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Zelenskyy meets world leaders as G7 wraps

Associated Press

HIROSHIMA, Japan — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy huddled with some of his biggest backers as the Group of Seven summit closed in Hiroshima on Sunday, building momentum for his country's war effort even as Russia claimed a battlefield victory that was quickly disputed by Ukraine.

The Ukrainian leader's in-person appearance in his trademark olive drab underscored the centrality of the war for the G7 bloc of rich democracies. It also stole much of the limelight from other priorities, including security challenges in Asia and outreach to the developing world, that the leaders focused on at the three-day gathering.

Hosting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the group was committed to "strong backing for Ukraine from every possible dimension."

Zelenskyy held two major rounds of meetings Sunday, one with G7 leaders and a second

with them and a host of invited guests including India and South Korea. He also spoke one-on-one with several leaders.

Hanging over Sunday's talks was the Russian claim that forces of the Wagner private army and Russian troops had seized the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. The eight-month battle for the eastern city — seen by both sides as a major symbolic prize — has been the longest and likely bloodiest of the war.

Comments by Zelenskyy earlier in the day in English suggested that the Russians had finally taken the city. But he and other Ukrainian officials later cast doubt on that assessment, with Zelenskyy telling reporters in Ukrainian that "Bakhmut is not occupied by the Russian Federation as of today."

President Joe Biden announced new military aid worth \$375 million for Ukraine, saying the United States would provide ammunition and armored vehicles. That pledge came after the U.S. agreed to allow training on American-made F-16 fighter

jets, laying the groundwork for their eventual transfer to Ukraine.

"We have Ukraine's back, and we're not going anywhere," Biden said.

Even before Zelenskyy landed Saturday, the G7 nations had unveiled a slew of new sanctions and other measures meant to punish Moscow over its invasion that began in February last year.

While Ukraine dominated the summit, the leaders of Japan, the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada and Italy, as well as the European Union, also aimed to address global worries over climate change, poverty, economic instability and nuclear proliferation.

And Biden sought to reassure world leaders that the U.S. would not default because of the debt limit standoff that has cast a large shadow over his trip.

Two U.S. allies — South Korea and Japan — furthered efforts to improve ties colored by lingering anger over issues

linked to Japan's brutal 1910-45 colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol visited a memorial to Korean victims, many of them slave laborers, of the Aug. 6, 1945, atomic bombing.

Washington wants the two neighbors, both of which are liberal democracies and bulwarks of U.S. power in the region, to stand together on issues ranging from Russia to North Korea.

Biden, Yoon and Kishida met briefly as a group outside the summit venue in front of Hiroshima Bay. Biden invited the two leaders to visit Washington for a trilateral meeting and they accepted, said a U.S. official who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the summit for aiming to isolate both China and Russia.

"The task has been set loudly and openly: to defeat Russia on the battlefield, but not to stop there, but to eliminate it as a geopolitical competitor," he said.

Rotating fighter squadrons give US advantage in Taiwan

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Replacing squadrons of F-15 Eagles on Okinawa with rotating contingents of more advanced fighters will allow U.S. forces to disperse and survive if a war with China breaks out over Taiwan, a Japanese security expert said Thursday.

Fighter swaps was one topic that Takuya Matsuda, a research fellow with the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies, touched on during a public forum at Fussa Citizen's Hall, just outside the gates of Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo.

Two F-15C/D squadrons at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa — nearly 50 fighters — are

being phased out over two years and replaced by rotating squadrons of aircraft from as far away as Germany and Alaska. The inventory of replacements thus far includes F-22 Raptor stealth fighters and F-16 Fighting Falcons.

China's force of hundreds of missile launchers with the ability to strike Okinawa factors into the decision to retire Kadena's two permanent F-15 squadrons, Matsuda said.

"Kadena demonstrates U.S. commitment to defense of the first island chain," he said.

Many people instinctively criticized the plan to withdraw the F-15s from Okinawa, Matsuda said.

For example, retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan Leaf, a former deputy commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, said withdrawing the Eagles sent China the wrong message.

"It is a lack of commitment in their minds," he said Nov. 16, after the Air Force announced the plan. "In terms of deterrence, it's a net negative. That element can't be undone by saying we are going to rotate, or the planes are more capable."

