

## DOD changes guidance on face masks

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Personnel fully vaccinated against the coronavirus are no longer required to wear masks indoors or outdoors at Defense Department facilities, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks announced late Thursday.

Face masks have been mandatory for everyone since April 5, 2020, on all Defense Department property, installations and facilities when social distancing was not possible, which was in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines at the time.

The decision to reverse that guidance for some was made following new guidelines issued Thursday afternoon by the CDC that said those who are fully vaccinated no longer need to wear masks or physically distance in any setting, according to the Hicks memo to the department.

The change applies to individuals who are at least two weeks beyond their final

vaccine dose. Those who are unvaccinated “should continue to follow applicable DOD mask guidance, including continuing to wear masks indoors,” Hicks wrote in the memo.

“All DoD personnel should continue to comply with CDC guidance regarding areas where masks should be worn, including in airports,” according to the memo.

At the Pentagon on Friday morning, service members and civilian employees began removing their masks in public for the first time in more than a year.

However, commanders and supervisors can make exceptions to the directive “as necessary to ensure a safe workplace,” Hicks wrote. More so, they must still respect employees’ medical privacy when implementing changes.

“Commanders and supervisors should not ask about an employee’s vaccination status or use information about an employee’s vaccination status to make decisions about how and when employees will report

to a workplace instead of teleworking,” Hicks also wrote in the memo.

About 614,330 active-duty, Reserve and National Guard service members and 258,476 DOD civilian employees were fully vaccinated as of Wednesday, according to the latest data from the Pentagon. Another 257,666 service members and 90,575 civilian personnel were partially vaccinated as of the same date.

The Pentagon has not issued any requirements or incentives for Defense Department personnel to receive the vaccine. The shot remains optional for DOD personnel as the department continues to be under emergency-use authorization by the Federal Drug Administration.

“We still believe that the right focus is to provide the best information available and this will help our troops to make informed decisions,” Austin told reporters at the Pentagon on May 6. “I think armed with the right information, accurate information, troops will make good choices.”

## Deaths rise as Palestinians flee Israeli fire in Gaza

*Associated Press*

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Thousands of Palestinians grabbed children and belongings and fled their homes Friday as Israel barraged the northern Gaza Strip with tank fire and airstrikes, killing a family of six in their house and heavily damaging other neighborhoods in what it said was an operation to clear militant tunnels.

As international efforts at a cease-fire stepped up, Israel appeared to be looking to inflict intensified damage on the Islamic militant group Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip and has fired hundreds of rockets into Israel.

The Gaza violence increasingly spilled over into turmoil elsewhere.

Across the West Bank, Palestinians held their most widespread protests since 2017, with hundreds in at least nine towns burning tires and throwing stones at Israeli troops. Soldiers opening fire killed six, according to Palestinian health officials, while a seventh

Palestinian was killed as he tried to stab an Israeli soldier.

Within Israel, communal violence erupted for a fourth night. Jewish and Arab mobs clashed in the flashpoint town of Lod, even after additional security forces were deployed.

In Gaza, the toll from the fighting rose to 122 killed, including 31 children and 20 women, with 900 wounded, according to the Health Ministry. The Hamas and Islamic Jihad militant groups have confirmed 20 deaths in their ranks, though Israel says that number is much higher. Seven people have been killed in Israel, including a 6-year-old boy and a soldier.

Israel called up 9,000 reservists Thursday to join its troops massed at the Gaza border, and an army spokesman spoke of a possible ground assault into the densely populated territory, though he gave no timetable. A day later, there was no sign of an incursion.

But before dawn Friday, tanks deployed on the border and warplanes carried out an in-

tense barrage on the northern end of the Gaza Strip.

Houda Ouda said she and her extended family ran frantically into their home in the town of Beit Hanoun, seeking safety as the earth shook for two and half hours in the darkness.

“We even did not dare to look from the window to know what is being hit,” she said. When daylight came, she saw the swath of destruction: streets cratered, buildings crushed or with facades blown off, an olive tree burned bare, dust covering everything.

Hamas showed no signs of backing down. So far, it has fired some 1,800 rockets toward Israel, some targeting the seaside metropolis of Tel Aviv, although more than a quarter of them have fallen short inside Gaza and most of the rest have been intercepted by missile defense systems.

Still, the rockets have brought life in parts of southern Israel to a standstill and caused disruptions at airports.

# Marine major charged in Capitol riot

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

An active-duty Marine Corps major was arrested Thursday in Virginia on charges including assaulting a police officer and obstructing justice for his role in the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol by a mob of former President Donald Trump's supporters, according to the Department of Justice.

Federal charging documents state Maj. Christopher Warnagiris, 40, of Woodbridge, Va., pushed his way through a line of police officers to enter the Capitol building during the violent attack that occurred as lawmakers gathered to officially certify President Joe Biden's election victory. The documents state Warnagiris was captured on security footage pushing into the East Rotunda doors and pulling others into the building from behind him.

"When a U.S. Capitol Police officer tried to pull the doors shut, Warnagiris refused and continued pushing it open," according to the documents. "Warnagiris can be seen pushing the officer in an effort to maintain his position in the open door."

Photos show Warnagiris apparently using his body to block officers attempting to stop

the crowd behind the Marine from entering the building. One of the officers, in an interview later, said Warnagiris pushed him in an attempt to keep the doors open, the documents state.

