

## US, allies growing forces in Poland

By JOHN VANDIVER

*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army this month is drilling to rapidly grow an American-led battlegroup in Poland that operates near the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, where soldiers are tasked with defending some of NATO's most vulnerable terrain.

The exercise, called Griffin Shock, calls for expanding the U.S.-led force from a battalion to brigade-sized element of some 3,000 troops, the Army's V Corps said in a statement Thursday.

"Griffin Shock will validate our ability to quickly scale the NATO battlegroup in Poland into a full combat brigade under the command and control of NATO Multinational Division-Northeast," V Corps commander Lt. Gen. John S. Kolasheski said in the statement.

The mission comes in response to a new NATO force model that allies agreed to during the alliance's leader summit last summer in Madrid, which requires a plan to increase

*"Allies demonstrate that we are a highly capable ... formation that can deter."*

**Lt. Gen. Juergen-Joachim Von Sandrart**  
commanding general, NATO Multinational Corps-Northeast

various eastern flank battlegroups into full brigades when needed. NATO battlegroups are made up of several hundred troops each.

In the case of Poland, the U.S. Army is the leading force in the NATO unit, which operates from Bemowo Piskie in the country's northeast. The location is about 50 miles from Kaliningrad, where Russia maintains a sizable force. The area also is in the vicinity of the so-called Suwalki Gap, which connects Poland to Lithuania.

The small gap has long been considered one of NATO's most vulnerable areas should a conflict with Russia ever develop. The concerns center on whether allies could mobilize fast enough should the Russian military attempt to seal off the Baltic states from the rest of the alliance.

With Griffin Shock, V Corps and NATO Multinational Corps Northeast are rehearsing how it would surge forces into that area in a crisis.

Units from the Army's 4th Infantry Division, the Vilseck, Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment and other Germany-based units will be part of the exercise, along with a mix of international troops.

"Through such exercises, allies demonstrate that we are a highly capable ... formation that can deter and, where necessary, confront and defend potential aggressors," Lt. Gen. Juergen-Joachim Von Sandrart, commanding general of NATO Multinational Corps-Northeast, said in a statement.

The exercise, which started on May 8, will run until May 26.

## US, Yemen: Iran not honoring arms supply pledge

By J.P. LAWRENCE

*Stars and Stripes*

Iran continues to supply Houthi rebels with arms and drugs to fund a shadow war in Yemen despite a deal with Saudi Arabia that was supposed to halt such practices, U.S. and Yemeni officials said last week.

The statements come after a U.S. Coast Guard cutter seized \$110 million worth of heroin and methamphetamine from two ships in the waters in the Gulf of Oman south of Iran, the Navy's 5th Fleet said.

Recent talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran on stopping the war in Yemen, in which opposing sides backed by the two governments have been clashing since 2014, were said to include a provision that Tehran would

halt arms shipments to Houthi rebels, The Wall Street Journal reported in March.

But the U.S. has not seen a change in Iran's operations, Tim Lenderking, U.S. special envoy for Yemen, said in a phone briefing with reporters Thursday.

"The Iranians have continued to smuggle weaponry and narcotics toward the conflict, and we are very concerned that this would continue despite the benefits that could come from a Saudi-Iran deal," Lenderking said.

Yemen's information minister, Muammar al-Eryani, also said Thursday that Iran was continuing to supply Houthi rebels, the Turkish state news agency Anadolu reported Fri-

day. Al-Eryani referenced the U.S. seizures last week.

The two ships filled with drugs that were seized by the crew of the USCGC Glen Harris both came from the port of Chah Bahar in Iran, the 5th Fleet statement said.

The Coast Guard cutter seized \$30 million worth of methamphetamine and heroin Monday from a fishing vessel and \$80 million worth of heroin Wednesday, the statement said.

More U.S. vessels will soon be patrolling the waters of the Strait of Hormuz, off the coast of Iran, the 5th Fleet announced Friday. The statement said the increase in the rotation of ships and aircraft is due to Iran's recent seizure of two oil tankers.

U.S. officials have also re-

peatedly accused Iran of providing weapons, training and financial support to the Houthis, a Shiite rebel movement, that seized Sanaa, Yemen's capital, in 2014, leading to a counteroperation by Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries.

A deal brokered by China to reestablish diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia earlier this year raised expectations that the war would end.

Lenderking said the U.S. welcomes the deal, which provides an opening for peace.

"Our hope ... is that Iran will change behavior and indeed, in the spirit of the agreement with the Saudis, support the peace effort vigorously in Yemen," Lenderking said.

# Austin visits Fort Bragg, hears soldiers' concerns

By **DOUG G. WARE**  
*Stars and Stripes*

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin traveled to the Army's largest base in the United States to meet with some military families and listen to them talk about their concerns about quality-of-life problems, in particular finding and paying for child care.

Austin said he chose to visit Fort Bragg to listen to Army families because he has a personal connection to the North Carolina base and some of the brightest minds in the service are stationed there. Austin held several commands at Fort Bragg during his Army career.

