencies are warning that any gains in women's rights in Afghanistan made in the last two decades will be at risk after U.S. troops withdraw later this year.

An unclassified report released Tuesday by the Director of National Intelligence says the Taliban remain "broadly consistent in its restrictive approach to women's rights and would roll back much of the past two decades' progress if the group regained national power."

It's the latest U.S. warning of the consequences of the Afghan withdrawal now underway, two decades after an American-led coalition toppled the Taliban. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Sunday that there would possibly be "some really dramatic, bad possible outcomes" for Afghan forces left on their own to counter the Taliban, but also noted, "We frankly don't know yet." And CIA Director William Burns told Congress in April that the American ability "to collect and act on threats will diminish."

President Joe Biden has set a September deadline for U.S. forces to withdraw. While Biden and his top officials have stressed that they will not end their engagement with Afghanistan or advocacy for human rights, the U.S. has also openly warned of gains for the Taliban.

There are fears that, as the U.S. has negotiated with the Taliban on an exit from Afghanistan, women will be stripped of rights or once again be forced to wear the burqa, the all-encompassing veils that became a symbol of Taliban rule.

The Taliban last month issued a statement promising that women could "serve their society in the education, business, health and social fields while maintaining correct Islamic hijab," referring to the Arabic word for veil.

But Tuesday's report underscores American skepticism of those pledges. Any progress in women's rights "probably owes more to external pressure than domestic support, suggesting it would be at risk after coalition withdrawal," it says.

Iraq's F-16 program stalls after contractors exit

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Increased threats and attacks by Iran-backed militias forced American contractors to evacuate Iraq's Balad Air Base in March, where they were supporting Iraq's F-16 program, a U.S. government report said this week.

Without the Americans, the Iraqis cannot perform the full range of maintenance tasks on the country's fleet of F-16s, which are key in the fight against Islamic State.

Thirty-two of the 36 F-16 fighter jets Iraq received from 2014 to 2017 were inventoried at Balad last summer, and 75% were either fully or partially operational in Decem-

ber. In the first three months of 2021 they flew 299 sorties, the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve said in a quarterly report Tuesday.

All but four of those sorties were training missions, it said.

The U.S. personnel were evacuated in March after a handful of rockets hit Balad in late February, days after a strike in Irbil killed a Filipino contractor and wounded a U.S. service member.

The contractors returned later in the month, but Defense Intelligence Agency officials told the IG that "the tactics employed by the militias this quarter suggest that they may be planning more attacks."

Biden aims to vaccinate 70% of adults by July 4

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden set a new vaccination goal to deliver at least one shot to 70% of adult Americans by July Fourth as he tackles the vexing problem of winning over the “doubters” and those unmotivated to get inoculated.

Demand for vaccines has dropped off markedly nationwide, with some states leaving more than half their available doses unordered. Aiming to make it easier to get shots, Biden on Tuesday called for states to make vaccines available on a walk-in basis, and he will direct many pharmacies to do like-

wise.

His administration for the first time is also moving to shift doses from states with weaker demand to areas with stronger interest in the shots.

“You do need to get vaccinated,” Biden said from the White House. “Even if your chance of getting seriously ill is low, why take the risk? It could save your life or the lives of somebody you love.”

Biden’s goal equates to delivering at least the first shot to 181 million adults and fully vaccinating 160 million. It’s a tacit acknowledgment of the declining interest in shots.

Already more than 56% of American adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and nearly 105 million are fully vaccinated. The United States is currently administering first doses at a rate of about 965,000 per day — half the rate of three weeks ago, but almost twice as fast as needed to meet Biden’s target.

“I’d like to get it 100%, but I think realistically we can get to that place between now and July Fourth,” Biden said of his new goal.

He said the administration would focus on three areas as it tries to ramp up the pace of vac-

cinations: adults who need more convincing to take the vaccine, those who have struggled or are in no hurry to obtain a shot and adolescents aged 12-15, once federal authorities approve vaccination for that age group.

Acknowledging that “the pace of vaccination is slowing,” Biden predicted the inoculation effort is “going to be harder” when it comes to convincing “doubters” of the need to get their shots.

He said the most effective argument to those people would be to protect those they love. “This is your choice: It’s life and death.”