Warnagiris was identified by multiple individuals who have worked with him via security footage and other imagery taken inside the Capitol during the siege, according to the federal charging documents. He was first identified by a former coworker who saw photos of unidentified suspects in the siege on the FBI's website and reported March 16 that Warnagiris was likely the man seen in the photographs.

Federal prosecutors charged him Thursday with assaulting, resisting or impeding certain officers, obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder, obstruction of justice, unlawfully entering a restricted building, and violent entry and disorderly conduct on U.S. Capitol grounds. Warnagiris was released from law enforcement custody Thursday afternoon after making a brief initial appearance in court in Virginia, Justice Department officials said. He did not enter a plea Thursday.

Warnagiris is a field artillery officer sta-

tioned at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., where he is assigned to the service's Training and Education Command, according to service records provided by the Marine Corps.

Warnagiris commissioned into the Marines in 2002 and has served multiple combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, his records show.

The Marine Corps confirmed they were aware of Warnagiris' arrest but declined further comment on his case. The Pentagon's top spokesman John Kirby said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was aware of the arrest, but he also declined further comment, calling it "a law enforcement matter."

Maj. J.A. Hernandez, a Marine spokesman at the Pentagon, wrote in an email that the Corps does not tolerate extremism within its ranks. Marine officials this week told lawmakers that they had expelled at least 16 Marines in recent years from the Corps for extremist actions.

Warnagiris is at least the fifth service member charged in connection with the Jan. 6 siege of the Capitol. He is the first known active-duty service member charged with participating in the riot.

## I am Vanessa Guillen Act introduced in Congress

By NIKKI WENTLING

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers introduced legislation Thursday that would change the reporting process for sexual harassment and assault in the military, and allow service members who are victims to seek monetary damages from the Defense Department.

The bill's proponents said it would "revolutionize" the way the military handles reports of sexual harassment and assault. It comes in response to the brutal killing last year of Spc. Vanessa Guillen, who was sexually harassed at Fort Hood, Texas, before her murder.

The legislation, titled the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act, was introduced in the House and Senate on Wednesday with more than 150 lawmakers signing on in support. Rep. Jackie Speier, who is leading the House effort, said she planned to get the measure into the National Defense Authorization Act this

year. The NDAA sets the Defense Department's annual budget and includes a slew of policies for the Pentagon. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., vowed to help get the measure to the House floor.

When Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin took office this year, he created an independent panel to study the Pentagon's sexual assault prevention programs. The panel recommended that decisions to prosecute service members for sexual assault be made by independent authorities, not commanders — a change that lawmakers have been trying to implement.

After a separate review that looked specifically into Fort Hood, the Army announced earlier this month it would split control of its criminal investigative agency from a general officer to a civilian director and add more civilian agents to its workforce.

The steps taken by the Defense Department have not been good enough, lawmakers said Wednesday.

"Major transformational change is needed, not only in the military justice system, but in the culture and command climate of the military," Speier said. "Vanessa's grizzly murder awakened Congress. The clock has run out on DOD half measures. We must act to take sexual violence cases out of the chain of command."

The I Am Vanessa Guillen Act would create a stand-alone military offense for sexual harassment and move decisions about prosecuting sex-related cases outside the chain of command. It would also reform the Army's Sexual Harassment Assault Response Prevention program by establishing civilian leaders and creating full-time positions for victim advocates and sexual assault response coordinators.

In addition, it establishes a process in which service members can file claims for negligence against the Defense Department and seek monetary damages in instances of sexual assault and harassment.

# Gas shortages from attack intensifying in the DC area

Associated Press

Gas shortages at the pumps have spread from the South, all but emptying stations in Washington, D.C., following a ransomware cyberattack that forced a shutdown of the nation's largest gasoline pipeline. Though the pipeline operator paid a ransom, restoring service was taking time.

As Georgia-based Colonial Pipeline reported making "substantial progress" in restoring full service, two people briefed on the matter confirmed that the company had paid the criminals a ransom of about \$5 million in cryptocurrency for the software decryption key required to unscramble their data network. The people spoke on condition they not be further identified because they were not authorized to divulge the information. Bloomberg first reported the payment.

President Joe Biden, when asked by a reporter on Thursday if he had been briefed about the ransom payment, said "I have no comment on that."

Biden also said that his administration "will pursue a measure to disrupt their ability to operate. And our Justice Department has launched a new task force dedicated to prosecuting ransomware hackers to the full extent of the law."

The tracking service GasBuddy.com on

Friday showed that 88% of gas stations were out of fuel in the nation's capital, about half were out in Virginia and 42% of Maryland stations were dry. Nearly 70% of stations were without gas in North Carolina, and about half were tapped out in Georgia and South Carolina.

Colonial said Thursday that operations had restarted and gasoline deliveries were being made in all of its markets, but it would take "several days" to return to normal, and some areas may experience "intermittent service interruptions during this startup period."

A cyberattack by hackers who lock up computer systems and demand a ransom to release them hit the pipeline on May 7. The hackers didn't take control of the pipeline's operations, but Colonial shut them down to prevent the malware from impacting its industrial control systems.

Biden said U.S. officials do not believe the Russian government was involved, but said "we do have strong reason to believe that the criminals who did the attack are living in Russia. That's where it came from."

