

Polish PM seeks permanent bases in east

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Poland is prepared to construct new bases to host more NATO forces and other countries along the alliance's eastern flank ought to follow suit, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told security leaders gathered in Warsaw.

"Permanent bases of allies should be established in NATO's eastern flank countries," Morawiecki said Thursday at the Strategic Ark think tank forum. "Poland is ready to build such bases (to include) light infantry units on a permanent basis."

Before the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, there were 80,000 U.S. troops in Europe, about 65,000 of whom are permanently based on the Continent.

Since the Feb. 24 launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, temporary reinforcements have been sent in, bringing the total number to just over 100,000.

Morawiecki's comments are part of a

push by eastern states to galvanize support in NATO for setting up a more formidable defense force on Russia's periphery. The Baltic states also have been especially vocal about wanting more troop commitments from allies.

The issue is expected to take center stage next month in Madrid when NATO heads of state, including President Joe Biden, are on pace to decide how to realign militaries in Europe to deal with Russia.

In recent years, the Pentagon has relied heavily on rotational forces to boost troop numbers in Europe. The debate in Washington now is likely revolving around whether to continue with the current model, which relies heavily on rotational forces, add more permanently based forces in Europe or do a combination of the two.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said he favors a focus on deploying rotational units to new permanent bases along NATO's eastern flank.

Critics of the rotational model, however, say troop rotations, which often last six months at a time, strain morale because of lengthy family separations. They argue that switching to permanent basing would alleviate the emotional toll of the rotations.

In Warsaw, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Jeff Broadwater, deputy commander of V Corps, said that whatever decisions are made in Madrid, the aim should be on overcoming "the tyranny of distance" so troops can get to hot spots quickly.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said the security pact needs to make adjustments that include substantially more forces in the eastern part of the alliance. But what that could look like isn't yet clear.

"It is important that we sustain our efforts and reset our posture for the longer term," Stoltenberg said Thursday at a meeting of NATO defense chiefs in Brussels.

Biden: S. Korean chip factory a model for Asian ties

Associated Press

PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — President Joe Biden opened a trip to Asia on Friday by touring a South Korean computer chip factory that will be the model for another plant in Texas, offering it as a way to deepen ties with the Indo Pacific and fuel technological innovation and foster vibrant democracies.

"So much of the future of the world is going to be written here, in the Indo Pacific, over the next several decades," Biden said. "This is the moment, in my view, to invest in one another to deepen our business ties, to bring our people even closer together."

Biden's message was pitched toward the promise of a better tomorrow, yet was also aimed at U.S. voters amid political challenges at home, such as inflation driven higher by the chip shortage, as he tries to show that his administration is delivering on economic growth.

The Democrat's first visit to Asia as president came as polling released Friday by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found Biden's U.S. ap-

proval rating at 39%, the lowest point of his presidency. The survey also found deepening pessimism about the economy and the state of the United States — especially among Democrats.

Samsung, the chip plant's owner, last November announced plans to open a \$17 billion semiconductor factory in Texas. A semiconductor shortage last year hurt the availability of autos, kitchen appliances and other goods, causing higher inflation worldwide and crippling Biden's public approval among U.S. voters. The president noted that the Texas plant would add 3,000 high-tech jobs and the construction would include union labor.

"These little chips," Biden said in remarks after he toured the plant, "are the key to propelling us into the next era of humanity's technological development."

Biden was seeking to frame business collaboration and foreign investment in the U.S. as part of his broader economic goals, and also good for him domestically. He was to appear Sunday in Seoul, South Korea, with the chairman of Hyundai Motor Group

on Hyundai's decision to invest in a new electric vehicle and battery manufacturing facility in Savannah, Ga.

Throughout the five-day visit to South Korea and Japan, Biden will grapple with a multitude of foreign policy issues as he tries to explain their relevance to the American public. In his remarks Friday, Biden did not mention China, which has emerged as a prime competitor with the U.S., yet he stressed the value of alliances that currently exclude that country.

Greeting Biden at the plant was South Korea's new president, Yoon Suk Yeol, and Samsung Electronics Vice Chairman Lee Jae-yong. Yoon is a political newcomer who became president, his first elected office, just this month. He campaigned on taking a tougher stance against North Korea and strengthening the 70-year alliance with the U.S.

Before Biden spoke, Yoon said in remarks that he hoped the U.S.-South Korea partnership evolves into an "economic and security alliance based on cooperation in advanced technology and supply chains."

Russia presses hard in Ukraine's east

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia shifted troops freed up by the imminent fall of the pulverized city of Mariupol and fighting raged in Ukraine's industrial east Friday.

Russian forces shelled a vital highway and kept up attacks on a key city in the Luhansk region, hitting a school among other sites, Ukrainian authorities said. Luhansk is part of the Donbas, the mostly Russian-speaking eastern expanse of coal mines and factories that Russian President Vladimir Putin is bent on capturing.