USMC wrestler set to return to Japan for Tokyo Games

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

A Greco-Roman wrestler and Marine Corps noncommissioned officer will retrace his steps to Tokyo during a quest for Olympic gold this summer.

New U.S. Olympic Team member Staff Sgt. John Stefanowicz, 29, of York County, Pa., visited the Japanese capital while stationed on Okinawa from 2010 to 2012 and will be back in July to compete in the games.

His path to the Olympics started when he began wrestling in kindergarten, he said in a telephone interview April 29.

“It was something that my mom and family got me into,” he said. “It was a sport that clicked with me. I enjoyed it and I was pretty good at it.”

The grappler said he joined the Marines straight out of high school in 2009, and also took a shine to military service.

“That sense of brotherhood and belonging they talk about, that is something I experienced,” he said. “It felt like home.”

The Marines sent Stefanowicz to the Japanese island of Okinawa where he worked as an aviation communications systems technician with Marine Air Support Squadron 2, he said. The unit is the oldest and most decorated aviation command and control unit in the Marine Corps, according to the service.

Stefanowicz said he has fond memories of trips to Tokyo and exploring the city during his time in Japan. In 2014, he moved to a job analyzing imagery with the 2nd Intelligence Battalion at Camp Lejeune, N.C., which is also home to the All-Marine Wrestling Team.

“My training is integrated into our daily battle rhythm,” he said of his preparation for the Olympics, which involves about six hours of wrestling work each day.

His coach of eight years, Jason Loukides, also on the phone with Stefanowicz, described him as “an extremely tough person.”

Wrestlers must overcome all kinds of hurdles to include injuries that can set back their training, Loukides said.

“When you step out on the mat to finally test yourself, there are all kinds of self-doubts that can creep into your mind,” he said.

Marine wrestlers are adept at coping with stress, Loukides said.

“Being an Olympian or the best in the U.S. is a high goal,” he said. “Not many people are able to compartmentalize the kind of stress that comes with high-level competition.”

The games will be held from July 23 through Aug. 8. Wrestling will begin on Aug. 1 and Stefanowicz is set to wrestle on Aug. 4 and 5.

Facebook upholds Trump suspension

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Former President Donald Trump won’t return to Facebook — for now.

The social network’s quasi-independent Oversight Board voted to uphold his ban from the platform after his account was suspended four months ago for inciting violence that led to the deadly Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

While upholding the suspension, the board faulted Facebook in a statement for the way it made the decision.

The board said the ongoing risk of serious violence justified Facebook’s suspension at the time, but said it “was not appropriate for Facebook to impose an ‘indefinite’ suspension.”

The board said Facebook was seeking to avoid its responsibilities by applying “a vague, standardless penalty” and then referring the case to the board to resolve.

“Indefinite penalties of this sort do not pass the international smell test,” oversight board co-chair Michael McConnell said in a conference call with reporters. “We are not cops, reigning over the realm of social media.”

The board agreed with Facebook that that two of Trump’s Jan. 6 posts “severely violated” the content standards of both Facebook and Instagram.

The board said Facebook has six months to reexamine the “arbitrary penalty” it imposed on Jan. 7 and decide on another penalty that reflects the “gravity of the violation and the prospect of future harm.”

Flood threats linger as South is pounded

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Relentless wind and rain keeps pummeling much of the southeastern United States, spawning tornadoes, sparking a flash flood emergency in Alabama and damaging homes from Texas to Virginia. The storms have prompted boat rescues and toppled trees and power lines.

Crews were preparing to continue cleaning up debris and assessing destruction across the region early Wednesday, as some schools canceled classes or moved them online due to damage on campuses and surrounding areas.

The National Weather Service's prediction center warned Wednesday morning that flash flooding could also now affect the Central Gulf Coast, with storms shifting southeast and rain continuing to soak much of the region.

The storms have been responsible for at least three deaths and dozens of injuries this week, and more than 200,000 customers were without power from Arkansas to Maryland early Wednesday, including about 75,000 in Alabama, about 66,000 in Mississippi, about 13,800 in Georgia and about 25,700 in Virginia, according to the website power-outage.us.

Torrential rains near Birmingham, Ala., on Tuesday, dumped more than 7 inches of water in a few afternoon hours, causing flooding problems across much of the state's most populous areas.