Biden has promised aggressive action against DarkSide, the Russian-speaking ransomware syndicate responsible for the attack.

# Biden, GOP plan further talks on infrastructure

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After meeting at the White House, President Joe Biden and a group of Republican senators agreed to talk again early next week as negotiations intensified over a potentially bipartisan infrastructure package that could become one piece of the administration's ambitious \$4 trillion public investment plan.

The GOP senators exited the more than 90-minute meeting Thursday "encouraged" about their discussions with the president and prepared to build on the \$568 billion proposal they had put forward last month as an alternative to his sweeping American jobs and families plans.

"The president asked us to come back and rework an offer so that he could then react to that," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, who is leading the group.

"We're very encouraged," she told reporters outside the White House. "The attitude the president had in the Oval Office with us was very supportive and desirous of striking a deal."

Biden also emerged upbeat. "I am very optimistic that we can reach a reasonable agreement — and even if we don't, it's been a good faith effort," Biden said.

Biden is intent on at least trying to strike a deal with Republicans rather than simply going it alone with a Democrats-only bill, which might in some ways be a more politically viable route in a Congress held by the president's party with only the slimmest of majorities.

One strategy that appears to be coming into focus would be for Biden to negotiate a more limited, traditional infrastructure bill of roads, highways, bridges and broadband as a bipartisan effort. Then, Democrats could try to muscle through the remainder of Biden's priorities on climate investments and the so-called human infrastructure of child care, education and hospitals on their own.

"I'm willing to negotiate," Biden said earlier at the White House. But the president has indicated that he's not about to wait indefinitely for a compromise that may or may not come, and reiterated his view Thursday that "doing nothing is not an option."

The White House said the president stressed that inaction was a "red line for him." He set a Memorial Day deadline for progress on a bipartisan deal.

# House Republicans elect Trump defender Stefanik to No. 3 post

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans vaulted Rep. Elise Stefanik into the ranks of House leadership Friday, electing an ardent Donald Trump defender in hopes of calming their searing civil war over the deposed Rep. Liz Cheney's unremitting combat with the former president.

Stefanik, R-N.Y., a moderate turned Trump loyalist who's given voice to many of his false claims about election fraud, was elected as expected to the No. 3 post that Cheney, R-Wyo., held for over two years.

Backed by Trump and the House's top two Republicans, Stefanik defeated challenger Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, by 134-46 in a secret ballot vote conducted behind closed doors. A member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, Roy was a

prohibitive long shot whose candidacy seemed a signal to GOP leaders that hard-right Republicans expect a robust voice moving forward.

Stefanik, 36, gives Republicans a chance to try changing the subject from the acrimonious fight over the defiant Cheney by installing a Trump loyalist in a visible role.

But GOP schisms are unlikely to vanish quickly. Many hard-right conservatives have misgivings about Stefanik's centrist voting record, tensions remain raw over Trump's taut hold on the party and Cheney's rancorous ouster, and Cheney has said she will remain a vocal foe of Trump.

Trump issued a statement congratulating Stefanik, adding, "The House GOP is united and the Make America Great Again movement is Strong!"



# US restaurants, stores rapidly raising pay

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—U.S. restaurants and stores are rapidly raising pay in an urgent effort to attract more applicants and keep up with a flood of customers as the pandemic eases.

McDonald's, Sheetz and Chipotle are just some of the latest companies to follow Amazon, Walmart and Costco in boosting wages, in some cases to \$15 an hour or higher.

The pay gains are, of course, a boon to these employees. Restaurants, bars, hotels and stores remain the lowest-paying industries, and many of their workers ran the risk of contracting COVID-19 on the job over the past year while white-collar employees were able to work from home. Still, the pay increases could contribute to higher inflation if companies raise prices to cover the additional labor costs. Some businesses, however, could absorb the costs or invest over time in automation to offset higher wages.

States and cities are easing business restrictions as COVID-19 deaths and cases plummet, and in places like Florida, Nevada and Texas, restaurant traffic is above or near pre-pandemic levels, according to OpenTable, a software provider to the industry.

Many companies say they are struggling to find workers.

"Customers are coming back faster than restaurants can staff up," said Josh Bivens, research director at the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute. "By raising pay, they are able to get more workers in the door."

In April, even as overall hiring slowed, a category that includes restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues hired more new workers than it did the previous month, a sign the extra pay is working.

McDonald's on Thursday said it will raise pay for workers in its 650 company-owned stores to an average of \$15 an hour by 2024.

Entry-level employees will make \$11 an hour. The company is urging its 14,000 franchised restaurants to make the same changes.

Also on Thursday, Amazon said it will pay new hires \$17 an hour, as it seeks to add 75,000 new workers. The online giant said it is offering a \$100 bonus for new hires who have been vaccinated.

Sheetz, a mid-Atlantic convenience store chain, said Monday it is giving its 18,000 employees a \$2-an-hour raise and an additional \$1 an hour for the summer.

Across the restaurant industry, the pay gains have largely returned overall wages to the same growth trend they were on before the pandemic, Bivens said. He expects the increases to climb above that trend in the coming months.