"The liberation of the Luhansk People's Republic is nearing completion," Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared, referring to the breakaway state proclaimed by pro-Moscow separatists in 2014 and recognized by the Kremlin.

In Mariupol, the strategic port in the southern corner of the Donbas, Russian troops worn down by their nearly three-month siege of the city may not get the time they need to regroup, Britain's Defense Ministry said.

With the battle winding down for the Azovstal steel plant that represented the last bastion of Ukrainian resistance in Mariupol, Russia is continuing to pull back forces there, and their commanders are under pressure to quickly send them elsewhere in the Donbas, according to the British.

"That means that Russia will probably redistribute their forces swiftly without adequate preparation, which risks further force attrition," the ministry said.

An undisclosed number of Ukrainian soldiers remained at the Azovstal steel plant. Russia said more than 1,900 had surrendered in recent days.

Wives of fighters who held out at the steelworks spoke emotionally about what may have been their last contact with their husbands.

Olga Boiko, wife of a marine, wiped away tears as she said that her husband had written her on Thursday: "Hello. We surrender, I don't know when I will get in touch with you and if I will at all. Love you. Kiss you. Bye."

Meanwhile, fighting intensified deeper in the Donbas.

Serhiy Haidai, the governor of Luhansk, said Russian forces were especially focused on the Lysychansk-Bakhmut highway, the only road for evacuating people and delivering humanitarian supplies.

"The road is extremely important because it's the only connection to other regions of the country," he said via email. "The Russians are trying to cut us off from it, to encircle the Luhansk region."

Russian forces shelled the road constantly from multiple directions, but Ukrainian

armored transports were still able to get through, Haidai added.

Moscow's troops have been trying for weeks to seize Severodonetsk, a key city in the Donbas. One of Friday's attacks was on a school in Severodonetsk that was sheltering more than 200 people, many of them children, Haidai said. Three adults were killed, he said on Telegram.

Twelve people were killed in Severodonetsk, Haidai said. It was not immediately clear if that included the three at the school. In addition, more than 60 houses were destroyed across the region, he added.

Russian forces now control 90 percent of Luhansk, but the attack on Severodonetsk failed — "the Russians suffered personnel losses and retreated," Haidai said. His account could not be independently verified.

Another city, Rubizhne, has been "completely destroyed," Haidai said. "Its fate can be compared to that of Mariupol."

Pro-Moscow separatists have fought Ukrainian forces in the Donbas for the past eight years and held a considerable swath of it before Russia's Feb. 24 invasion. But the effort by Putin's troops to take more territory there has been slow-going.

In a sign of Russia's frustration with the war, some senior commanders have been fired in recent weeks, Britain's Defense Ministry said.

Pro-war Russians criticize handling of invasion

The Washington Post

RIGA, Latvia — Battlefield setbacks in Ukraine are prompting mounting criticisms of the Russian military among Russians who support the war but are increasingly frustrated with the way it is being fought.

Military analysts, veterans, mercenaries and journalists are among those who have begun speaking out on social media and state-run television against the blunders and shortcomings that continue to plague Russia's efforts in Ukraine, even after the Russian military narrowed its goals to the cap-

ture of territory in the eastern Donbas region.

Thousands of Russians have been detained or harassed because they oppose President Vladimir Putin's decision to go to war. The pro-war critics are different — they support the war but are frustrated with the pace of progress and in many instances want Putin to get tougher.

"Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich, please decide, are we fighting a war or are we jacking off?" Alexander Arutyunov, a military veteran who blogs under the name Razvedos, asked on

his Telegram account. "If we are fighting we need to fight! And we need to hit everything. There is no other way to win in a war."

Others bluntly question whether Russia can win the war without radical adjustments to its tactics or the mass mobilization of Russian reservists.

Harsh condemnations are also being circulated on Telegram, the social media channel that has emerged as the dominant forum for news and discussion of the war, among Russians and Ukrainians alike.

Russia's battle for Donbas will only be won with "courage and political will ... not with chatter and half-measures, but decisive, lightning-fast actions," wrote Yury Kotyonok, a journalist and military analyst with over 290,000 followers on his Telegram account. He added that both appear to be lacking.

Whether the criticisms are reaching Putin and his inner circle is in question. Putin has boasted in the past that he doesn't have time for social media and the Kremlin has said that he doesn't own a cellphone.

Ex-board leader faced online abuse

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nina Jankowicz, like so many millennials, was excited to share a social media post announcing her new job on Twitter late last month when she was named executive director for a new disinformation board established by the Department of Homeland Security.

But instead of well-wishes, Jankowicz's tweet set off a torrent of sexist profanities across social media and menacing emails filled with rape or death threats that continue to follow her even after she resigned from that new job on Wednesday morning following the disastrous rollout of the program.

It's a familiar scenario.

A crush of online harassment, stalking and abuse has driven dozens of women around the globe from powerful positions. The speed and unchecked virulence of the attacks show another way that social media can serve as an accelerant to sowing discord.