Matsuda noted Kadena's proximity to a potential combat zone near Taiwan, however, which Beijing considers a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

"Resilience comes into play," he said.

DOD error may give Ukraine more weapons

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon overestimated the value of weapons that the U.S. has sent to Ukraine by at least \$3 billion, an accounting error that would allow the Defense Department to send more weapons now without asking Congress for more money.

The error was caused when officials used costs to replace some weapons rather than the current value of the weapons, Pentagon officials said Thursday.

“During our regular oversight process of presidential drawdown packages, the department discovered inconsistencies in equipment valuation for Ukraine,” Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said in a statement. “In some cases, ‘replacement cost’ rather than ‘net book value’ was used, therefore overestimating the value of the equipment drawn down from U.S. stocks.”

Some U.S. aid is sent to Ukraine through the presidential drawdown authority, which means it will come directly from Pentagon stocks and be sent quickly on an emergency basis. Aid given this way typically reaches Ukraine in a matter of weeks.

Other U.S. aid is provided through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a program that procures new weapons and equipment from manufacturers. It takes several months for Ukraine to receive items given through the initiative.

The Pentagon’s error comes at a time when Ukraine is gearing up for a much-anticipated counteroffensive against invading Russian forces and U.S. defense officials face increased pressure from Congress about tracking the weapons and equipment given to Ukraine and questions whether support should continue.

Singh said the mistake has not constrained the U.S. support to Ukraine or hampered in sending aid to the battlefield.

The accounting error was discovered back in March, according to a defense official.

Reps. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., and Michael McCaul, R-Texas, who have generally supported the military aid to Ukraine, criticized the Pentagon and urged President Joe Biden’s administration to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions and long-range missiles to “fuel the counteroffensive and win the war.”

“The revelation of a \$3 billion accounting error discovered two months ago and only today shared with Congress is extremely problematic, to say the least,” Rogers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and McCaul, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said Thursday in a joint statement. “These funds could have been used for extra supplies and weapons for the upcoming counteroffensive, instead of rationing funds to last for the remainder of the fiscal year.”

Prosecutors seek passport hold after reservist moves

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Justice Department is seeking the passport of a Navy Reserve officer awaiting trial on bribery, money laundering and other federal charges related to allegations he wrote fake recommendation letters for Afghan nationals seeking to live in America.

Federal prosecutors say Cmdr. Jeromy Pittmann, 54, violated pre-trial conditions of release when he moved from Italy to Germany in September without their permission.

That action violates conditions set by the court in March 2022 that allowed Pittmann to retain his passport and continue working for the U.S. government at Naval Support Activity Naples while he awaited trial, the DOJ said in a document filed Tuesday in New Hamp-

shire U.S. district court.

The Justice Department is asking Judge Landya McCafferty to amend those conditions and require Pittmann to turn over his passport to the court or his attorney.

It also wants Pittmann to report weekly to a probation office and get approval from the U.S. District Attorney’s Office before traveling outside of Germany, according to the court filing. McCafferty earlier this month ordered Pittmann to appear in person at a June 26 pre-trial conference.

“The United States continues to have concerns about whether (Pittmann’s) release conditions are sufficient to assure his appearance in court,” prosecutors said in the filing. “In addition to appearing to now reside in Germany, (Pittmann) appears to no longer maintain a residence in the United States.”

Colonel faces court-martial for groping, kissing charges

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The wife of an Army officer claims she was at her home at Fort Cavazos with her daughter while her husband was away training when Col. Jon Meredith came to her house, groped her and made unwanted sexual advances toward her, according to court documents released Friday.

Meredith, 47, was arraigned Monday on two counts of abusive sexual contact and two counts of conduct unbecoming of an officer, according to Lt. Col. Jennifer Bocanegra, spokeswoman for the 1st Cavalry Division. Meredith was fired as commander of the division’s 1st Brigade Combat Team in October amid a criminal investigation into his actions.

He pleaded not guilty to the charges Monday in the 3rd Judicial Circuit at Fort Cavazos, ac-

ording to the online court docket. The colonel will now face a court-martial set for Aug. 14.