"My No. 1 priority is to defend this country," he told a group of soldiers with the 82nd Airborne Division, part of the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps that's stationed at the base. "My second priority is to take care of people and I want to make sure that you have the resources that you need to be successful."

Austin flew into Fayetteville in the southern part of North Carolina on Friday to spend several hours on a whirlwind tour —

meeting with service leaders, policy advisers, new ROTC graduates and concerned military families.

During a private meeting with Austin, families told him about some of their top struggles, including difficulty finding, keeping and paying for child care on bases. Part of the problem is there aren't enough on-base providers, and private child care off base is more expensive, they said.

On some installations, military parents are stuck on long waitlists for on-base child care. The problem has gotten so serious, the military has been helping families pay for Pentagon-approved providers off base.

The family members asked Austin whether more can be done to help them, a defense official said. Austin said that he wants to strip down some of the military process for dual-income families.

In his meeting, Austin said a partial solution is in helping spouses find employment quicker and removing some of the burdens on dual-income households. One way that the Pentagon is looking to do this is getting state governments to allow spouses to quickly transfer their professional licenses.

# Bill would ease path of spouses to US citizenship

By **ROSE L. THAYER**  
*Stars and Stripes*

The requirement to live in a state for more than 90 days before applying for citizenship could be waived for military spouses under a new bill introduced Friday by House lawmakers.

Reps. Marilyn Strickland, D-Wash., and Maria Salazar, R-Fla., filed legislation called the Ensuring Security for Military Spouses Act of 2023 after learning about a spouse in Washington state whose application was denied because of the rule, which is part of Immigration and Nationality Act.

"Military spouses are the backbone of our nation's military, serving the nation right alongside our service members," Strickland said in a statement. "In order to ensure national security, address recruitment and retention issues, and maintain readiness, we must support green-card-holding military spouses who want to become citizens."

Service members are already exempt from the rule, and it does not apply to spouses living with service members outside of the United States. Lifting the requirement for foreign-born spouses living in the U.S. creates parity, Strickland's office said.

Lydia Owiti, who is married to an Army retiree, said military spouses often move more often than their service member because they will go back home to be with family during deployments. When she first arrived in the U.S. from Kenya in 2012, she recalled wanting to live close to her brother in another state while her husband was deployed to Kuwait.

"I wanted to be with him to feel like I have somebody who I know, something about me that I can relate to, [who] I can share a meal with and I can laugh with because I don't want to be alone," Owiti said.

The bill, which has the support of the National Immigration Forum and Minority Veterans of America, does not change the three-year minimum requirement for spouses of U.S. citizens to maintain legal permanent residence before applying for citizenship, according to Strickland's office.

Owiti said the three-year wait feels long enough without the possibility of an additional three months, particularly when it comes to employment.

# Marines face alcohol screenings as COVID-19 pandemic ends

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Marine Corps is reviving random breathalyzer and urinalysis testing across the force following a temporary pause brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Alcohol Screening Program, which requires 10% of Marines in each unit to take a breathalyzer and undergo urinalysis every month, will resume no later than June 1, Lt. Gen. James Glynn, deputy commandant for manpower and Reserve affairs, wrote in a Marine Corps administrative message Monday.

The screening program was suspended while the COVID-19 public health emergency — declared by the federal government in January 2020 — was in effect because a

breathalyzer test requires a subject to blow into the device, according to the message. COVID-19 is transmitted through tiny liquid particles from an infected person's mouth or nose, according to the World Health Organization.

The Department of Health and Human Services ended the COVID-19 public health emergency on Thursday, a plan it announced in February.

The screening program "supports a commander's efforts to ensure Marines arrive to work safely and fit for duty," the Marine Corps message states.

The policy applies to active-duty Marines, members of the Selected Marine Corps Reserve and Marines on active operational support orders.

# Buffalo shooting victims honored on anniversary

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The city of Buffalo paused Sunday to mark the passing of one year since a gunman killed 10 people and wounded three others in a racist attack that targeted Black people at a city supermarket.

A moment of silence followed by the chiming of church bells at 2:28 p.m. was planned to honor victims of the massacre at the Tops Friendly Market on May 14, 2022.

“The racially motivated mass shooting shook our community to its core. It was the day the unthinkable happened,” Mayor Byron Brown said in announcing plans for the commemoration, to be held at the now-reopened supermarket.

In the days leading up to the anniversary, panelists discussed

ways to combat racism and social media radicalization and residents were invited to reflect at an outdoor community gathering.

In the year since the shooting, relatives of the victims have spoken before Congress about white supremacy and gun reform and organized events to address food insecurity that worsened when the market, the neighborhood’s only grocery store, was inaccessible for two months.

President Joe Biden honored the lives of those killed in Buffalo in an op-ed published Sunday in USA Today. He called on Congress and state legislative leaders to act by banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, requiring background checks for all gun sales, and repealing gun manufacturers’ immunity from liability. His administration

passed a landmark gun measure in June following a series of mass shootings.