"This type of silencing and terrorizing are global, sadly, and unsurprising," said Danielle Citron, a law professor at the University of Virginia who studies online privacy and hate crimes. "It is a playbook. And it's downright scary."

For her part, Jankowicz said Wednesday

she won't be "silenced" by the online harassment and it was not the final provocation that led to her resignation.

But it had a similar effect.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas decided Tuesday to pause the work of the Disinformation Governance Board after such a negative reception and growing concerns that it was becoming a distraction for the department's other work on disinformation, according to two department officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. The board's pause led Jankowicz to quit Wednesday morning.

Ballot fiasco delays results in Oregon

Associated Press

OREGON CITY, Ore. — Thousands of ballots with blurry bar codes that can't be read by vote-counting machines will delay results by weeks in a key U.S. House race in Oregon's primary election, a shocking development that is giving a black eye to a vote-by-mail pioneer state with a national reputation as a leader on voter access and equity.

The fiasco affects up to 60,000 ballots, or two-thirds of the roughly 90,000 returned so far in Oregon's third-largest county. Hundreds of ballots were still coming in under a new law that allows them to be counted as long as they are postmarked by Election

Day, and 200 Clackamas County employees were getting a crash course Thursday in vote-counting after being redeployed to address the crisis.

Elections workers must pull the faulty ballots from batches of 125, transfer the voter's intent to a fresh ballot, then double-check their entries — a painstaking process that could draw the election out until June 13, when Oregon certifies its vote. The workers operate in pairs, one Democrat and one Republican, in two shifts of 11 hours a day.

Voters from both political parties milled about in a narrow room with windows that allowed views of workers opening ballots, transferring votes, reviewing flagged bal-

lots and using the vote-counting machines. They expressed shock at the error and anger at the slow reaction by embattled Elections Clerk Sherry Hall, who has held the elected post for nearly 20 years. By Wednesday night, workers had counted 15,649.

The debacle has stunned Oregon, where all ballots have been cast only by mail for 23 years and lawmakers have consistently pushed to expand voter access through automatic voter registration, expanded deadlines and other measures. It's also thrown into question a key U.S. House race in a redrawn district that includes a large portion of Clackamas County, which stretches nearly 2,000 square miles.

Gusty winds fan wildland blazes across Southwest

Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — More than 5,000 firefighters battled multiple wildland blazes in dry, windy weather across the Southwest on Thursday, including a fire that has destroyed dozens of structures in west Texas and another that's picking up steam again in New Mexico.

Evacuation orders remained in place for residents near the wildfires in Texas, Colorado and New Mexico. High winds prevented officials from sending aircraft to drop retardant or water in many places.

Dangerous fire weather fueled by gusty winds, high temperatures and extremely low humidity was predicted to continue through Friday — especially in New Mexico, where

the largest U.S. wildfire has burned for more than a month and the governor expects the number of structures destroyed will exceed 1,000.

Fire officials said ground crews worked hard to keep the most active flames in check at the fire in a region between Santa Fe and Taos.

"Today, we saw a real good, old-fashioned firefight out there," U.S. Forest Service fire behavior analyst Stewart Turner said Thursday night. "Tomorrow is going to be a big day — bigger than we saw today."

Winds gusting up to 50 mph were expected Friday before easing into the weekend when cooler temperatures also should provide some relief, Turner said.

More than 2,100 fire personnel were fight-

ing that blaze, which has burned more than 473 square miles of timber and brush in a region east of Santa Fe and south of Taos. Only about one-third of the fire's perimeter is estimated contained.

In Texas, the Texas A&M Forestry Service said the fire that has burned dozens of homes was still only 5% contained Thursday afternoon after charring more than 15 square miles of juniper and mesquite brush 18 miles southwest of Abilene.

That fire had prompted the evacuation of the historic town of Buffalo Gap on Wednesday. Forestry Service spokesman Stuart Morris said the town had reopened Thursday and that no injuries had been reported, but 27 structures had been destroyed.

Monkeypox spreads in West, baffling African scientists

Associated Press

LONDON — As more cases of monkeypox are detected in Europe and North America, some scientists who have monitored numerous outbreaks in Africa say they are baffled by the unusual disease's spread in the West.

Cases of the smallpox-related disease haven't previously been seen among people with no links to central and West Africa. But in the past week, Britain, Spain, Portugal, Italy, U.S., Sweden and Canada all reported infections, mostly in young men who hadn't previously traveled to Africa.

France, Germany, Belgium and Australia confirmed their first cases of monkeypox on Friday.

"I'm stunned by this. Every day I wake up and there are more countries infected," said Oyewale Tomori, a virologist who formerly headed the Nigerian Academy of Science and who sits on several World Health Organization advisory boards.

"This is not the kind of spread we've seen in West Africa, so there may be something new happening in the West," he said.

One of the theories British health officials are exploring is whether the disease is being sexually transmitted. Health officials have asked doctors and nurses to be on alert for

potential cases but said the risk to the general population is low.