“Col. Meredith looks forward to addressing the pending allegations in the case, and we understand everyone is entitled to a fair and unbiased process,” said Sherilyn Bunn, Meredith’s civilian attorney who is a former Army lawyer.

Meredith is accused of going to the home of the victim, who is a civilian, on July 23 while the woman’s daughter and another person were present, according to a charge sheet detailing the allegations against the colonel.

Meredith knew the woman’s husband was away at a field training exercise and “did wrongfully grope [the woman’s] inner thigh and crotch, kiss her repeatedly on the mouth, and tell her he wanted to [expletive] her,” according to the document.

Biden, McCarthy plan to meet for debt talks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy plan to meet in person Monday as the government races against a looming deadline to raise America's debt limit before federal funds potentially run dry early next month.

The leaders spoke by phone Sunday as the president returned home on Air Force One after the Group of Seven summit in Japan. McCarthy, R-Calif., told reporters at the Capitol that the call was "productive" and that the on-again, off-again negotiations would resume later in the day.

Both sides have said progress was being made, but that they remain far apart. Biden's Treasury Department has said it could run out of cash as soon as June 1, and U.S. Treasury Secre-

tary Janet Yellen said Sunday, "I think that that's a hard deadline."

McCarthy said after his call with Biden that "I think we can solve some of these problems if he understands what we're looking at." The speaker added, "But I've been very clear to him from the very beginning. We have to spend less money than we spent last year."

The Republican leader said "there's no agreement on anything" and that "we've all said our piece about where we are and we're trying to find common ground to get this done."

Their conversation followed an exchange of harsh rhetoric reflecting the high stakes of the standoff.

Biden said at a news conference in Hiroshima that House Republicans must move off

their "extreme positions" on the now-stalled talks over raising the debt limit and that there would be no agreement to avert a catastrophic default only on their terms.

McCarthy said based on earlier discussions, "I felt that we were at a place where we could agree together that we would have compromise." Now, he said on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures," "the president, even though he was overseas, thought to change places."

Biden made clear before leaving Japan that "it's time for Republicans to accept that there is no deal to be made solely, solely, on their partisan terms." He said he had done his part in attempting to raise the borrowing limit so the U.S. government can keep paying its bills, by agree-

ing to significant cuts in spending. "Now it's time for the other side to move from their extreme position."

Even with a new wave of tax revenue expected soon, perhaps giving Washington more time to negotiate, Yellen said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "the odds of reaching June 15, while being able to pay all of our bills, is quite low."

With that time pressure in mind, Biden said it was his guess that McCarthy would "want to deal directly with me in making sure we're all on the same page." A compromise remained within reach, the president said, despite their differences.

"I'm hoping that Speaker McCarthy is just waiting to negotiate with me when I get home," he said. "I'm waiting to find out."

Uvalde families' suits test gun industry protections

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — After Mayah Zamora was shot and wounded at Robb Elementary School, her family did what many mass shooting survivors do: They sued.

They sued the store off Main Street in Uvalde, Texas, that sold the teenage gunman his AR-style rifle. They sued the gun maker. And they sued police who waited 77 minutes outside Mayah's fourth-grade classroom before stopping the shooting that killed 19 children and two teachers.

"Mainly what we are looking for is some sort of justice," said Christina Zamora, Mayah's mother.

As the grim frequency of gun violence continues, both the U.S. government and gun manufacturers have reached large settlements in recent years following some of the nation's worst mass shootings. In April, the Justice Department announced a \$144

million settlement with relatives and families of a 2017 Texas church attack, which was carried out by a former U.S. airman with a criminal history.

The lawsuits, relatives and victims of mass shootings say, are an effort to get accountability and prevent more attacks — by forcing reforms, hurting the gun industry's bottom line and strengthening background checks after lapses failed to stop gunmen from buying weapons.

But high hurdles remain for lawsuits to succeed. On May 11, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee signed a new law that further shields gun manufacturers from lawsuits, weeks after a shooter at a Nashville school killed six people. It comes as attorneys say the narrow path for victims to bring lawsuits has begun to widen, including for families in Uvalde, who on Wednesday will mark the one year since the most deadly school shooting in Texas history.

Union: Victims of highway crash were farmworkers

Associated Press

ALBANY, Ore. — The victims of one of Oregon's deadliest highway crashes were farmworkers traveling in a van at an hour when agricultural laborers typically commute home after toiling in the harvest, the state's farmworkers union and Mexican officials said.