Gun control organizations and advocates including Moms Demand Action and Students Demand Action held nearly 200 events across the country over the weekend, calling on Congress to reinstate a bipartisan assault weapons ban.

In Buffalo, Wayne Jones, whose mother Celestine Chaney, 65, died in the attack, urged the city and its institutions to keep on investing in the area and its residents even after the anniversary events are over.

That’s why he is willing “to keep opening up this wound that I have” and talk about it.

The son of 63-year-old shooting victim Geraldine Talley on Sunday released a book that he said

describes what he went through after losing his mother. He titled it: “5/14: The Day the Devil Came to Buffalo.”

“I definitely know that she wouldn’t want me to be consumed by sadness and anger,” Mark Talley said of his mother, speaking outside of the store as the anniversary approached, “so I will definitely try to find strength in her memory and use it to fight injustice and racism for the rest of my life in her name.”

Inside the remodeled store, fountains flank a poem dedicated to the victims. A commission is at work designing a permanent memorial for outside.

In the meantime, a hand-painted mural overlooking the parking lot promotes unity, with a Black hand and white hand meeting together in prayer.

## Biden’s goals ambitious, varied for Indo-Pacific trip

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden has an ambitious agenda when he sets off this week on an eight-day trip to the Indo-Pacific.

He’s looking to tighten bonds with longtime allies, make history as the first sitting U.S. president to visit the tiny island state of Papua New Guinea and spotlight his administration’s commitment to the Pacific. The three-country trip also presents the 80-year-old Biden, who recently announced he’s running for reelection, with the chance to show that he still has enough in the tank to handle the grueling pace of the presidency.

But as he prepares to head west, Biden finds himself in a stalemate with Republican lawmakers over raising America’s debt limit. If the matter is not resolved in the coming weeks, it threatens to spark an economic downturn.

Biden first heads to Hiroshima, Japan, for the Group of Seven summit. Japanese Prime Minis-

ter Fumio Kishida is this year’s host for the annual gathering of leaders from seven of the world’s biggest economies. He picked his hometown of Hiroshima, where the United States dropped the world’s first atomic bomb in 1945.

The significance of Hiroshima resonates deeply today, given that Russia has made veiled threats of using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, North Korea has stepped up ballistic missile tests and Iran has pushed forward with its nuclear weapons program.

Biden will then make a brief and historic stopover in Papua New Guinea. He has sought to improve relations with Pacific Island nations amid growing U.S. concern about China’s growing military and economic influence in the region.

Finally, Biden travels to Australia for a summit with his fellow Quad leaders: Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Kishida.

## NC governor vetoes abortion ban, starting override faceoff

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — In front of an exuberant crowd, North Carolina’s Democratic governor vetoed legislation Saturday that would have banned nearly all abortions in his state after 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Abortion-rights activists and voters watched on a plaza in the capital of Raleigh as Gov. Roy Cooper affixed his veto stamp to the bill in an unconventionally public display. The veto launches a major test for leaders of the GOP-controlled General Assembly to attempt an override vote after they recently gained veto-proof majorities in both chambers. The bill was the Republican response to last year’s U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

“We’re going to have to kick it into an even higher gear when that veto stamp comes down,” Cooper told the crowd. “If just one Republican in either the House or the Senate

keeps a campaign promise to protect women’s reproductive health, we can stop this ban.”

Andrea Long, a 42-year-old mother of three from Cary, said she was honored to be part of the “electric” crowd on what she called a “historic day for freedom” in North Carolina.

“I couldn’t stop crying tears of joy seeing the governor hold up the veto stamp, but I know it’s an uphill battle to keep this momentum going,” Long said. In a statement provided late Saturday through Cooper’s office, State Capitol Police Deputy Chief Terry Green said the crowd estimate was over 2,000 people.

Cooper, a strong abortion-rights supporter, had until Sunday night to act on the measure that tightens current state law, which bans most abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. The legislation passed along party lines earlier this month in the House and Senate. Override voting could begin this week.

# Zelenskyy: No attack on Russia territory

Associated Press

BERLIN — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that his country is preparing a counteroffensive designed to liberate areas occupied by Russia, not to attack Russian territory.

Speaking during a news conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, Zelenskyy said Ukraine's goal is to free the territories within its internationally recognized borders.

The Washington Post cited previously undisclosed documents from a trove of U.S. intelligence leaks suggesting that Zelenskyy has considered trying to capture areas in Russia proper for possible use as bargaining chips in peace negotiations to end the war launched by Moscow in February 2022. This would put him at odds with Western governments that have insisted that weapons they provide must not be used to attack targets in Russia.

Asked about the report, Zelenskyy said: "We don't attack Russian territory, we lib-

erate our own legitimate territory."

"We have neither the time nor the strength (to attack Russia)," he said, according to an official interpreter. "And we also don't have weapons to spare, with which we could do this."

"We are preparing a counterattack for the illegally occupied areas based on our constitutionally defined legitimate borders, which are recognized internationally," Zelenskyy said.

Among the areas still occupied by Russia are the Crimean peninsula and parts of eastern Ukraine with mainly Russian-speaking populations.