Emergency Management officials in the area urged residents to stay off roads because so many were flooded, including some downtown. In the Birmingham suburb of Homewood, fire department rescuers in a small boat paddled past submerged cars in a parking

lot, slowly removing more than a dozen people from the waters surrounding an apartment complex.

Strong winds blowing behind a line of storms were toppling trees across central Alabama, where soil was saturated with water and lightning struck a church in central Alabama, causing extensive damage from a fire. The National Weather Service in Birmingham said late Tuesday that it planned to send two crews to Greene and Tuscaloosa counties to assess wind and possible tornado damage from storms that started Sunday.

Strong winds and heavy rain whipped through Mississippi's capital city of Jackson late Tuesday while thunder rattled windows. The high winds cracked some limbs off trees and sent them onto nearby houses. The storms left streets littered with branches and leaves.

At least eight people were injured when storms that brought tornadoes to Texas flipped tractor-trailers on an interstate and damaged structures.

In Tennessee, at least 11 counties were hit by possible EF-0 tornadoes, according to an official with the National Weather Service in Nashville. A tornado that struck Virginia's Northumberland County near the Chesapeake Bay destroyed one home and severely damaged a few others Monday.

On Monday, tornadoes also touched down in South Carolina and southern Kentucky, while a possible tornado hit West Virginia.

In Mississippi, forecasters confirmed 12 tornadoes Sunday evening and night, including the Yazoo City twister, which stretched for 30 miles, and another tornado that moved through suburbs south of Jackson, producing a damage track 1,000 yards wide.

Data show US a degree hotter than 20 years ago

Associated Press

America's new normal temperature is a degree hotter than it was just two decades ago.

Scientists have long talked about climate change — hotter temperatures, changes in rain and snowfall and more extreme weather — being the “new normal.” Data released Tuesday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration put hard figures on the cliché.

The new United States normal is not just hotter, but wetter in the eastern and central parts of the nation and considerably drier in the West than just a decade earlier. Meteorologists calculate climate normals based on 30 years of data to limit the random swings of daily weather. It's a standard set by the World Meteorological Organization.

Every 10 years, NOAA updates normal for the country as a whole, states and cities — by year, month and season.

For the entire nation, the yearly normal temperature is now 53.3 degrees based on weather station data from 1991 to 2020, nearly half a degree warmer than a decade ago. Twenty years ago, normal was 52.3 degrees based on data from 1971 to 2000. The average U.S. temperature for the 20th century was 52 degrees.

“Almost every place in the U.S. has warmed from the 1981 to 2010 normal to the 1991 to 2020 normal,” said Michael Palecki, NOAA's normals project manager.

More than 90% of the U.S. has warmer normal temperatures now than 10 years ago, he said.

US birth rate at lowest point in more than a century

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The U.S. birth rate fell 4% last year, the largest single-year decrease in nearly 50 years, according to a government report being released Wednesday.

The rate dropped for moms of every major race and ethnicity, and in nearly every age group, falling to the lowest point since federal health officials started tracking it more than a century ago.

Births have been declining in younger women for years, as many postponed motherhood and had smaller families.

Birth rates for women in their late 30s and in their 40s have been inching up. But not last year.

“The fact that you saw declines in births even for older moms is quite striking,” said Brady Ha-

milton, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the lead author of the new report.

The CDC report is based on a review of more than 99% of birth certificates issued last year. The findings echo a recent Associated Press analysis of 2020 data from 25 states showing that births had fallen during the coronavirus outbreak.

The pandemic no doubt contributed to last year's big decline, experts say. Anxiety about COVID-19 and its impact on the economy likely caused many couples to think that having a baby right then was a bad idea.

But many of the 2020 pregnancies began well before the U.S. epidemic. CDC researchers are working on a follow-up report to better parse out how the decline unfolded, Hamilton said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman accused of driving through burial service

ND FARGO — A Minnesota woman was charged after witnesses said she drove over several graves at a Fargo cemetery and nearly hit two people attending a burial.

Fargo police said the incident happened at Riverside Cemetery. Blair Whitten, of Barnesville, Minn., was charged in Cass County District Court with misdemeanor reckless endangerment.