Authorities have not yet released the names of the seven who died or the four who were injured when a semitruck ran off Interstate 5 on Thursday and slammed into the van as it was parked on the roadside near Albany, in an agricultural area of the Willamette Valley.

But the union, the Woodburn-based PCUN, said in a statement late Friday that the 11 people in the vehicle were farmworkers and that it has been in contact with some of their families to support them. It also offered condolences to those affected by the tragedy.

"At this time, families are ask-

ing for safer roads for workers commuting after a hard day's work," Reyna Lopez, the union's executive director, was quoted as saying.

The Mexican Consulate in Portland also said that the victims were farmworkers in a statement in Spanish that it posted on Facebook and Twitter.

"According to information provided by the office of the Oregon State Police, seven dead were reported in the ... accident and four people injured, all of them apparently agricultural workers of Mexican nationality," the statement said.

The driver of the semitruck that rammed into the van, Lincoln Clayton Smith, 52, of North Highlands, Calif., was arrested Friday on suspicion of manslaughter, driving under the influence of intoxicants, reckless driving and assault, police said. He was being held without bail in Marion County Jail.

Zelenskyy denies Bakhmut occupied by Russian forces

Associated Press

HIROSHIMA, Japan — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that Russian forces weren't occupying Bakhmut, casting doubt on Moscow's insistence that the eastern Ukrainian city had fallen.

Responding to a reporter's question about the status of the city at the Group of Seven summit in Japan, Zelenskyy said: "Bakhmut is not occupied by the Russian Federation as of today."

"We are not throwing people (away) to die," Zelenskyy said in Ukrainian through an interpreter. "People are the treasure. I clearly understand what is happening in Bakhmut. I cannot share with you the technical details of what is happening with our warriors."

The fog of war made it impossible to confirm the situation on the ground in the invasion's longest battle, and a series of comments from Ukrainian and Russian officials added confusion to the matter. Zelenskyy's response in English to a question earlier at the summit about the status of Bakhmut suggested that he believed the city had fallen to Russian forces, and he offered solemn words about its fate. When asked if the city was in Ukraine's hands, Zelenskyy said: "I think no, but you have to — to understand that there is nothing. They've destroyed everything. There are no buildings. It's a pity. It's tragedy."

"But, for today, Bakhmut is only in our hearts. There is nothing on this place, so — just ground and — and a lot of dead Russians," he said.

Zelenskyy's press secretary later walked back those previous comments. Ukrainian defense and military officials said that fierce fighting was ongoing. Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar even went so far as to say that Ukrainian troops "took the city in a semi-encirclement."

"The enemy failed to surround Bakhmut, and they lost part of the dominant heights around the city," Malyar said. "That is, the advance of our troops in the suburbs along the flanks, which is still ongoing, greatly complicates the enemy's presence in Bakhmut."

And the spokesman for Ukraine's Eastern Group of Forces, Serhii Cherevaty, said that the Ukrainian military is managing to hold positions in the vicinity of Bakhmut.

"The president correctly said that the city has, in fact, been razed to the ground. The enemy is being destroyed every day by massive artillery and aviation strikes, and our units report that the situation is extremely difficult.

"Our military keep fortifications and several premises in the southwestern part of the city. Heavy fighting is underway," he said.

Only hours earlier, Russian state news agencies reported that President Vladimir Putin congratulated "Wagner assault detachments, as well as all servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces units, who provided them with the necessary support and flank protection, on the completion of the operation to liberate Artyomovsk," which is Bakhmut's Soviet-era name.

US, Saudis agree to monitor Sudan cease-fire

Bloomberg News

Saudi Arabia and the U.S. said Sunday that Sudan's warring sides agreed on a seven-day cease-fire starting Monday to allow the distribution of humanitarian aid and restoration of essential services.

Sudan's army and the Rapid Support Forces, a rival paramilitary group, signed the accord in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Saturday and agreed to refrain from taking military advantage until it takes effect, the U.S. State Department said in a joint statement.

Sudan's army and the RSF previously signed a similar brokered agreement to protect civilians and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid on May 11.