Consumer prices rose 0.3% at restaurants in April, far less than their labor costs that month. That suggests many restaurants are accepting smaller profits rather than passing on the costs to customers, Bivens said. Restaurant

prices have risen 3.8% in the past year, which is above pre-pandemic levels.

Worries about higher inflation have dominated financial markets after consumer prices jumped 4.2% in April compared with a year earlier, the biggest gain in 13 years. But the rise was driven largely by soaring used car prices and more expensive airline tickets, not higher labor costs.

In a sign that companies in general are struggling to add workers, the number of available jobs in the U.S. shot to 8.2 million at the end of March. Yet employers added just 266,000 jobs in April, far fewer than the previous month.

Some of the unemployed are reluctant to return to work for fear of contracting COVID-19, while many women have left the workforce to take care of children who are still in online school. Because of an extra \$300 in unemployment aid, some of the jobless are receiving more in benefits than they earned at their old jobs.

## No one hurt after 2 planes collide midair in Colorado

Associated Press

DENVER — The pilot of an airplane that collided with another mid-air near Denver requested an emergency landing for engine failure, not knowing that his plane was nearly ripped in half, according to air traffic control audio. Miraculously, both planes landed and no one was hurt, officials said.

The planes were getting ready to land at a small regional airport in a Denver suburb Wednesday when they collided, according to the National Transportation Safety Board and South Metro Fire Rescue.

The pilot who requested the emergency landing was the only person aboard a twin-engine Fairchild Metroliner that landed at Centennial Airport despite major damage to its tail section. The plane is owned by Colorado-based Key Lime Air, which operates cargo aircraft.

"Looks like the right engine failed, so I'm gonna continue my landing here," the pilot said in an audio clip with air traffic control.

Experts say the positive outcome of the collision was a combination of luck and advanced life-saving technology.

"It's very rare for me to be able to say 'midair' and 'no fatalities' in the same sentence," said Joseph LoRusso, a Broomfield, Colo.-based aviation attorney and commercially rated pilot.

The damage to the Metroliner's rear fuselage was in the "perfect location," said Anthony Brickhouse, an associate professor of aerospace and occupational safety at the Daytona Beach, Fla., campus of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

"If it was the flight deck: Bad outcome. The wings: Bad outcome. The tail: Bad outcome. It happened in the perfect place for the pilot to make it down," he said.

The second plane, a single-engine 2016 Cirrus SR22, was rented by Independence Aviation, the company said in a statement. Its pilot successfully deployed the Cirrus Airframe Parachute System designed to slow the craft's descent after a collision.

## Lawyer: 'Tiger King' star willing to give up big cats

Associated Press

MUSKOGEE, Okla. — Netflix's "Tiger King" star Jeff Lowe and his wife are willing to give up their big cats to resolve a Justice Department civil complaint against them over the animals' care, their attorney told a federal judge.

At a hearing Wednesday where the judge found the couple in contempt for violating a previous order regarding the big cats, attorney Daniel Card said the Lowes "want out completely."

Jeff Lowe took over the Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park from founder Joe Exotic in 2016. Lowe and his wife displayed big cats there until shutting down the park in August. They then moved to a new facility in Thackerville.

The civil complaint, filed in November, accused the Lowes of recurring inhumane treatment and improper handling of animals protected by the Endangered Species

Act. U.S. District Judge John F. Heil III in January issued an order that, among other things, required the couple to prevent breeding; to relinquish all of their lion and tiger cubs to the federal government; and not to exhibit any of their big cats.

The judge in March found that the Lowes had violated his order, and on Wednesday fined them \$1,000 per day until they get in compliance, according to The Oklahoman.

Jeff Lowe was one of the central characters in the Netflix series that became a pop culture phenomenon last year. The series focused on Joe Exotic, a pseudonym for Joseph Maldonado-Passage. He is serving 22 years in federal prison for violating federal wildlife laws and for his role in a failed murder-for-hire plot targeting his chief rival, Carole Baskin, who runs a rescue sanctuary for big cats in Florida.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Teen hospitalized after being impaled by javelin

**NJ** TOMS RIVER — A teenager was taken to a hospital after he was impaled by a javelin at a track-and-field event in New Jersey, police said.

Police were called to Donovan Catholic High School in Toms River late Tuesday afternoon where officers found the javelin impaled in the 16-year-old Pine Beach resident's right thigh.

There was no sign of bleeding and the boy was able to talk with medical responders, police said.

He was taken to Jersey Shore University Medical Center. The extent of his injuries was not known. It was not clear if the boy is a student at the school or if he was participating in the event.

### Police: Robbery suspect, 11, was driving stolen car

**CA** SAN LEANDRO — An 11-year-old and a 17-year-old were arrested Wednesday on suspicion of robbing an 80-year-old California man, and police said the 11-year-old was driving a stolen car.

The robbery victim, an Asian man, was walking in a residential area of San Leandro when he was attacked and robbed by the two juveniles, KRON-TV reported.

Police tracked down the suspects and said the 11-year-old was behind the wheel of a vehicle stolen during a carjacking in Oakland on Monday.

### Vulture invasion besets neighborhood residents

**FL** TAMPA — Residents of a Florida neighborhood say they are beset by an invasion of turkey vultures that are damaging homes and caus-

ing major messes.

Resident Judy Oliveri told WFLA-TV that her neighborhood in the Tampa suburb of Westchase is overrun with the large black birds, and they've been multiplying since they showed up three years ago.