“Multiple complainants reported Whitten was driving her vehicle, inside the cemetery, in a manner with extreme indifference for human life which created substantial risk of serious bodily injury to persons in the cemetery,” police spokeswoman Jessica Schindeldecker said.

Toddler freed from antique wooden barrel

TN PORTLAND — Fire rescuers and medical staff used a power saw and screwdrivers to extract a toddler from an antique wooden barrel in which he became wedged during a visit with his grandparents.

Kelly Strubing and her husband took their 2-year-old son, Dorian, to the emergency room after he got stuck, WKRN-TV reported. Sumner County Emergency Medical Services and the Portland Fire Department worked with hospital staff to free the boy.

X-rays determined where his hips, knees and feet were, Strubing told the station. His arms, shoulders and head stuck out from the top of the barrel, which allowed him to hold on to a teddy

bear.

The workers used a power saw to cut some wood from the bottom of the barrel and screwdrivers were used to chip away at the top opening to make a hole big enough for his feet to fit through, Strubing said.

The first responders pulled the toddler through the top of the barrel once his legs were straightened.

Man rescues 2 kids in lake, then leaves

NY GREENWICH — Authorities were looking for a fisherman who saved two children from drowning in a lake in upstate New York so they can thank him.

The rescue happened in Cosayuna Lake in Washington County. The Times Union of Albany reported that a 10-year-old child fell out of a kayak.

A second 10-year-old was able to help the first child hang onto the kayak, but the children could not manage to swim or paddle themselves to shore, authorities said.

A fisherman who was in the area heard the children yelling and came to their aid to get them back to shore, the sheriff's office said. The man then left.

Man drives hours with owl in truck's grill

FL NAPLES — A man moving from Alabama to southwest Florida traveled hundreds of miles with an owl stuck in his truck's grill. The owl survived.

Torie Gray said he saw a vehicle ahead of him swerve to avoid the great horned owl. But somehow he hit it and it became lodged in the truck.

Gray said he wasn't aware of the situation until he got to Naples.

Gray called the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, which sent a volunteer to help dislodge the bird.

Eventually they did, and both men marveled that the owl was in good shape. Gray said the bird did more damage to the truck than to itself.

Residents warned about seeping sewage lagoon

KY SMITHLAND — A sewage lagoon above a small western Kentucky city is seeping through its embankment and is likely to fail, prompting the mayor to warn residents living downhill to prepare to evacuate if more rains increase the danger.

The Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet notified city officials of the seepage at the Smithland Wastewater Treatment Lagoon, WPSD-TV reported, citing a statement from Smithland Mayor Bill Hesser.

The mayor said the city has hired an engineering firm and is working hard “to remediate this very old system as fast as we can.”

Nurses, doctor help mom who gave birth on flight

HI HONOLULU — A doctor and a team of neonatal medical professionals were in the right place at the right time — helping a Utah woman deliver her baby onboard an hourslong flight to Hawaii.

Lavinia “Lavi” Mouna was traveling from Salt Lake City to Hawaii for a family vacation

when she gave birth to her son, Raymond, at just 29 weeks' gestation.

Dr. Dale Glenn, a Hawaii Pacific Health family medicine physician, along with Lani Bamfield, Amanda Beeding and Mimi Ho — neonatal intensive care unit nurses from North Kansas City Hospital — were also on board.

Bamfield said she heard someone call out for medical help and saw how little the baby was.

All three nurses and the doctor sprung into action. With no special equipment for the premature, the group got creative: they used shoelaces to cut and tie the umbilical cord and used a smartwatch to measure the baby's heart rate.

Medical crews were waiting at the airport in Honolulu to help get the mom and baby to Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children.

5 arrested, weapons seized after pursuit

MN MINNEAPOLIS — Authorities said five people were arrested and several guns were recovered after a chase through several cities in the Twin Cities metro area.

Minneapolis police said the pursuit began when officers tried to stop a vehicle on the city's north side. One of the people in the vehicle was wanted in connection with at least one shooting, police said.

After tracking the vehicle through several cities it was eventually disabled by an officer with the Crystal Police Department. All five occupants were taken into custody.

— From wire reports

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NHL players fighting through the fatigue

Associated Press

It was the second night of a back-to-back and the Tampa Bay Lightning's 10th game in 18 days and the defending Stanley Cup champions just didn't have it.