Outbreaks in Nigeria, which reports about 3,000 monkeypox cases a year, are usually in rural areas, where people have close contact with infected rats and squirrels, according to Tomori. He said the disease is not spread very easily and that many cases are likely missed.

Tomori hoped the appearance of monkeypox cases across Europe and other Western countries would further scientific understanding of the disease.

The World Health Organization's lead on emergency response, Dr. Ibrahim Soce Fall, acknowledged this week that there were still "so many unknowns in terms of the dynamics of transmission, the clinical features (and) the epidemiology."

British officials have so far reported nine cases of monkeypox, noting that the most recent cases have all been in young men who had no history of travel to Africa and were gay, bisexual, or had sex with men.

Authorities in Spain and Portugal also said their cases were in young men who mostly had sex with other men and said those cases were picked up when the men turned up with lesions at sexual health clinics.

Oklahoma GOP passes strictest US abortion ban

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma lawmakers on Thursday approved a bill prohibiting all abortions with few exceptions, and providers said they would stop performing the procedure as soon as the governor signs it in the latest example of the GOP's national push to restrict access to what has been a constitutional right for nearly a half century.

Oklahoma lawmakers this year already passed a half-dozen anti-abortion measures, and while abortion providers across the country have been bracing for the possibility that the U.S. Supreme Court's new conservative majority might further restrict the practice, that has especially been the case in Oklahoma and Texas.

Two of Oklahoma's four abortion clinics already stopped providing abortions after the governor signed a six-week ban earlier this month, and an attorney for the two other independent clinics said Thursday they will no longer offer services once the bill is signed. The bill is likely to reach Gov. Kevin Stitt's desk early next week, and the first-term Republican running for reelection has already said he would sign any anti-abortion bill the Legislature sends to him. It would take effect immediately after he signs it.

"This bill could go into effect at any time, and once it does, any person can sue the clinic, the doctors, anyone else who is involved in providing an abortion in Oklahoma," said Rabia Muqaddam, an attorney for the Center for Reproductive Rights, which is representing Oklahoma clinics in legal challenges against several proposed new anti-abortion laws.

The bills are part of an aggressive push in Republican-led states across the country to scale back abortion rights. It comes on the heels of a leaked draft opinion from the nation's high court that suggests justices are considering weakening or overturning the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion nearly 50 years ago.

The bill by Collinsville Republican Rep. Wendi Stearman would prohibit all abortions, except to save the life of a pregnant woman or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest that has been reported to law enforcement.

"Is our goal to defend the right to life or isn't it?" Stearman asked her colleagues before the bill passed on a 73-16 vote, mostly along party lines.

Pfizer booster urged for ages 5-11

Associated Press

Kids ages 5 to 11 should get a booster dose of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, advisers to the U.S. government said Thursday.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention quickly adopted the panel's recommendation, opening a third COVID-19 shot to healthy elementary-age kids — just like what is already recommended for everybody 12 and older.

The hope is that an extra shot will shore up protection for kids ages 5 to 11 as infections once again are on the rise.

"Vaccination with a primary series among this age group has lagged behind other age groups leaving them vulnerable to serious illness," said CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, in a statement.

"We know that these vaccines are safe, and we must continue to increase the number of children who are protected," she said.

Earlier this week, the Food and Drug Ad-

ministration authorized Pfizer's kid-sized booster, to be offered at least five months after the last shot.

The CDC takes the next step of recommending who actually needs vaccinations. Its advisers debated if all otherwise healthy 5- to 11-year-olds need an extra dose, especially since so many children were infected during the huge winter surge of the omicron variant.

the initial two Pfizer doses since vaccinations opened to them in November.

Thursday's decision also means that 5- to 11-year-olds with severely weakened immune systems, who are supposed to get three initial shots, would be eligible for a fourth dose.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech currently make the only COVID-19 vaccine available for children of any age in the U.S. Those ages 5 to 11 receive a dose that's one-third the amount given to everyone 12 and older.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Paramedic shot by patient in ambulance

NY NEW YORK — An on-duty New York City paramedic was shot and wounded by a patient he was treating in a moving ambulance Wednesday night.

Police Inspector Mark Molinari said the 37-year-old suspect was reported being disorderly outside the Funkey Monkey Lounge in the borough of Staten Island.

On the way to the hospital, an EMT was getting the man's preliminary medical information when the suspect took out a pistol and shot him in the shoulder.

The ambulance pulled over and the man jumped out, but was caught by a retired detective and an off-duty sanitation department hazmat lieutenant, police said.

Molinari said the man had a previous run-in with the police, an "incident of an emotionally disturbed person."

More federal funding for cleanup at mine

WV CHARLESTON — West Virginia will receive an additional \$27 million in federal funding for abandoned coal mine cleanup.

Sens. Joe Manchin and Shelley Moore Capito announced the funding from the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement. The office's Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization program, established in 2016, pays for projects that return ex-coal mining sites to productive uses.