Fighting raged in Khartoum, the capital, the following day despite the accord.

"It is well known that the parties have previously announced cease-fires that have not been observed," according to the statement.

This time, a U.S.-Saudi and internationally supported "monitoring mechanism" will support the attempt to halt the fighting.

About 1,000 people have died and thousands more have been injured since fighting broke out between the two sides on April 15, after months of rising tensions over how to merge the generals' armies into a single force.

To this point, an estimated 843,000 people have fled their homes, according to the United Nations.

Mount Etna volcano erupts, raining ash on Sicily, forcing flight suspension

Associated Press

ROME — Mount Etna, Europe's most active volcano, was erupting on Sunday, spewing ash on Catania, eastern Sicily's largest city, and forcing a suspension of flights at that city's airport.

Italy's National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, or INGV, which closely monitors Etna with instrumentation on the slopes, noted that cloud cover on a rainy day was impeding views of the eruption, which of-

ten serves up a spectacular display of flaming lava during the volcano's not infrequent eruptions.

The institute said that ash had fallen on Catania and at least one town on Mount Etna's inhabited slopes. No injuries were reported.

Catania airport said due to ashfall, flight operations were temporarily suspended.

INGV indicated that monitoring had recorded evidence of a stepping up in tremor activity in

recent days.

People in the towns of Adrano and Biancavilla reported hearing loud booms emanating from the volcano on Sunday, the Italian news agency ANSA said.

Italy's national Civil Protection agency had noted on Thursday in an alert that in view of increased volcanic activity, "sudden" variations of Etna's activity could occur.

In early 2021, an eruption of the volcano lasted several weeks.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Change in life insurance cited in poisoning case

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A Utah woman who wrote a children’s book about grief after her husband’s death and was later arrested on accusations of killing him made changes to her husband’s life insurance years before he was fatally poisoned, according to updated charging documents.

Prosecutors say Kouri Richins, 33, poisoned her husband, Eric Richins, 39, by slipping five times the lethal dose of fentanyl into a cocktail she made for him in March 2022. The mother of three later self-published a children’s book titled “Are You with Me?” about an angel wing-clad deceased father watching over his sons. She promoted it on television and radio, describing the book as a way to help children grieve the loss of a loved one.

Years before, Kouri Richins bought four life insurance policies on her husband’s life without his knowledge from 2015 to 2017 with benefits totaling nearly \$2 million, prosecutors alleged in the documents updated Thursday.

Massive blaze caused by fire in manure hauler

TX DIMMITT — A fire and explosion at a dairy farm in the Texas Panhandle that injured one person and killed an estimated 18,000 head of cattle was an accident that started with an engine fire in a manure vacuum truck cleaning part of the massive barn, according to state investigators.

A State Fire Marshal report of the April 10 fire at the Southfork Dairy Farm did not determine

what caused the engine fire, but found there was “no intentional act to cause a failure.”

A worker driving the truck through a section of the 2 million-square-foot barn told investigators he noticed what he first thought was steam coming from the engine compartment. He tried to drive out of the barn when he realized it was a fire, but couldn’t make it outside.

The driver and others tried to extinguish the fire, but it quickly spread.

Dodgers remove gay ‘nun’ group from Pride Night

CA LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Dodgers have disinvited a satirical LGBTQ+ group called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to the team’s annual Pride Night after opposition from conservative Catholic groups.

The charity, protest and performance group was to have received the team’s Community Hero Award in a ceremony during the 10th annual event before the June 16 game against the San Francisco Giants.

“Given the strong feelings of people who have been offended by the sisters’ inclusion in our evening, and in an effort not to distract from the great benefits that we have seen over the years of Pride Night, we are deciding to remove them from this year’s group of honorees,” the Dodgers said in a statement.

Veteran convicted in road rage killing of Muslim

IN INDIANAPOLIS — An Army veteran has been convicted in the road rage shooting death of a Muslim man, after witnesses said he hurled ethnic

and religious insults at the victim, including yelling, “Go back to your country,” before opening fire.

A Marion County jury convicted Dustin E. Passarelli, 37, of murder last week over the February 2019 killing of Mustafa Ayoubi, 32. Passarelli, of Plainfield, could get up to 65 years in prison when he’s sentenced June 21 on the murder charge.