"Everybody's tired," coach Jon Cooper said after that loss to Carolina. "Not just our team — all the teams."

Fatigue has set in around the NHL with teams playing 50 games in just over 100 days as part of a condensed schedule that's proving even more demanding than players expected. The 56-game schedule squeezed between mid-January and mid-May has taken its toll, leading to plenty of mental mistakes and wear-and-tear injuries for those gutting through the grind.

Just in time for the playoffs, too.

"We're just trying to dig deep here," Vegas forward Alex Tuch said. "We're just trying to prepare physically and mentally for each game, and the more you take it game by game, the better it is."

The teams in playoff contention all have a handful of games left before the postseason, which is just the trick for

igniting energy levels for even the most worn-out and banged-up veterans. Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour is glad "there's a finish line now."

Getting there has been the hard part.

"We can all agree it's been pretty tiring," Edmonton forward Ryan Nugent-Hopkins said. "Every team's going through it. We knew going in that it was going to be a bit of a grind of a season, and we've stayed with it."

Not without some stumbles along the way. Virus-related postponements mangled the schedule of just about every team in the league, including Vancouver, which missed more than two weeks and still has nine games to play through May 19.

The rest of the NHL will be into the first round of playoffs by then, which is close enough to taste now. New York Islanders coach Barry Trotz likened it to running a marathon and getting to that final turn.

"We are getting more and more excited for (the playoffs), and I feel that helps us," Minnesota's Kevin Fiala said.

Contenders are hoping to get healthy by the playoffs.

Tampa Bay expects to get Steven Stamkos back from his injury, and 2019 MVP Nikita Kucherov could be ready to go by Game 1 after missing the entire regular season following hip surgery.

Washington has been without Alex Ovechkin for all but 39 seconds for well over a week. Pittsburgh just got Evgeni Malkin back from a six-week absence. Florida has had a laundry list of injuries and still managed to clinch a playoff berth for the first time in five years.

"Guys have been very good about trying to stay fresh and trying to stay rested," coach Joel Quenneville said. "We try to manage our ice time as best we can as opposed to going to practice on a day where we know that, hey, there's not a lot of excitement in going and putting our skates back on. We've elected the latter half of the schedule here to have some days off and keep ourselves fresh, have morning skates and reinforce our team structure in games in video."

Some of the grind is mental, and it's especially challenging for the many players who left family back home because the

season started so late, travel restrictions are in place and there are so many games in such a short period of time. Washington defenseman Zdeno Chara is one of them, and he said his wife and kids staying back in Boston has been the toughest part of his season.

"I think we're trying to do our best with the technology we have available these days," Chara said. "Obviously with the FaceTime and phone technology, you can be in touch daily. It's different not being with them at home. Those are the sacrifices we talked about before I made that decision (to sign in Washington), and so far it's been working."

After some fits and starts and juggling of the schedule, the NHL has worked well enough to get through its season during the pandemic. While there are questions ahead about how to handle the four Canadian teams that make the playoffs and potential border concerns, players and coaches are glad they've been able to get through the season.

"We're happy to do it," Brind'Amour said. "The alternative is worse: not playing. You've just got to make do with it."

Crosby scores two goals as Penguins hammer Flyers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Sidney Crosby had two goals and an assist, and the Pittsburgh Penguins regained first place in the East Division with a 7-3 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday night.

Jake Guentzel had a goal and two assists for the Penguins, who moved two points ahead of idle Washington. Marcus Pettersson, Jason Zucker, Mark Friedman and John Marino also scored, and Tristan Jarry had 30 saves.

The Capitals have two games in hand over the Penguins with

one week left in the regular season.

The Flyers got goals from Justin Braun, Sean Couturier and Travis Konecny. Brian Elliott had 24 saves in the loss.

Hurricanes 6, Blackhawks 3: Andrei Svechnikov stopped an eight-game goal drought by scoring twice, sending host Carolina past Chicago.

Svechnikov also had an assist on Teuvo Teravainen's third-period goal for the Hurricanes, who erased a 2-0 deficit and maintained momentum toward winning the franchise's first Presidents' Trophy.