The Ukrainian president is visiting allies in search of further arms to help his country fend off the Russian invasion, and funds to rebuild what's been destroyed by more than a year of devastating conflict.

A Luftwaffe jet flew Zelenskyy to the German capital from Rome, where he had met Saturday with Pope Francis and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni.

It was his first visit to Berlin since the start of the war and came a day after the German government announced a new package of military aid for Ukraine worth more than \$3 billion, including tanks, anti-aircraft systems and ammunition.

Zelenskyy thanked Scholz for Germany's political, financial and military support, saying the country is now second only behind the United States in providing aid to Ukraine — and joked that he is working to make it the biggest donor.

"German air defense systems, artillery, tanks and infantry fighting vehicles are saving Ukrainian lives and bringing us closer to victory. Germany is a reliable ally! Together we are bringing peace closer!" he wrote on Twitter after the meeting.

Scholz said Berlin has so far given Kyiv some 17 billion euros in bilateral aid and that it can expect more in future.

"We will support you for as long as necessary," he said, adding that it is up to Russia to end the war by withdrawing its troops.

# Turks await vote count on new term for Erdogan

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Election polls closed Sunday in Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 20-year leadership of the NATO member country grappling with economic turmoil and the erosion of democratic checks-and-balances hung in the balance after a strong challenge from an opposition candidate.

The election could grant Erdogan, 69, a new five-year term

or unseat him in favor of the head of an invigorated opposition, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who has promised to return Turkey to a more democratic path. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, the race will be determined in a May 28 runoff.

Voters also elected lawmakers to fill Turkey's 600-seat parliament, which lost much of its legislative power under Erdogan's executive presidency. If his political alliance wins, Erdo-

gan could continue governing without much restriction. The opposition has promised to return Turkey's governance system to a parliamentary democracy if it wins both the presidential and parliamentary ballots.

Opinion surveys indicated the increasingly authoritarian leader entered the election trailing a challenger for the first time. Erdogan has ruled Turkey as prime minister or president since 2003.

Pre-election polls gave a slight lead to Kilicdaroglu, 74, the joint candidate of a six-party opposition alliance who leads the center-left, pro-secular Republican People's Party, or CHP.

More than 64 million people, including 3.4 million overseas voters, were eligible to vote in the elections, which come the year the country will mark the centenary of its establishment as a republic.

# Loreen's song leads Sweden to Eurovision win

Associated Press

LIVERPOOL, England — Liverpool cleaned up from the Eurovision Song Contest on Sunday, as Sweden celebrated victory and Ukraine remained defiant after a night of Russian bombardment, including a strike on the hometown of the country's competitors.

Swedish singer Loreen won the contest with her power ballad "Tattoo," at a colorful, eclectic music competition clouded for a

second year by the war in Europe. Britain hosted Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine, which won last year but couldn't take up its right to hold the contest because of the war.

Electronic duo Tvorchi represented Ukraine at the spectacular pan-continental pop competition on Saturday night, coming sixth of the 26 finalists with "Heart of Steel," an anthem to the country's resilience inspired by the siege of the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol.

Air raid sirens sounded across Ukraine as the contest was underway in Liverpool, and Ukraine's military said a barrage of Russian drones and missile strikes left dozens wounded. One strike hit Ternopil, home city of Tvorchi in western Ukraine.

Ternopil was attacked again on Sunday morning, Ukraine's State Emergency Service said. Civilian buildings and cars were damaged; there was no immediate information on victims.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Sheriff: Man shot teen playing hide and seek**

**LA** STARKS — A Louisiana man has been charged with aggravated assault and battery after shooting at children who had been playing hide and seek outside his home, striking a 14-year-old girl, officials said.

The girl suffered a gunshot wound to the back of the head and was taken to a hospital with injuries that were not considered life-threatening, the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office said in a statement posted on social media.

Investigators learned that several children were playing hide and seek in the Starks neighborhood and were hiding on the neighbor's property.

David Doyle, 58, told detectives that he got his gun when he saw shadows outside his home and shot at people he saw running away, unknowingly hitting the girl, officials said.

Doyle was arrested and charged with aggravated battery, four counts of aggravated assault with a firearm and illegal discharge of a firearm, the sheriff's office said.

**2 missing mountain climbers believed dead**

**AK** DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE — Two climbers last heard from as they prepared to scale a peak in Alaska's Denali National Park and Preserve last week are believed dead, the park said Thursday.

Leaders of the search efforts "have concluded that survival is outside the window of possibility," citing the rocky terrain, the

climbers' limited supplies, temperatures dipping as low as 5 degrees Fahrenheit overnight and the time that has passed since the men were last heard from, according to a statement from the park.

Eli Michel, 34, of Columbia City, Ind., and Nafiun Awal, 32, of Seattle, were last heard from on May 5, when they checked in with a friend using a satellite communication device before setting out to climb on the 10,300-foot peak called the Moose's Tooth, the park has said.