Passarelli shot and killed Ayoubi following a road rage incident on Interstate 465 that led to Passarelli following Ayoubi to an apartment complex on the city’s northwest side, according to court documents.

Multiple witnesses said Passarelli and Ayoubi shouted inflammatory remarks at each other in front of a townhome. They said Passarelli yelled religious and ethnic insults at the unarmed Ayoubi, including, “Go back to your country,” shortly before he shot him.

Passarelli claimed that post-traumatic stress disorder he developed during his time in the Army contributed to his behavior on the highway and was partially to blame for the shooting. But Passarelli’s mental evaluation and PTSD claims were ruled inadmissible in court.

Disney scraps plans for new campus near Orlando

FL LAKE BUENA VISTA — The Walt Disney Co. announced it was scrapping plans to build a new campus in central Florida and relocate 2,000 employees from Southern California to work in digital technology, finance and product development.

The decision follows a year of attacks from Gov. Ron DeSantis

and the Legislature because the company opposed a state law that bans classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades. Disney filed a First Amendment lawsuit against DeSantis and other officials last month.

Disney had planned to build the campus about 20 miles from the giant Walt Disney World theme park resort, but Josh D’Amaro, chairman of the parks, experiences and products division, said in a memo to employees that “new leadership and changing business conditions” prompted the company to abandon those plans.

Indictments in Trump probe likely in August

GA ATLANTA — The Atlanta prosecutor investigating whether then-President Donald Trump and others broke the law while trying to overturn his 2020 election loss in Georgia seems to be suggesting that any grand jury indictments in the case would likely come in August.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis sent a letter Thursday to county Superior Court Chief Judge Ural Glanville indicating that she plans to have much of her staff work remotely for most days during the first three weeks of August and asking that judges not schedule trials and in-person hearings during part of that time.

Willis last month wrote local law enforcement leaders advising them that she intended to announce charging decisions in the case between July 11 and Sept. 1. Thursday’s letter seems to narrow that window.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

National Treasure wins Preakness

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Bob Baffert choked back tears and his voice cracked while he tried to juggle the conflicting feelings of seeing one of his horses win the Preakness Stakes hours after another was euthanized on the same track.

“This business is twists and turns, ups and downs,” the Hall of Fame trainer said. “To win this — losing that horse today really hurt. ... It’s been a very emotional day.”

National Treasure won the Preakness on Saturday in Baffert’s return to the Triple Crown trail following a suspension, ending Kentucky Derby champion Mage’s Triple Crown bid in the race Baffert has now captured more than any other trainer. But the joy was tempered by the agony of another 3-year-old colt, Havnameltdown, injuring his left front leg in an undercard race and being put down.

“When he got hurt, it’s just the most sickening feeling a trainer can have,” Baffert said. “It put a

damper on the afternoon.”

It also put the sport squarely back in a familiar spot, two weeks after seven horses died in a 10-day span at Churchill Downs leading up to the Derby.

National Treasure did not run in the Derby at Churchill Downs, where Baffert has been barred the past two years because of a suspension stemming from 2021 Kentucky Derby winner Medina Spirit’s failed drug test that led to a disqualification in that race. Medina Spirit was Baffert’s most recent Preakness horse, finishing third.

The 5-2 second choice Saturday, National Treasure came through, delivering Baffert a record-breaking eighth victory in the Preakness and his 17th in a Triple Crown race, also the most among trainers. National Treasure held off hard-charging Blazing Sevens down the stretch to win the 1 $\frac{3}{16}$ -mile, \$1.65 million race by a head in 1:55.12.

“He fought the whole way,” said jockey John Velazquez, who won the Preakness for the first time in his 13th try. “He put

up a really good fight. ... That’s what champions do.”

National Treasure paid \$7.80 to win, \$4 to place and \$2.60 to show. Blazing Sevens paid \$5 to place and \$2.80 to show.

Mage finished third after going off as the 7-5 favorite, paying \$2.40 to show. Despite the smallest Preakness field since 1986, horses at the lead went much slower than in the Derby, which did not benefit Mage’s running style of closing late and passing tired rivals down the stretch.

“Slow, very slow,” Mage’s trainer, Gustavo Delgado Sr., said.