Sabres 4, Islanders 3 (SO): Anders Bjork scored his team's last two goals in regulation and then had the deciding shootout goal to lift host Buffalo over New York.

Cody Eakin also scored for the last-place Sabres, who rallied past the playoff-bound Islanders for the second straight night. Victor Olofsson had two assists.

Devils 4, Bruins 3 (OT): Pavel Zacha scored his second goal of the game 2:42 into overtime, and host New Jersey snapped Boston's four-game winning streak.

Jesper Boqvist and Yegor Sharangovich scored for New Jersey, which finished its home season with a 7-18-3 record. Mackenzie Blackwood had 33 saves in winning his fourth straight game.

Oilers 4, Canucks 1: Leon Draisaitl scored twice and Darnell Nurse had a goal and an assist, leading visiting Edmonton past Vancouver.

Evan Bouchard also scored for Edmonton, which improved to 10-3-1 in its past 14 games dating to April 2. Connor McDavid had two assists and Mike Smith made 28 saves.

Ynoa's slam, arm lead Braves over Nats

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Huascar Ynoa (3-1) hit a grand slam and allowed an unearned run and four hits in seven innings, leading the Atlanta Braves to a 6-1 victory over the Washington Nationals on Tuesday night.

Ynoa drove a fastball from Tanner Rainey 427 feet to center field in the sixth inning for the first grand slam by a major league pitcher since Cincinnati's Anthony DeSclafani on June 23, 2018.

"The hitting right now is working, it's getting results," Ynoa said. "I put a lot of work into my hitting going into camp this year. I don't go into any of these at-bats trying to hit a home run. All I'm trying to do is get on base because that's not where the danger is. The danger is facing (Ronald) Acuña next. You have Acuña and that's who can hit the home runs. All I'm trying to do is get a hit, get on base and let the actual hitters do the rest of the damage."

Acuña also homered for the Braves, breaking a scoreless tie in the fifth against Joe Ross (2-2). Atlanta stopped a four-game skid while ending Washington's four-game winning streak.

Yankees 7, Astros 3: Boos and bad words streamed loudly from the seats in Houston's return to Yankee Stadium, and New York got a homer and four hits from Giancarlo Stanton to sate those spiteful fans.

In the Astros' first visit to the Bronx since their sign-stealing scam was exposed, an error by third baseman Alex Bregman in the sixth inning let the Yankees blow the game open.

Cubs 7-4, Dodgers 1-3: Los Angeles dropped a doubleheader at Chicago as Clayton Kershaw (4-3) gave up four runs and four hits in one inning of the opener in the shortest start of his career — exactly 11 years after he went just 1½ innings against

Milwaukee.

Trevor Bauer didn't get through the fifth in the nightcap and David Bote, who tagged Kershaw for a three-run double in a 7-1 win, delivered a game-ending single off Garrett Cleavinger (0-2) in the ninth inning. The Dodgers have lost eight of their last 10 games.

Anthony Rizzo had an RBI single off Kershaw, a three-time NL Cy Young Award winner. Kyle Hendricks (2-3) allowed seven hits over seven innings in his sixth career complete game.

Justin Steele (1-0) got his first career win in the second game as Chicago took two from the World Series champions after losing seven of nine.

Marlins 9, Diamondbacks 3: NL RBI leader Jesús Aguilar delivered a tiebreaking single in a six-run eighth against Kevin Ginkel (0-1) following Miguel Rojas' double, Corey Dickerson followed with an infield single, and catcher Stephen Vogt's throwing error allowed Aguilar to score all the way from first as host Miami defeated Arizona.

Lewis Brinson added a three-run homer off Alex Young.

Rockies 4-8, Giants 12-6: Charlie Blackmon hit a three-run, two-out homer off Camilo Doval (0-1) to cap a comeback from a 6-2 in the final inning, giving host Colorado a doubleheader split.

Brandon Belt hit a go-ahead single and a grand slam in a 10-run first inning of the opener. Belt homered in the second game and had seven RBIs in the doubleheader.

Ben Bowden (1-2) got his first big league win with 1½ scoreless innings in the second game.

Phillies 6, Brewers 5: Andrew McCutchen had a pair of solo homers and Brad Miller hit a three-run shot to back Aaron Nola as Philadelphia won at home.