Search efforts began last Sunday after a friend notified park officials that the climbers had not been in contact with them.

"Clues collected by mountaineering rangers throughout the search indicate that Michel and Awal were swept off their feet by a small slab avalanche on the evening of Friday, May 5, high on the peak's West Ridge route," the statement said. The climbers have not been found.

**Woman gets life for killing 11-year-old stepson**

**CO** DENVER — A judge sentenced a woman convicted of killing her 11-year-old stepson in Colorado and dumping his body over a bridge in Florida to life in prison without parole, calling her claim that she was insane and that one of her other personalities killed him a disservice to those who are mentally ill.

Jurors found Letecia Stauch guilty of first-degree murder and other charges she faced in Gannon Stauch's killing over three years ago. Prosecutors said she stabbed Gannon 18 times as he tried to fight her off

before hitting him in the head and then shooting him once.

Prosecutors claimed Stauch killed the boy in January 2020 because she hated him and wanted to hurt his father, Al Stauch, whom she planned to leave and who was away on a National Guard deployment at the time. They said she then put his body in a suitcase and drove over 1,300 miles with it in a rented van.

**\$100M gift to be used for medical research**

**MA** BOSTON — Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital plans to use a \$100 million gift to establish a new institute to study immunology and inflammation, hospital officials announced.

The gift from biotechnology entrepreneur Gene Lay, though his Laygend Foundation, is the largest in the history of the hospital, which traces its roots to 1832.

Lay, the founder and CEO of San Diego-based BioLegend Inc., said he has always been fascinated by the immune system's ability to heal the body.

"With this gift, I am bringing together the best scientific minds I know to translate research discoveries into therapies for immune-mediated diseases rooted in chronic inflammation," he said.

**County bans TikTok on government devices**

**AZ** PHOENIX — Maricopa County leaders voted unanimously to prohibit TikTok on any government-owned devices.

The ban approved by the Board of Supervisors in Ari-

zona's most populous county will take effect immediately.

The resolution to protect the privacy and security of county data comes a month after Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs signed an executive order for the same ban on state devices.

It is the first county in Arizona to take this step, Supervisor Thomas Galvin said.

TikTok is a subsidiary of the Chinese technology company ByteDance. Galvin said the risk was too great that the app can collect county data that can easily be requested by the Chinese government.

**Rescuers suspend search for 3 in downed aircraft**

**CA** SAN DIEGO — Rescuers crews have suspended their search for three people who were aboard a Learjet that plunged into the Pacific Ocean about a mile from a Navy-owned island off the coast of San Diego, U.S. officials said Thursday.

The U.S. Coast Guard said its crews along with U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Customs and Border Protection all searched a combined 334 square miles in the vicinity Wednesday after the Phoenix Air Learjet went down that morning off San Clemente Island.

The aircraft was used by a Navy contractor who departed from the Ventura County area, said Drew Verbis, spokesperson for Naval Base Ventura County on the coast northwest of Los Angeles.

He had no other immediate details, and identities of those aboard have not been released.

— From wire reports



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**Reporting World, National and Military News**

# Heat grind way back to Eastern finals

Associated Press

MIAMI — Inside the Miami Heat locker room, now officially halfway to the season's ultimate goal, Erik Spoelstra stepped on to the NBA championship logo on the center of the floor and gathered his team around him.

His message was simple.

"There's been nothing about this season that's been easy," Spoelstra said.

He's right, and the Heat aren't complaining about that, either — since this anything-but-easy season is still going.

They were a No. 1 seed last year and got to the Eastern Conference finals, and this year, they were a No. 8 seed and still got to the Eastern Conference finals. It took six games to get past New York — the revival of a playoff rivalry from the late 1990s and early 2000s — but the job is done, the clincher coming in a 96-92 win in Game 6 of their matchup Friday night.

"It's a crazy story being written," Heat center Bam Adebayo said. "Through all the ups and downs of the season, a lot of peo-

ple counted us out. We weren't even going to make it past the first round and now we're in the Eastern Conference finals. It just shows the determination and the will this team has."

It's a wild time in South Florida, and the Heat are only half of that story right now.

The Florida Panthers — they seed a little differently in the NHL, but they're basically a No. 8 seed as well, just like their NBA neighbors in Miami — are also headed to the conference finals, winning in Toronto on Friday night in overtime to clinch that series in five games.

The Heat and Panthers are following the same path so far; up-and-down regular season, scramble just to get into the playoffs, then beat the No. 1 overall seed in Round 1 — for the Heat it was the Milwaukee Bucks, for the Panthers it was the Boston Bruins — followed by a win over another favored opponent in Round 2. And all that comes on the heels of Miami and Florida Atlantic going to the men's college basketball Fi-

nal Four last month, Miami going to the women's Elite Eight and Nova Southeastern winning the Division II men's title.

Spoelstra would rather be busy for a few more weeks. Game 1 of the East finals — at either Boston or Philadelphia, two teams that played a Game 7 in their East semifinal series on Sunday — awaits on Wednesday. If the Celtics win, it'll be rematches of the conference finals from the 2020 bubble, with Denver set to face the Lakers for the Western Conference title as well.