In February the state received \$141 million for reclamation at former coal mines from

President Joe Biden's \$1 trillion infrastructure deal.

Pair accused in theft from workplace

MN MINNETONKA — Two people are accused of stealing more than \$400,000 in items from a suburban Minneapolis department store where they worked.

Authorities say the suspects stole high-end purses, shoes, jackets and other expensive items from Nordstrom at Ridgedale Center in Minnetonka.

Detectives recovered more than \$46,000 in cash, which is believed to be proceeds from selling the stolen items.

The suspects had 215 postings on their eBay account at the time of their, police said.

Inmate stopped from escaping via ceiling tiles

ME PORTLAND — Corrections workers in Maine thwarted an attempt by an inmate to escape through bathroom ceiling tiles when he was at a hospital.

The Cumberland County Sheriff's Office said the inmate tried to climb through the ceiling tiles at Maine Medical Center in Portland on Tuesday. The office said the inmate was in restraints at the time and was in the process of being discharged from the hospital.

Corrections staff intervened and prevented the escape without further incident.

App to provide verified sightings of sharks

MA Shark's in the water. But is it near

swimmers? Soon, New England beachgoers will know.

An aquarium and environmental organization are working together to collect better data about shark sightings and help keep people informed of when the animals are nearby. Representatives with the New England Aquarium in Boston and Chatham, Mass.-based Atlantic White Shark Conservancy said Wednesday their expansion of the conservancy's "Sharktivity" smartphone app will help protect both the humans and the sharks.

The conservancy has used the app since 2016 to collect information from the public about the presence of sharks off Massachusetts. Increased shark sightings off Cape Cod have been a source of discussion in recent years, and there have been two fatal shark bites off New England since 2018.

Now, the conservancy is contracting with the aquarium to employ a shark expert to verify shark sighting reports that arrive via Sharktivity. Verified sightings will appear as an icon on the app.

Gun in child's backpack goes off at school

IL CHICAGO — A Chicago mother has been charged with child endangerment after a gun in her second grader's backpack accidentally discharged at school, injuring a 7-year-old classmate, police said Wednesday.

The 28-year-old woman appeared in court on Wednesday on three misdemeanor child endangerment counts. A judge ordered her release from Cook County Jail on \$1,000 bond.

During the hearing, prosecutors alleged that the woman's 8-year-old son found the gun underneath her bed and took it to Walt Disney Magnet School.

According to police, the backpack was in the boy's classroom when, just before 10 a.m. on Tuesday, the gun discharged. The Chicago Sun-Times reported that prosecutors said during the hearing that the bullet ricocheted off the floor and grazed the child's abdomen. The child was taken to a hospital in good condition, police said.

Celtics co-owner gives \$2M to aid manatees

FL MIAMI — A co-owner of the Boston Celtics is donating \$2 million toward protecting the Florida manatees and their habitat following two seasons of record-breaking manatee mortalities in the state.

Fox Rock Foundation will give \$1 million each to the non-profits Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida and Save the Manatee Club, the groups announced Tuesday. The foundation is a family charity overseen by Celtics co-owner Rob Hale and his wife, Karen. The Hales have a home in Naples.

The Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida is using the money to expand projects to restore the Indian River Lagoon's overall health by replanting 8 acres of vegetation in the lagoon.

The Save the Manatee Club will use the money to fund a perpetual endowment, supporting projects to preserve, remediate and restore critical manatee habitat for the long and short terms, the group said.

— From Associated Press

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Alabama's Saban, Texas A&M's Fisher exchange accusations over NIL deals

Associated Press

The Southeastern Conference spring meetings will be held in person for the first time since 2019 in a little less than two weeks.

It is unlikely two of the league's superstar coaches will be chumming around Destin, Fla., together.

Texas A&M coach Jimbo Fisher called Nick Saban a "narcissist" on Thursday after the Alabama coach accused the rival Aggies of using name, image and likeness deals to land their top-ranked recruiting classes. Saban apologized a few hours later but generally stuck to his stance and SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey followed soon after with a public reprimand for both.

So much for a quiet offseason.

The public spat is perhaps the ugliest display of the growing angst among college coaches who are wrestling with two big changes: the NIL compensation era that launched last July and its impact on recruiting, and the ease with which players can now transfer. Both have upset the landscape veteran coaches are used to, leading to complaints and now scathing accusations.

Less than 24 hours after Saban said Texas A&M was essentially "buying" players, Fisher called an impromptu news conference to blast college football's most accomplished coach and his former boss at LSU.

"It's despicable that a reputable head coach can come out and say this when he doesn't get his way or things don't go his way," Fisher said in College Station, Texas. "The narcissist in him doesn't allow those things to happen — it's ridiculous — when he's not on top. And the parity in college football he's been talking about? Go talk to coaches who have coached for him. You'll find out all the parity. Go dig into wherever he's been."