"We could have 20 to 25 vultures on our roofs. They land on our screens, their under-feathers are all over the roof, their droppings are all over the place," Oliveri said.

Other homeowners say it's possible the vultures were dislocated from their previous habitat by ongoing development in the area.

Residents say the U.S. Department of Agriculture has promised to remove the vultures, but no timetable has been set.

### Police: 2-year-old shoots, wounds parents at home

**ME** WEST BATH — A 2-year-old boy in Maine shot and wounded his parents Wednesday after discovering a handgun on a nightstand, police said.

The 22-year-old mother was hit in the leg, the 25-year-old father suffered a minor head injury and the boy was injured by the recoil of the weapon when a single shot was fired, Sagadahoc County Sheriff Joel Merry said. All three went to the hospital.

"This situation, while disturbing, could have had an even more tragic ending. We are thankful that the injuries were not more serious," Merry said.

The parents were in bed when the 9mm semiautomatic handgun discharged, and the father dialed 911 shortly before 8 a.m., the sheriff said.

The incident remains under investigation by the sheriff's de-

partment and the district attorney, Merry said.

### Man struck and killed by his own vehicle

**SD** SIOUX FALLS — A Sioux Falls man has died after he was hit by his own car, according to police.

The 41-year-old man was driving his car in eastern Sioux Falls and struck the back of a Jeep Cherokee on Tuesday afternoon.

The SUV was stopped in traffic at an intersection and waiting to make a left turn when it was struck by the car, according to police spokesman Sam Clemens.

As the man stepped out of his car, it started to go in reverse and the victim got caught under the vehicle as it began making circles. The car then ran over the man, fatally injuring him, the Argus Leader reported. The car eventually stopped when it crashed into a nearby pickup. The victim has not been identified.

### Officials: Big cat seen on door camera is cougar

**KS** WICHITA — A doorbell camera captured video of a mountain lion trotting along a residential back alley in Wichita earlier this week, Kansas wildlife officials confirmed.

Kansas Department of Wildlife Research Biologist Matt Peek said it's the first confirmed cougar sighting in Wichita, KAKE reported.

The video was captured on Cris Boyle's doorbell camera, showing the large cat padding along the alleyway in the Riverside neighborhood. The wildcat can even be heard growling as it passes by Boyle's house.

Wildlife officials have notified Wichita police of the sighting,

Peek said.

"So that if somebody does call up and say, you know, there's a mountain lion in the tree in my yard, that they take it seriously because it is possible," he said.

### Couple charged with stealing from widow, 85

**TN** FRANKLIN — A Tennessee exterminator who posed as the relative of an 85-year-old widow with dementia has been charged with defrauding the woman out of nearly \$1.7 million, according to a criminal complaint unsealed Wednesday.

Karl Hampton, 63, and his wife, Deborah Hampton, 59, were arrested at their Franklin home on federal fraud and money laundering charges, according to a statement from Mary Jane Stewart, the Acting U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee.

The complaint alleged Karl Hampton met the 85-year-old victim while he was working as an exterminator for a pest control company where he provided services for her home from 2016-2019.

Prosecutors accused Karl Hampton of deceiving the woman, who was suffering from cognitive decline, into believing that he was a relative and that he would take care of her and her finances.

He was able to convince her to sign over her power of attorney and name him in a trust and in her will, eventually draining her bank accounts, taking out a \$500,000 line of credit in her name and accumulating large charges on her credit cards, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

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# Saros has Predators back in postseason

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Goalie Juuse Saros is the biggest reason the Nashville Predators went from a potential NHL draft lottery team to their seventh straight playoff appearance.

How long they stick around will depend on how well Saros keeps playing in net.

"You want to just play better for him because he's been playing so good," Predators forward Tanner Jeannot said of Saros. "It gives you confidence to know he's going to make that save when you need it."

The 26-year-old Finn has put together a season worthy of Vezina Trophy consideration and maybe even a few Hart Trophy votes. Saros, who posted a career-high 21 victories, was at his best since returning in the middle of March from an upper-body injury. He led the NHL over his last 23 games with a .945 save percentage and posted all three of his shutouts since March 23, second-most in the league in that span.

For the season among NHL goaltenders playing at least 25 games, Saros tied for second in save percentage (.927), tied for fifth with his three shutouts and fourth with a 2.28 goals-against average and sixth in wins. He led NHL goalies with a .942 even-strength save percentage.

Nashville coach John Hynes credits Saros with learning from 2018 Vezina Trophy winner Pekka Rinne on how to handle the mental preparation of being the No. 1 goalie. The 5-foot-11 Saros, who's 6 inches shorter than Rinne, also has grown into understanding how he needs to play in net.

"He is a very smart goalie," Hynes said. "I think he reads plays very well, he's position-

ally sound."

Saros did give up seven goals in back-to-back losses to Carolina in mid-April before holding the Hurricanes to just one goal May 8 as Nashville clinched the Central Division's No. 4 seed.

The top-seeded Hurricanes host Nashville on Monday night in Game 1, and defenseman Dougie Hamilton said he's heard how well Saros has played down the stretch.

"Everyone has good goalies at this point," Hamilton said. "To win games, you need good goaltending. So we're going to have to find ways to make it hard for him and see if we can do that and challenge him., and hopefully we can get some by him."