"We've got eight more (wins) to get," Heat star Jimmy Butler said. "Like I always say, we're always going to be in this thing together. I'm so, so proud of all of my guys for playing as hard as we did today. And like I said, we've got eight more."

The Heat lost their first play-in game to Atlanta and missed a chance at the No. 7 seed, then needed a 15-1 run to close the second play-in game against Chicago, rally from a late deficit and sneak into the playoffs as

the No. 8 seed.

They're 8-3 since and nobody in the playoffs has a better record. Miami has the same record West No. 1 seed Denver posted in its first two rounds, would be the same record as Philadelphia through two rounds if the 76ers win on Sunday, and is a bit better than the 8-4 mark by the Lakers to this point.

"Hopefully we keep it rolling, man," Heat point guard Gabe Vincent said.

The series against the Knicks was not aesthetically pleasing. The Heat shot 43% to New York's 44% and both teams struggled from three-point range — 31% for Miami, 30% for New York. But the Heat found a way, even after losing a potential clincher in Game 5 and falling behind by 14 early in Game 6. The Heat had a one-point lead at the half and never trailed after halftime, dodging everything the Knicks threw their way. It wasn't easy. But it was fitting, as Spoelstra said.

"Just an absolute grind," Spoelstra said.

## Suns fire Williams following another playoff exit

Associated Press

The Phoenix Suns fired Monty Williams on Saturday, two years after reaching the NBA Finals and a year after he was the overwhelming choice as the coach of the year.

Williams had great success in his four regular seasons in Phoenix, winning 63% of his games. But three consecutive years of playoff frustration was likely too much for the Suns to overlook — especially after two straight years of Phoenix trailing by 30 points at halftime of elimination games at home.

ESPN and The Athletic first reported the decision.

"Monty has been foundational to our success over the past four seasons," said James

Jones, the Suns' president of basketball operations and general manager. "We are filled with gratitude for everything Monty has contributed to the Suns and to the Valley community."

Jones also said he made the decision to fire Williams.

The Suns had a 2-0 lead in the 2021 NBA Finals, only to lose in six games. They lost in the second round in each of the last two seasons, both times in an embarrassing home finale — last year to Dallas, this year to Denver.

"Neither day feels good," Williams said after the loss last week to Denver, when asked to compare last season's debacle with this year's season-ending

loss.

Saturday likely didn't feel good, either.

The Suns now become yet another high-profile coaching opening, after Toronto fired Nick Nurse and Milwaukee fired Mike Budenholzer. Nurse won the 2019 NBA title with the Raptors, while Budenholzer was the coach who overcame Phoenix's 2-0 lead in 2021.

It's the second major move made by the Suns in the three months or so since new owner Mat Ishbia closed the sale that gave him control of the club. In February, Ishbia green-lighted a blockbuster trade that brought Kevin Durant to Phoenix and gave the Suns a core — him, Devin Booker, former No. 1

pick Deandre Ayton and Chris Paul — that the team hoped would be enough to deliver a title.

It just didn't work, at least, not this year. Paul got hurt in the playoffs to continue his run of bad luck on the health front in the postseason, Ayton sat out the finale and Booker and Durant simply looked gassed by the time it was over.

Williams, after the season ended, blamed himself.

"I take that personally, not having our team ready to play in the biggest game of the year," Williams said. "That's something that I pride myself on and it just didn't happen. ... That's something I have to take a deep look at, everything I'm doing."

# Eberle, Kraken top Stars, force Game 7

Associated Press

SEATTLE — For their first venture into the Stanley Cup playoffs, the Seattle Kraken are giving their fans quite the exciting, yet stressful experience.

Two playoff series. And now, a second Game 7.

“That’s all you can ask for. These games are what makes playoff hockey fun,” Seattle’s Jordan Eberle said.

Eberle scored twice, Eeli Tolvanen had a goal and two assists, and the Kraken beat the Dallas Stars 6-3 on Saturday night to force a deciding Game 7 in their Western Conference semifinal series.

Tolvanen’s goal in the opening minutes of the second period gave Seattle a 3-1 lead. Rookie Tye Kartye scored his third of the playoffs, beating Jake Oettinger with a wrist shot less than three minutes later, and

the Kraken withstood several pushes by the Stars to send the series back to Texas.

“We were ready tonight. I feel like last couple games they’ve been maybe the ready team at the start,” Tolvanen said. “That was the big key today. All four lines were ready to play.”

Matty Beniers and Yann Gourde each added a goal and an assist for Seattle, which is headed to the second Game 7 in the its short playoff history after ousting defending Stanley Cup champion Colorado with a 2-1 win in the deciding game of the opening round. The Kraken are the sixth team in league history to go to a Game 7 in each of the franchise’s first two playoff series.

Philipp Grubauer stopped 20 shots for the win.