Texas A&M had the consensus No. 1 recruiting class in the country for 2022 after beating Alabama during the regular season. The Tide's class was No. 2. In his session with reporters, which lasted about 10 minutes, Fisher declared: "We never bought anybody, no rules are broken. Nothing was done wrong."

Saban said he has reached out to Fisher

but "never got a response." He apologized for singling anybody out but stood by the gist of his message about booster-backed collectives helping to recruit players.

"I feel bad about it. But I'm not changing my philosophy," Saban said on SiriusXM radio. "I look at the betterment of college football. What is good for the game?"

When asked if he wanted to address the conflict with Fisher at the upcoming SEC meetings, Saban said he's hoping to work on big-picture issues.

"I really wasn't saying that anybody did anything illegal in using name, image and likeness," Saban said. "I didn't say that. That was something that was assumed by what I said, which was not really what I meant. Nor was it what I said. There's nothing illegal about doing this. It's the system that allows you to do it. And that's the issue that I have."

Sankey issued a "public reprimand" for both coaches, but acknowledged there's "tremendous frustration" about the lack of consistency in NIL rules in different states.

"The membership of the Southeastern Conference has established expectations for conduct and sportsmanship that were not met last night nor today," Sankey said.

The Crimson Tide lost to the Aggies in 2021, but went on to win the SEC championship and play for the national title. The Aggies finished 8-4 in their fourth season under Fisher.

Saban, who has won six national championships and is widely regarded as one of the greatest coaches in the history of the game, has called the current state of affairs unsustainable. At an event in Birmingham, Ala., this week he said some schools were spending "tons of money to get players."

"We were second in recruiting last year. A&M was first. A&M bought every player on their team. Made a deal for name, image and likeness. We didn't buy one player," Saban said Wednesday night.

Fisher was an assistant under Saban in the early 2000s at LSU, working as offensive coordinator on the Tigers' 2003 national title team. That relationship appears to be badly damaged now.

"We're done," Fisher said. "He showed you who he is. He's the greatest ever, huh?"

When you got all the advantages, it's easy."

Texas A&M plays at Alabama on Oct. 8, but Fisher and Saban won't have to wait that long to cross paths with the SEC meetings just around the corner.

"I don't cheat. I don't lie. If you did my old man slapped me across the face. Maybe someone should have slapped him (Saban)," Fisher said.

Fisher, 56, won a national championship in 2013 as head coach at Florida State before receiving a 10-year contract for \$75 million to leave Tallahassee for Texas A&M in 2017. Fisher was hired to deliver a title to a program that has not won a national championship since 1939 despite its deep-pocketed boosters, resources and access to talent.

The NCAA lifted most of its rules barring athletes from earning money from sponsorship and endorsement deals last July, but there are concerns in college sports that NIL deals are being used as recruiting inducements and de facto pay-for-play. Last week, the NCAA issued guidance to Division I members to clarify rules against boosters being involved in recruiting.

Saban, 70, didn't stop at Texas A&M during his speaking engagement Wednesday night. He also mentioned Jackson State and Miami in his critique of NIL.

Jackson State coach Deion Sanders, a Pro Football Hall of Famer, landed one of the top recruits in the country in cornerback Travis Hunter, who was committed to Florida State until a signing-day flip.

Sanders has denied Hunter received impermissible deals and told Andscape.com that he would like to have a public conversation with Saban about the accusations.

"I still love him. I admire him. I respect him. He's the magna cum laude of college football and that's what it's going to be because he's earned that," Sanders said. "But he took a left when he should've stayed right. I'm sure he'll get back on course. I ain't tripping."

As for Fisher, he said he's looking forward to the Destin meetings.

"I don't mind confrontation. Lived with it my whole life," Fisher said. "Kind of like it myself. Backing away from it isn't the way I was raised."

McIlroy powers his way to PGA lead

Associated Press

TULSA, Okla. — Rory McIlroy was more interested in his own history in the majors than the peculiar heritage at Southern Hills on Thursday at the PGA Championship.

Southern Hills has proven to be favorable to frontrunners. As for McIlroy, he has failed to break par in the opening round 15 times in the 27 majors he has played since winning his last one.

So there was reason for that bounce in his step when he finished with an 18-foot birdie putt for a 5-under 65, giving him a one-shot lead at end of a warm and windy day.

He was asked — yes or no — if it was the start he wanted.

“Yes or no? No, I’d rather shoot 74 and try to make the cut tomorrow,” he said. “Yeah, look, it was a great start. I’ve been carrying some good form. I think when your game is feeling like that, it’s just a matter of going out there and really sticking to your game plan, executing as well as you possibly can, and just sort of staying in your own little world.”

It’s a different world for Tiger Woods, who chose a different path on a right leg shattered in a car crash 15 months ago and

feeling worse on this day than it did at the Masters last month.

Three bogeys in the middle of his round ruined a good start for Woods. Two bogeys at the end gave him a 74, his worst start to the PGA Championship since 2015. Then he limped off to an afternoon of ice baths.