Nola (3-1) struck out 10 and allowed one

run and five hits in six gritty innings as the Phillies held on to earn consecutive wins for the first time since they started the season 4-0.

Rangers 6, Twins 3: Adolis García hit a two-run homer in the 10th off Brandon Waddell (0-1), his third hit as Texas won at Minnesota.

Kyle Gibson, making his first start against his former team, gave up three runs and three hits with eight strikeouts.

Red Sox 11, Tigers 7: Xander Bogaerts hit a two-run homer, Nick Pivetta struck out eight in five innings and host Boston sent Detroit to its sixth straight loss.

White Sox 9, Reds 0: Dylan Cease (2-0) pitched one-hit ball for six innings, struck out 11 and got two doubles and a single in his first pro plate appearances as Chicago won at Cincinnati. Cease became the first American League pitcher since Jarrod Washburn in 2001 to have a three-hit game.

Indians 7, Royals 3: Harold Ramirez hit a go-ahead double in the eighth, pinch-hitter Jake Bauers added a two-run homer later in the inning and Cleveland rallied from a 3-0 deficit to win at Kansas City.

Athletics 4, Blue Jays 1: Mitch Moreland hit a two-run homer on the heels of Jed Lowrie's two-run double in the second to back Cole Irvin (3-3), who allowed three hits and struck out a career-high nine over eight smooth innings as Oakland won at home.

Rays 8, Angels 3: Austin Meadows hit two homers and drove in a career-high five runs, and visiting Tampa Bay capitalized on Los Angeles' fielding ineptitude.

Mariners 5, Orioles 2: Kyle Lewis and Kyle Seager homered, and reliever Kendall Graveman extended his scoreless streak to 18 ⅔ innings as host Seattle beat Baltimore.

Pirates 2, Padres 1: Mitch Keller tossed shutout ball into the sixth inning and Pittsburgh won at San Diego.

Robot umps and dogs: Minors return after lost year

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — It took just four batters at George Steinbrenner Field before a fan yelled "C'mon, blue!" toward home plate umpire Kaleb Devier after two consecutive close pitches were called balls.

Never mind that a computer was making the calls.

It didn't matter on Tuesday night, as the Tampa Tarpons took on the Dunedin Blue Jays. Because from Omaha to San Jose to

the Jersey Shore, minor league baseball was back after a lost season, with fans, crazy promotions and even those robot umpires.

The Tarpons found themselves already in the dog days on opening day. They hosted the Dunedin Blue Jays on "Tail Waggin' \$2 Tuesday" where fans could bring their pooches to the park for two bucks.

New York Yankees vice president

Vance Smith greeted and talked with fans as they entered the ballpark to see the Class A affiliate, calling it a homecoming after a minor league season wiped out by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Excited, but also hesitation," Smith said. "We're following some protocols, but we're happy to have baseball back. That's the one thing I'm excited about because it's been 18 months since we've had Tarpons baseball and minor league baseball."

Booker, Paul lead Suns past Cavs in OT

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Devin Booker scored 31 points, Chris Paul had 23 and 16 assists and the Phoenix Suns stayed in step with Utah atop the Western Conference by outlasting the under-manned Cleveland Cavaliers 134-118 in overtime on Tuesday night for their fifth straight win.

Mikal Bridges made two three-pointers, dunked and had a block as the Suns scored the first 15 points in OT to finally put away the Cavs.

Phoenix outscored Cleveland 20-4 in the extra five minutes.

The Suns let a late lead in regulation slip away to the Cavs, who were missing six players with injuries but battled one of the NBA's top teams for 50 minutes before running out of gas.

Rookie Isaac Okoro scored a season-high 32 points and Collin Sexton 29 for Cleveland, which dropped its seventh straight.

Bucks 124, Nets 118: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points and host Milwaukee used

a fourth-quarter rally to beat Brooklyn for the second time in three days.

The Bucks blew a 10-point lead in the second half and trailed 103-97 with 10 minutes left, but responded with an 18-1 run to clinch a fifth straight playoff appearance.

The Nets cut the margin to four with 1:02 left, but Antetokounmpo sank a pair of free throws and Jrue Holiday made a steal in the final minute to seal the victory.