Saros has plenty of company streaking into the NHL postseason:

**Connor McDavid:** The Edmonton captain is in a class by himself with a league-high 104 points in 55 games as the likely Hart Trophy winner as the NHL's MVP. The Oilers will be playing Winnipeg in their first-round series, the team McDavid had the most points against this season with 22 in nine games played.

**High-scoring rookie:** Kirill Kaprizov not only is the top scoring rookie in the NHL, he's also Minnesota's hottest player as the Wild look to win their first playoff series since 2015.

He had a career-best six-game point streak with five goals and five assists snapped in a loss to St. Louis on Wednesday night. He also just posted a four-game, multi-point streak that's the longest by a rookie in franchise history. He has 16 points (11 goals, 5 assists) in his last 13 games.

**Canes' Aho:** Carolina center Sebastian Aho ranked second only to McDavid and Brad Marchand for most points since April 6 with 24. He also had a nine-game point streak that ended May 4, and now he goes into the postseason without a point in three straight games.

**Hot teams:** Since acquiring Taylor Hall at the NHL trade deadline, the Boston Bruins have been the league's hottest team going 12-4-1. They're 15-6-2 over their last 23 games.

Pittsburgh has won eight of its last 10 going into its first-round series with the New York Islanders.

And Presidents' Trophy winner Colorado now has home-ice advantage through the playoffs. The Avalanche have won nine straight at home and are 16-0-1 over their last 17 games, matching the franchise record for longest home point streak set in 2002-03.

Toronto, which opens its first-round series with Montreal on Thursday, has won four straight at home.

**Something has to give:** The Florida Panthers enter the postseason on the NHL's longest active winning streak (six games). They also enter on the longest active streak without a series win (25 years).

Florida's only three series wins came during its run to the Stanley Cup Final in 1996. They were swept by Colorado in that series, one where Joel Quenneville was an assistant coach for the Avalanche. He's now coaching the Panthers, trying to end the drought.

Florida lost first-round series in 1997, 2000, 2012 and 2016, then lost to the New York Islanders in the preliminary round during the season restart last summer.

## Avalanche beat Kings, clinch No. 1 seed

Associated Press

DENVER — Tyson Jost scored two of Colorado's five second-period goals and the Avalanche clinched the West Division and the top overall seed in the NHL playoffs with a 5-1 victory over the Los Angeles Kings on Thursday night.

Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, Joonas Donskoi and Andre Burakovsky also scored in the pivotal period. Backup Jonas Johansson made 21 saves to help the Avalanche finish 7-1 against the Kings this season.

Colorado and Vegas both finished with 82 points, but the Avs

earned the division crown and the Presidents' Trophy — awarded to the team with the best regular-season mark — on regulation wins. The Avalanche won the Presidents' Trophy for the first time since 2000-01, when they went on to hoist the Stanley Cup.

Colorado begins a first-round series Monday against St. Louis.

Sean Walker scored for the Kings.

**Blues 7, Wild 3:** David Perron, Brayden Schenn, and Jordan Kyrou each scored twice and St. Louis scored seven straight goals to erase a first-period def-

icit and beat visiting Minnesota.

Zach Sanford also scored and Jordan Binnington made 16 saves. The Blues are locked into fourth place in the West Division.

Nico Sturm, Marcus Foligno, and Ryan Suter scored and Kappo Kahkonen stopped 20 shots for Minnesota, locked into third place in the West.

**Flames 4, Canucks 1:** Elias Lindholm and Matthew Tkachuk each had a goal and an assist in host Calgary's victory over Vancouver.

Rasmus Andersson and Andrew Mangiapane also scored, Jacob Markstrom made 24 saves

and Johnny Gaudreau had two assists. Matthew Highmore scored for Vancouver.

Eliminated from playoff contention, Calgary and Vancouver will meet three more times while the postseason gets underway. They are making up games lost when the coronavirus swept through the Canucks and suspended their season for three weeks.

The Canucks will play at Edmonton on Saturday, then close the season against the Flames with games in Vancouver on Sunday and Tuesday and Calgary on Wednesday.



# Flaherty, Cardinals shut out Brewers

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — St. Louis Cardinals ace Jack Flaherty put his frustrating history at Milwaukee's American Family Field behind him.

These days, Flaherty is finding a way to win just about anywhere.

Flaherty became the major leagues' first seven-game winner this year with a 2-0 victory over Milwaukee on Thursday as the Brewers' Corbin Burnes extended his streak to 58 consecutive strikeouts before his first walk.

Flaherty had been 0-3 with a 7.07 ERA at the ballpark.

"You've got to find a way to push that to the side and focus on staying present," Flaherty said. "All those things happened in the past."

Flaherty (7-0) allowed four hits, struck out six and walked two to help the Cardinals win a three-game series that featured

dominant starting pitching. Nolan Arenado's first-inning RBI single that put St. Louis ahead for good marked the only time in this series that either team scored before the sixth inning.

**Indians 4, Mariners 2:** Zach Plesac came within six outs of ending Cleveland's 40-year no-hitter drought, keeping host Seattle hitless into the eighth inning to spoil the anticipated debuts of prospects Jarrod Kelenic and Logan Gilbert.