“I just can’t load it,” Woods said of his leg. “Loading hurts, pressing off it hurts, and walking hurts, and twisting hurts. It’s just golf. I don’t play that, if I don’t do that, then I’m all right.”

McIlroy had a one-shot lead over Pebble Beach winner Tom Hoge and Will Zalatoris, who finished his 66 with a 30-foot birdie.

Justin Thomas, trying to shake off a sinus infection and allergies, made one of only four birdies on the 18th hole for a 67 in the afternoon, when greens had more foot traffic and scoring was more difficult.

The start was just what McIlroy needed as he tries to end nearly eight years without a major. This was his lowest start to par in a major since a 5-under 66 when he won the PGA at Valhalla in 2014, the last of his four majors.

In seven previous majors at Southern Hills, the winner had at least a share of the

lead after the first round and every champion was atop the leaderboard from 36 holes until it was over.

That bodes well for McIlroy, and so does his game. He chose to attack with driver, leaving him wedges to par 4s and and 3-iron into a pair of par 5s that measure 628 yards and 665 yards.

“I feel like this course, it lets you be pretty aggressive off the tee if you want to be, so I hit quite a lot of drivers out there and took advantage of my length and finished that off with some nice iron play and some nice putting,” he said.

Masters champion Scottie Scheffler had to save par from a tee shot in the water on 18th hole for a 71, his first time over par in two months.

Jordan Spieth, who joined Woods and McIlroy in a group that drew a loud and thoroughly entertained crowd, opened with a 72 in his bid to capture the only major keeping him from the career Grand Slam.

Woods opted for a different strategy than McIlroy and Spieth, picking his targets off the tee with irons. That didn’t work when some of those irons didn’t always find the short grass.

Alonso’s homer in 10th lifts Mets past Cardinals

Associated Press

NEW YORK — There are two constants to the Mets’ season: injuries and wins.

They learned Thursday that Max Scherzer will join fellow ace Jacob deGrom on the injured list for a lengthy stretch. Then New York wasted a ninth-inning lead against the St. Louis Cardinals and fell behind in the 10th.

Pete Alonso ended an afternoon of twists with a two-run homer into the left field second deck leading off the bottom of the 10th for a 7-6 victory that sent the Mets flying even before they headed to Colorado for the start of a six-game trip.

“We’re just a bunch of resilient guys, and we’re gritty,” Alonso said after a 447-foot drive that was so emphatic he patted his chest five times with both hands before starting his trot. “When you get guys that are talented and love to win and are a group of tough men, you get games like this.”

The Mets said during the game that Scherzer had been diagnosed with a strained oblique muscle and is expected to be sidelined for six to eight weeks.

Orioles 9, Yankees 6: Anthony Santander lined a three-run homer in the ninth inning off Lucas Luetge and host Baltimore avoided a four-game sweep by beating New York.

Giancarlo Stanton homered for the Yankees, who lost for just the second time in 11 games and for the first time this season when scoring five runs or more.

Red Sox 12, Mariners 6: Trevor Story had three homers, four hits and seven RBIs to help host Boston rally from a four-run deficit to beat Seattle.

Story slugged a pair of two-run homers and a three-run shot in the eighth, and also singled in the go-ahead run in the sixth with the help of a wild throw by Julio Rodriguez.

Padres 2, Phillies 0: Yu Darvish escaped a jam and retired \$179 million of offense in Kyle Schwarber and Nick Castellanos in a key spot, pitching seven shutout innings to lead visiting San Diego past Philadelphia.

Darvish (4-1) struck out five, walked none, allowed six hits and continued a run of solid starts. In the sixth with runners on the corners and the Padres ahead 2-0, Darvish

struck out Schwarber and Castellanos grounded into an inning-ending forceout.

Reds 4, Guardians 2: Tyler Naquin homered in the fifth inning and scored on Kyle Farmer’s go-ahead single in the eighth, leading visiting Cincinnati past Cleveland.

The Reds are showing positive signs after starting 3-21. They’re 8-5 since May 5.

White Sox 7, Royals 4: Luis Robert homered and drove in four runs as visiting Chicago rallied past Kansas City to win the five-game series.

Robert delivered a pair of RBI singles before hitting a two-run homer into the left field stands in the eighth. His sixth home run of the season capped Chicago’s sixth come-from-behind win.

Diamondbacks 3, Cubs 1: Zac Gallen pitched five effective innings, Daulton Varsho homered and visiting Arizona stopped a six-game slide by beating Chicago.

Astros 5, Rangers 1: Martin Maldonado hit a three-run double and Jose Altuve added a season-high four hits to back a strong start by Framber Valdez as Houston extended its winning streak at home against Texas to 11.

Colton's late goal pushes Lightning up 2-0 on Panthers

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — In four games over a pressure-filled week, the Tampa Bay Lightning have gone from the brink of playoff elimination to a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

Ross Colton scored with 3.8 seconds remaining, giving the two-time defending Stanley Cup champions a 2-1 victory over the Florida Panthers in Game 2 of their best-of-seven series on Thursday night.