“We had a goal in mind. We wanted to make sure that we

were still one of the six teams alive when we woke up tomorrow morning and have the opportunity to go and play a Game 7,” Seattle coach Dave Hakstol said. “We know the test. We know the challenge. It’ll be a big one, but we’ll be ready.”

Mason Marchment, Joe Pavelski and Joel Kiviranta scored for Dallas. Oettinger gave up four goals on 18 shots before he was pulled 4½ minutes into the second period. Scott Wedgewood came on and stopped nine of the 10 shots he faced.

Game 7 will be Monday night in Dallas.

“I mean, their lives were on the line. They played desperate hockey and played a good game,” Dallas captain Jamie Benn said.

The Stars last played a Game 7 in the second round of the 2020 playoffs in the NHL bubble in

Edmonton when Dallas beat Colorado 5-4 in overtime. This will be first Game 7 in Dallas since the second round in 2016, when Stars lost 6-1 to St. Louis after giving up three first-period goals.

Pavelski scored his 72nd career playoff goal and his eighth of the series when he redirected Miro Heiskanen’s shot from the point during a power play in the second period. Pavelski is tied with Alex Ovechkin for the most playoff goals among active players.

And he could have had more. Pavelski nearly added a second goal in the opening seconds of the third period, but his shot hit the post and Heiskanen’s rebound attempt slid wide of the goal mouth. Moments later, Jason Robertson’s shot from the slot hit the same post and ricocheted away from danger.

## Panthers savor being back in Eastern Conference finals

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — There was a wide range of emotions that the Florida Panthers all enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of securing their first conference finals trip in 27 years.

Extreme joy and elation at first. Then a quieter, more contemplative celebration. And then, exhaustion.

“They get to enjoy it,” Panthers coach Paul Maurice said Saturday, “until the puck drops again.”

Dominated in the second round last year. Dominators in the second round this year. Florida’s offseason of risk has officially paid off. The Panthers are headed to the Eastern Conference finals for the first time since 1996, after beating Toronto 3-2 in overtime on Friday night to finish off another playoff stunner.

They ousted the Maple Leafs in five games, after ousting a record-setting Boston team in

seven games in Round 1. Their reward: The Eastern Conference finals against Carolina, which eliminated New Jersey. The NHL hasn’t said when the Panthers-Hurricanes series will start.

“Nobody in the world thought we were going to be in this position right now,” Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk said. “But we don’t care what anybody’s opinion is on us. We know that it’s probably going to be very similar going into this round against a team like Carolina that had a tremendous season and has had tons of success the last bunch of years.”

This position, though, was part of the destination that the Panthers had in mind last summer.

Florida had the best record in the NHL last season and got swept out of the second round by Tampa Bay. The Panthers didn’t totally blow up the ros-

ter, but big changes were made. Leading scorer Jonathan Huberdeau and MacKenzie Weegar were traded to Calgary for Tkachuk, and Maurice was brought in even though interim coach Andrew Brunette wanted to keep the job.

The changes were for a purpose: general manager Bill Zito and the Panthers’ braintrust knew that team, as constructed then, wasn’t good enough to win a Stanley Cup. It needed an edge. It needed Tkachuk.

So far, so good. The Hart Trophy finalist hasn’t done it alone — the Panthers seem to have a new hero every night, and Sergei Bobrovsky has been lights-out in net — but Tkachuk has swagger and seems to have heightened the swagger of those around him.

“I’ve got two kind of drivers of this,” Maurice said. “One is Bill Zito, who did more than just change the coach with that mentality — we’ve got to play a

different game than we played.’ The other is the kind of willingness that the players said yes. It got a little tough there ... but the players were good about it.”

The Panthers took a big swing at the trade deadline last season, loading up for the playoffs by acquiring Claude Giroux and Ben Chiarot. Giroux was stellar in the playoffs for Florida, Chiarot was an immediate contributor, but both moved on over the summer. They were certainly not the reasons why Florida didn’t make a deep playoff run in 2022.

This season, the Panthers held firm at the deadline — even with a team in danger of missing the playoffs at that point. And here they are, four wins from the Stanley Cup Final, eight wins from hockey’s biggest prize.

“These guys, they truly care about each other,” Maurice said.

# Palou wins, takes IndyCar points lead

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Alex Palou sent an early message by aggressively passing pole-winner Christian Lundgaard on the first lap of the Indianapolis Grand Prix.

He was driving to win — and wasn't leaving anything to chance.

The Spaniard delivered on his promise, too. After inheriting the lead on Lap 65, he pulled away from the 27-car field and beat Pato O'Ward of Mexico across the yard of bricks by 16.8006 seconds on Saturday.

"We missed a little bit in qualifying, but we knew we had a fast car," Palou said after producing IndyCar's widest victory margin since his 30-second season-ending win in 2022. "I knew when we started on the alternates (red tires), we had to go hard. It was right, it was perfect."

Palou's Chip Ganassi Racing team got everything right, including the crucial tire strategy — opting to start on reds before switching to new primaries, then

scuffed primaries and finally sticker primaries on his final pit stop.