**Rays 9, Yankees 0:** Rich Hill (2-1) joined Cy Young and Nolan Ryan as the only pitchers to strike out nine against New York at age 41 or older, and host Tampa Bay avoided getting swept in a three-game series.

**Blue Jays 8, Braves 4:** Bo Bichette hit a go-ahead, two-run double in the ninth inning and visiting Toronto rallied yet again to beat Atlanta and sweep all six games between the teams this season.

**Astros 4, Rangers 3 (11):** Myles Straw scored on a wild pitch in the 11th inning to give host Houston a win over Texas.

After the Rangers loaded the bases with an intentional walk to Alex Bregman that brought up Chas McCormick, reliever Brett Martin (0-1) uncorked a 1-2 pitch that bounced away, and Straw raced home from third.

**White Sox 4, Twins 2:** Tim Anderson and Jake Lamb homered, Billy Hamilton made a leaping catch at the wall to end a bases-loaded threat and host Chicago beat Minnesota for its sixth straight win.

**Nationals 5, Phillies 1:** Josh Bell and Kyle Schwarber hit two-run homers in the first inning, Patrick Corbin (2-3) continued his resurgence with seven solid innings and host Washington beat Philadelphia to end a four-game slide.

**Giants 3, Pirates 1:** Anthony

DeSclafani (3-1) allowed one hit over five scoreless innings and Steven Duggar hit his first home run in nearly two years to lead visiting San Francisco past Pittsburgh.

**Red Sox 8, Athletics 1:** Xander Bogaerts and Bobby Dalbec each hit a two-run home run, and host Boston avoided a sweep against Oakland.

**Tigers 4, Royals 3:** Michael Fulmer shut down a ninth-inning rally for his second save, and host Detroit extended Kansas City's losing streak to 11 games.

**Rockies 13, Reds 8:** Josh Fuentes homered for the second straight game to back seven shutout innings from Chi Chi Gonzalez (2-1), and host Colorado held on against Cincinnati.

**Marlins 5, Diamondbacks 1:** Trevor Rogers (5-2) pitched six strong innings and Jesús Aguilar had three more hits to lead visiting Miami over Arizona.

## A couple of challengers loom for Medina Spirit

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Midnight Bourbon hopes to take a path to the winner's circle at the Preakness that has successfully been run before — 30 years ago.

Hansel was the horse hyped to win the Kentucky Derby three decades ago but struggled in the first leg of the Triple Crown. He was an afterthought going into the Preakness before winning it.

Hansel's jockey Jerry Bailey sees similar potential in Midnight Bourbon.

"He had been so consistent — he had never been out of the top three," Bailey, now an NBC Sports analyst, said of Midnight Bourbon. "He's the most likely of those type of horses that have always been consistent and wasn't there in the Derby and now everybody's writing him off."

While Derby winner Medina Spirit will likely be the Preakness favorite if drug tests clear him to run, fellow Bob Baffert-trained Concert Tour and typically front-running Midnight Bourbon are the top challengers in Saturday's race.

Midnight Bourbon was installed on the

morning line as the third betting choice at 5-1 behind 9-5 favorite Medina Spirit and 5-2 Concert Tour. The oddsmakers certainly think Midnight Bourbon stands a good chance of handling the 10-horse field in the Preakness better than he did 19 in the Derby, when he finished sixth.

"I'm very confident because of who he is physically," trainer Steve Asmussen said. "He's very strong physically and his energy level's been very high since the Derby, so I do think that it's helpful with him."

Jockey Mike Smith, who jumped ship to Concert Tour, said Midnight Bourbon stumbled out of the starting gate in the Derby. A cleaner start would allow the colt to better run the race he's accustomed to from closer to the lead.

If Medina Spirit isn't scratched for a problem stemming from additional tests agreed to by Baffert's camp and Maryland racing officials, he's expected to be on the lead again with stablemate Concert Tour. Bailey pointed out trainers have run multiple horses with different owners in the Preakness before, but this one is more com-

plicated because they have the same running style and could wear each other down.

"The only thing I'd worry about is if they get in each other's way in a race," assistant trainer Jimmy Barnes said. "You've got to give them all a fair shot, and the best horse will win."

A speed duel on the lead could set up well for Chad Brown's two entries, 10-1 Crowded Trade or 15-1 Risk Taking, Michael McCarthy's 12-1 Rombauer or Robertino Diodoro's 15-1 Keepmeinmind, who finished seventh in the Derby.

"On paper I think there's definitely enough pace, and the smaller field helps," Diodoro said. "We're going to stay on the rail as long as we can this time."

Or Baffert's horses could run slow enough early to set up something of a match race down the stretch.

"He's definitely not going to send two (horses to the lead), but at the same time there's a concern that they could control the pace, his two horses," Diodoro said. "We're not going to change our running style."

# Booker's free throws lift Suns over Blazers

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Devin Booker made two free throws with 2.4 seconds remaining to give the Phoenix Suns a 118-117 victory over the Portland Trail Blazers on Thursday night.

Phoenix moved within a game of Utah for the No. 1 seed in the NBA and Western Conference with two games to play.

Booker's foul shots were set up when Portland's Robert Covington was fouled and missed both free throws with 4.4 seconds left, giving the Suns one last chance. Booker was fouled by Norman Powell as he went up for a jumper.