Hornets 102, Pistons 99: LaMelo Ball scored 23 points, including two free throws with 5.8 seconds left, and Charlotte took another step toward the postseason with a victory in Detroit.

The Pistons trailed by two when rookie Killian Hayes was fouled with 9.4 seconds remaining, but he made just one of two free throws. Ball made his free throws at the other end, and Hayes missed a last-second three-pointer.

Hamidou Diallo scored a ca-

reer-high 35 points for Detroit.

Clippers 105, Raptors 100: Paul George and Marcus Morris scored 22 points each, and host Los Angeles rallied for a victory over Toronto to snap a three-game skid.

Reggie Jackson added 18 points and Kawhi Leonard had 13 to help the Clippers avoid their first four-game losing streak of the season.

George and Jackson hit three-pointers in the final two minutes, snapping a 99-all tie and putting Los Angeles in control.

Mavericks 127, Heat 113: Tim Hardaway Jr. made 10 three-pointers and scored 36 points, Luka Doncic added 23 points and Dallas moved up to the No. 5 spot in the Western Conference by winning in Miami.

Duncan Robinson and Goran Dragic each scored 19 for the Heat, who remained No. 6 in the Eastern Conference. The team played without Jimmy Butler, ruled out about two hours before the game with flu-like

symptoms — not anything related to the coronavirus, the team said.

Pelicans 108, Warriors 103: Lonzo Ball hit seven three-pointers and capped a 33-point performance with a step-back jumper with 25.3 seconds left, followed by four free throws in the final 15 seconds, and host New Orleans pulled out a crucial victory over Golden State.

Stephen Curry, who had 37 points and hit eight threes, missed a deep jumper that could have given the Warriors the lead in the final 20 seconds. Mychal Mulder briefly appeared to have a long offensive rebound in his grasp when Zion Williamson stole it and drew a clear path foul from Draymond Green.

Kings 103, Thunder 99: Buddy Hield had 18 points and 11 rebounds to help Sacramento win at Oklahoma City.

It was the seventh double-double of Hield's five-year career. He made just 5 of 16 shots, but he fell one rebound short of his career high.

Blue Jays moving their home games back to Buffalo

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Toronto Blue Jays are returning to their home away from home, Buffalo, N.Y., starting in June. And this time, they'll have a limited number of fans in attendance.

Forced from Canada by that government's coronavirus travel restrictions, the Blue Jays posted a note on their Twitter account on Wednesday saying: "Buffalo, we're BACK! We'll see you June 1st." The words were over a picture of Buffalo's downtown Sahlen Field, the regular home of the Blue Jays' Triple-A farm team.

Toronto played its first two homestands at its spring training ballpark in Dunedin, Fla., and will play its third there from May 14-24. But the Blue Jays

did not want to remain in Florida for the hotter, more humid portion of the year.

The Blue Jays return to Buffalo with a homestand that includes games against Miami on June 1-2 and Houston from June 4-6. They'll travel to Buffalo after a five-game trip that ends in Cleveland.

Toronto last played at 49,000-capacity Rogers Centre on Sept. 29, 2019.

NCAA aims for less preseason contact

The NCAA football oversight committee is preparing to recommend changes to preseason camp that will include fewer fully padded practices and the elimination of some old-school collision drills.

The latest move to scale back contact in practice comes in response to a five-year study involving six major college football teams that found more head impact exposure and concussions happened in preseason practice than during games.

The committee's initial proposal called for at least nine of a team's 25 preseason practices to be run with players wearing helmets but no other pads, and no more than eight fully padded, full-contact practices. That proposal went out to NCAA membership for feedback two weeks ago.

CBS commentator apologizes for remark

MANCHESTER, England — CBS Sports commentator Jim

Beglin has apologized for making "culturally insensitive remarks" about Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Angel Di Maria during the broadcast of Manchester City's 2-0 victory in the Champions League semifinals.

Di Maria was sent off for kicking Fernandinho, and as the Argentina international walked off the field, Beglin said "it's that Latino temperament." He made an on-air apology Tuesday and later expressed remorse on social media.

"I apologise for my culturally insensitive remarks during the Champions League tie between Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain," he wrote on Twitter. "I wrongly used a racial stereotype. This was inappropriate and unacceptable."