As a result, the 2021 series champ dominated the race, leading 52 of 85 laps to claim his first win of the season and his first in 11 career starts on Indianapolis Motor Speedway's two race courses. He's also the series' only driver to complete every lap of this season's first five races, and Palou now owns five career wins with at least one coming in three straight seasons.

It put Ganassi back in victory lane for the first time since Marcus Ericsson's season-opening victory in March.

Palou also leapfrogged his teammate, Ericsson, in the season standings. Palou has a six-point lead on O'Ward while Ericsson fell to third, 19 points behind.

O'Ward has been the runner-up three times this season but believes Arrow McLaren is poised to make a big move after putting all three of the team's cars in

the top five Saturday. Alexander Rossi, the 2016 Indianapolis 500 champ, was third while Felix Rosenqvist was fifth.

"We've been knocking on the door every single week," O'Ward said. "I'm just really enjoying it. We're growing massively as a team."

IndyCar's first Danish pole-winner, Lundgaard of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing, was fourth. Defending race winner Colton Herta of Andretti Autosport wound up ninth after moving from 14th on the starting grid into the top five.

Palou was surprised by others who opted not to start on primary tires.

"For us it was clear. We were struggling a little bit more than some of the guys on used reds in the warmup," he said. "We knew we didn't want to use used reds, that's why we started on new alternates, try to get the lead, try to get a big gap, like two, three, four seconds, then work on our pace on the black (tires)."

# Judge hits pair of home runs as Yankees top Rays

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Six-run leads with All-Star aces on the mound don't mean what they used to.

Less than a week after watching Tampa Bay rally to victory from a 6-0, fifth-inning deficit against Gerrit Cole, the Yankees found themselves trailing Shane Bieber by the same margin on Saturday.

"They did it to us. Let's do it to them," Anthony Rizzo remembered saying to teammates in New York's dugout.

Aaron Judge hit a pair of two-run homers, Anthony Volpe sparked the Yankees by breaking Joe DiMaggio's team record for consecutive stolen bases at the start of a career and New York topped the Rays 9-8.

In a matchup of All-Star starters, Taylor Walls had a go-ahead single in the second and Yandy Díaz hit his first career grand slam in a five-run fifth against Nestor Cortes. Wander Franco's double chased Cortes and Jimmy Cordero (3-1) al-

lowed Randy Arozarena's two-out, run-scoring infield single — originally ruled an out at first but overturned in a video review. Cordero retired Isaac Paredes on an inning-ending groundout.

**Rangers 5, Athletics 0:** Jon Gray took a non-hitter into the seventh and finished with eight scoreless innings, Nathaniel Lowe homered to extend his hitting streak to 12 games and visiting Texas beat Oakland.

**Orioles 2, Pirates 0:** Tyler Wells pitched seven innings of one-hit ball and host Baltimore used homers by Adley Rutschman and Gunnar Henderson to beat slumping Pittsburgh and clinch its ninth series win in its last 10.

**Dodgers 4, Padres 2:** J.D. Martinez hit a go-ahead three-run homer in the first inning, Julio Urias tossed seven strong innings and host Los Angeles beat San Diego for its fourth straight victory.

**Guardians 8, Angels 6:** Josh Naylor's three-run homer high-

lighted host Cleveland's stunning comeback in the eighth inning in a win over Los Angeles.

**Mariners 5, Tigers 0:** Rookie right-hander Bryce Miller shut down Detroit for seven innings as visiting Seattle moved above .500 for the first time since a win on opening day.

**Reds 6, Marlins 5:** Jake Fraley hit a three-run shot for his third homer in two days as visiting Cincinnati beat Sandy Alcantara and Miami.

**Diamondbacks 7, Giants 2:** Rookie Dominic Fletcher hit a two-run homer and a go-ahead, bases-clearing triple for five RBIs, Zac Gallen pitched 7<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> strong innings and host Arizona beat San Francisco.

**Blue Jays 5, Braves 2:** Bo Bichette singled home the tie-breaking run in the seventh inning and finished 2 for 4 with two RBIs as host Toronto handed Atlanta its first series loss on the road this season.

**Twins 11, Cubs 1:** Alex Kiriloff hit two of host Minnesota's season-high five home runs in a

rout over Chicago.

**Cardinals 4, Red Sox 3:** Kenley Jansen (1-2) blew a ninth-inning lead for the second straight day when shortstop Kiké Hernández's throwing error on a potential game-ending double play allowed Nolan Gorman to score the go-ahead run in a three-run ninth, lifting visiting St. Louis over Boston.

**White Sox 3, Astros 1:** Luis Robert Jr. homered and drove in two runs, and host Chicago beat Houston on Saturday night.

**Brewers 4, Royals 3:** Rookie Joey Wiemer's sacrifice fly with one out in the ninth inning gave host Milwaukee a victory over Kansas City.

**Phillies 7, Rockies 4:** Ranger Suárez labored through four innings in his return from injury, Bryce Harper hit a two-run home run and visiting Philadelphia beat Colorado in a game in which Rockies starter Ryan Feltner was struck in the head with a line drive.