The Lightning have won four straight since falling behind Toronto 3-2 in the first round and will look to take a commanding series lead over the Presidents Trophy-winning Panthers when the matchup moves across the state to Tampa for Game 3 on Sunday.

Colton said he was just trying not to get scored on in the final minute. He wound up being the

hero when Nikita Kucherov retrieved a loose puck behind the Florida net and flicked a perfect no-look, backhand pass that Colton lifted over Sergei Bobrovsky's shoulder to win it.

"I was kind of trying to sit back and let the plays come to us. But when you're on the ice with (Kucherov), you have to be ready for anything. Once I saw the puck behind the net, I just went to the front of the net," Colton said.

"He's got eyes in the back of his head, as you can see, because I didn't even know he knew I was there. He gift-wrapped it for me," Colton continued. "Luckily it just squeaked under the bar there, but unbelievable play by him."

Florida, which had the NHL's best record during the regular season, now has to win four of the final five games in the series to advance to the Eastern Con-

ference final.

The Lightning, meanwhile, are playing like a team determined to become the first to win three consecutive Stanley Cup titles since the New York Islanders captured four in a row in the early 1980s.

"We're two games closer to where we want to be, but we're not there yet," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "I told you this in the last series, and I'm going to tell you again: Tonight was just one game. We're here to win a series."

Florida interim head coach Andrew Brunette expects the Panthers to bounce back when the series resumes in Tampa.

"Obviously, it's really hard. It's not easy. This is a roller-coaster ride that we're on," Brunette said. "The sun will come up, and we will wake up, and we need to keep playing like we're playing."

Celtics roll past Heat, tie series

Associated Press

MIAMI — His team was down by 10 in the opening minutes, and Boston coach Ime Udoka was making no effort to hide his level of disappointment.

His message was simple.

"Wake up," he told his team.

Oh, they listened. And the Eastern Conference finals are all tied up, the series about to shift to Boston with the Celtics now holding the home-court advantage.

Jayson Tatum scored 27 points, Marcus Smart and Jaylen Brown each had 24 and the Celtics went on a massive first-half run to roll past the Miami Heat 127-102 on Thursday night in Game 2 of the series.

"Guys have pride and looked at a golden opportunity that we kind of lost (in Game 1) and thought we could do much better," Udoka said. "And we did that tonight."

Smart was a rebound shy of a triple-double, after adding 12 assists and nine rebounds.

Grant Williams scored 19 points for Boston, which used a 17-0 run late in the first quarter — fueled by five three-pointers in the span of six possessions — to take control.

Jimmy Butler had 29 points in 32 minutes for Miami, which fell to 7-1 at home in these playoffs. Gabe Vincent and Victor Oladipo each scored 14 points.

"This only counts as one," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "That's what the experienced players in the locker room and staff understand. We don't like it. They played extremely well. You have two really good teams and we just have to figure some things out."

The Celtics — now 4-0 in these playoffs in the game immediately following a loss — made 20 shots from three-point range to Miami's 10.

Perron scores 2, Blues even series with Avs

Associated Press

DENVER — Between the new line combinations and wrinkles — using five forwards on a power play — there was one big-time constant for St. Louis: Jordan Binnington.

Stellar in goal yet again.

David Perron scored twice as St. Louis juggled its offensive pairings, Binnington made 30 saves and the Blues beat the Colorado Avalanche 4-1 on Thursday night to tie their second-round series at a game apiece.

Jordan Kyrrou added a goal and Brandon Saad sealed it with an empty-netter for the Blues, who rode another superb performance from Binnington. The Blues goaltender stopped 51 shots during a 3-2 overtime loss

in Game 1.

Binnington's flashing his 2019 form, when as a rookie he led the Blues to a Stanley Cup title with a 16-10 mark and a 2.46 goals-against average.

It was also his 20th career playoff win. There are only two other goaltenders who have as many postseason wins as him since 2019 — Andrei Vasilevskiy (40-21) and Tuukka Rask (22-16), according to NHL Stats.

"We played a connected hockey game," Binnington said. "We talked about just controlling the puck and tracking back hard and trying to outnumber them all over the ice. We did a great job."

Gabriel Landeskog scored on a power play early in the third for Colorado to make it 2-1. But

Perron answered with his seventh goal of these playoffs.

Darcy Kuemper stopped 28 shots. Two of the goals he allowed were redirected off the stick of a defenseman.

The difference in the game was this: Nathan MacKinnon and the Avalanche found open ice a scarce commodity against a physical, hard-checking and more determined Blues squad.

"We didn't have our jump tonight," MacKinnon said. "Our execution was off. Yeah, just weren't feeling it, just fighting it out there. It's unfortunate, but it's 1-1."

Among the line changes by the Blues was pairing Pavel Buchnevich with Ryan O'Reilly and Perron. Buchnevich finished with two assists.