Portland's C.J. McCollum missed a three-point shot at the buzzer — after an apparent over-and-back violation — to end it.

Chris Paul led Phoenix with 26 points on 11-for-14 shooting. Mikal Bridges had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Booker had 18 points but shot just 5-for-17 from the field.

Damian Lillard scored a game-high 41 points on 16-

for-23 shooting for Portland, which had its five-game winning streak stopped. McCollum had 27 points.

**Heat 106, 76ers 94:** Jimmy Butler scored 21 points, Bam Adebayo had 18 points and 12 rebounds and Miami beat visiting Philadelphia to hold onto the No. 5 spot in the Eastern Conference.

Tobias Harris scored 21 points, Shake Milton added 12 and Danny Green had 11 for Philadelphia, which could have wrapped up the East's No. 1 seed with a win. Joel Embiid, who was dealing with the flu earlier in the week, managed only six points on 3-for-9 shooting.

Miami is 39-31, tied with No. 4 Atlanta and No. 6 New York. The Hawks hold a tiebreaker over the Heat; the Heat hold a tiebreaker over the Knicks.

**Knicks 102, Spurs 98:** Alec Burks scored a season-high 30 points in his return from a three-game absence and host New York kept up its chase of home-court advantage in the playoffs by rallying to beat San

Antonio.

The Spurs secured the final spot in the Western Conference play-in tournament later when Sacramento lost at Memphis.

Julius Randle had 25 points, nine rebounds and nine assists for the Knicks. They are a half-game behind Atlanta as they battle the Hawks and Miami for the No. 4 seed in the Eastern Conference.

**Bucks 142, Pacers 133:** At Indianapolis, Giannis Antetokounmpo had 40 points, 15 rebounds and six assists and visiting Milwaukee wore down short-handed Indiana.

The Bucks moved within a game of the Brooklyn Nets for the Eastern Conference's No. 2 playoff seed.

**Hawks 116, Magic 93:** Bogdan Bogdanovich scored 27 points, Trae Young added 18 and Atlanta beat visiting Orlando for its third straight victory.

Atlanta has the NBA's longest active home winning streak at 10 games and has won 18 of its last 20 at State Farm Arena.

**Clippers 113, Hornets 90:**

Paul George had 20 points and 10 rebounds, Reggie Jackson made five three-pointers and had 19 points and Los Angeles handed host Charlotte its fourth loss in five games.

Kawhi Leonard added 16 points and nine rebounds for the Clippers. They are third in the Western Conference, a game ahead of Denver.

**Nuggets 114, Timberwolves 103:** Nikola Jokic scored 16 of his 31 points in the first quarter in visiting Denver's victory over Minnesota.

**Bulls 114, Raptors 102:** Zach LaVine scored 24 points, Lauri Markkanen added 20 and host Chicago beat short-handed Toronto.

The Bulls pulled within two games of idle Washington with two remaining for 10th place in the Eastern Conference and the final play-in spot.

**Grizzlies 116, Kings 110:** Dillon Brooks scored 30 points and Memphis beat visiting Sacramento to eliminate the Kings from Western Conference play-in contention.

## New commissioner for Pac-12 favors expanding playoff

Associated Press

Incoming Pac-12 Commissioner George Kliavkoff introduced himself to the world of college sports by taking one particularly notable position.

The College Football Playoff needs to be expanded beyond its current four-team format, he said.

"I was not expecting to make news," Kliavkoff told AP in a phone interview after his introductory new conference Thursday.

"But if you've been paying attention the last couple of weeks to the moves that have been made both in announcements related to the contemplation of the expansion of college football playoffs and also some of the NIL (name, image and likeness) legislation

and timing ... I thought on both of those it was important to get our positions at least publicly announced even if they are not solidified in detail," he said.

A couple of weeks ago, CFP executive director Bill Hancock revealed in a Friday news release that was both surprisingly forthcoming and typically coy that the playoff management committee was ready to give serious consideration to changing the format.

There was no commitment to anything beyond a thorough conversation, but the mere mention that a subcommittee of conference commissioners and Notre Dame's athletic director had been studying more than 63 possible playoff permutations, ranging from six teams to 16, caused a stir.

On June 17 at the Big Ten offic-

es in Chicago, the subcommittee is scheduled to present a report on expansion to the full management committee.

When Kliavkoff officially succeeds Larry Scott and takes over as Pac-12 commissioner on July 1 he also gets a seat on the CFP management committee with the rest of the FBS conference leaders.

His last day in his current job as president of sports and entertainment for MGM Resorts in Las Vegas is June 4. Kliavkoff said he was hoping to take a little down time between the end of his tenure at MGM and the beginning of his time with the Pac-12.

"But I will be in constant communication with Larry (Scott) about how we represent the Pac-12 in the transition period to

make sure that our thoughts on the expansion are well understood," Kliavkoff said, adding with a bit of a laugh: "Chicago is lovely in June."

The Pac-12 has sent a team to the playoff just twice since it started in 2014, and the conference has been shutout since 2016.

With every season the Pac-12 is left out of the CFP, elite high school players see the conference as less-than compared with the other Power Five leagues.

No better example of the Pac-12's tarnished reputation will be found this season than at Alabama and Clemson, where the superpower football programs are each expected to start a former five-star high school quarterback from southern California, the heart of Pac-12 territory.