Mage’s defeat means there will not be a Triple Crown winner for a fifth consecutive year since Baffert’s Justify in 2018.

Baffert became the face of the sport after his American Pharoah ended a 37-year Triple Crown drought in 2015. Since Medina Spirit was DQed from the Derby, though, Baffert has turned into a polarizing figure. In addition to his Churchill Downs punishment, he was

forced to miss the Preakness and Belmont last year because of a related suspension in Kentucky that Maryland and New York honored. On Saturday, he was back at a major race — and, thanks to National Treasure, back in the winner’s circle.

“You can’t do it without the group of owners I have that have stuck by me through all of this negative, all this bad stuff that’s happened to me in the last few years,” Baffert said. “Days like this, it’s not really vindication. It’s just, I feel like we have a moment where we can enjoy it.”

Even that wasn’t simple, given the somber scene earlier in the day, when Havnameltdown stumbled and unseated jockey Luis Saez.

While Saez was being attended to, black barriers were propped up on the dirt track while the horse was euthanized. All the while, 2Pac’s “California Love” blared from the infield speakers at what is intended as an annual daylong celebration of thoroughbred racing.

Koepka toughs it out in 3rd round of PGA Championship

Associated Press

PITTSFORD, N.Y. — Brooks Koepka has his health back, along with his swagger. Now he gets another chance to restore his reputation as golf’s toughest customer in the toughest championships.

Oak Hill was every bit of that on a rainy Saturday in the PGA Championship, and Koepka was up to the task. With three big birdies over the last seven holes, Koepka had a 4-under 66 — the low round at Oak Hill for the second straight day — to build a one-shot lead over Viktor Hovland and Corey Conners.

“I like it when it’s difficult. Today was super difficult,” Koepka said. And then with the

slightest grin he added, “I’ll take 4 under.”

Now he has to finish it off, just like he did with such great poise when he won back-to-back in the U.S. Open (2017-18) and then back-to-back in the PGA Championship (2018-19), earning the rank of “Major Brooks.”

This is his second straight 54-hole lead in a major. He was two ahead at the Masters until playing it safe in the final round and closing with a 75 as Jon Rahm tracked him down and beat him by four shots.

“I know what I did,” Koepka said. “I promise I won’t show up like that tomorrow.”

It wasn’t just the Masters. Koepka was two behind Dus-

tin Johnson going into the final round of the 2020 PGA Championship at Harding Park when he boldly said, “When I’ve been in this position before, I’ve capitalized. He’s only won one. I’m playing good. I don’t know, we’ll see.” And then he shot 74 and tied for 29th.

A year later, he played in the final group with Phil Mickelson at Kiawah Island in the PGA Championship, played the par 5s in 4 over and shot 74 to finish second.

Koepka has looked so strong that he has made only two bogeys the last two rounds, as pivotal as his 10 birdies on an Oak Hill course that’s a brute even in pleasant weather. Only nine players broke par on Saturday.

He was more than 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ strokes better than the average score.

The last player to have the low score in the second and third rounds of a major championship was Tiger Woods in the 1997 Masters, which he won by a record 12 shots.

Koepka, who was at 6-under 204, won’t have it that easy.

Missing from all this activity was Scottie Scheffler, the No. 2 player in the world, who started with two straight bogeys and didn’t make a birdie — his only one of the round — until the 14th hole. He shot a 73, but is still very much in the mix.

“I didn’t shoot myself out of it on a day where the conditions were tough and I didn’t have my best stuff,” Scheffler said

Nuggets on brink of first NBA Finals

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Nikola Jokic was far from his usual dominant self while mired in foul trouble, and Jamal Murray cooled off after his scorching first half. The Denver Nuggets' big early lead disappeared entirely in the fourth quarter of Game 3, and the Lakers' home crowd was in a frenzy.

The Nuggets weathered every setback and calmly, methodically took control with a poise worthy of champions.

With one more victory, they'll finally get the chance to play for their first rings.

Murray scored 37 points, Jokic added 24 points and eight assists and the Nuggets rolled to a 3-0 lead in the Western Conference finals with a 119-108 victory over Los Angeles on Saturday night.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored 12 of his 17 points in the second half against his former team for the top-seeded Nuggets, who have never been this close to the NBA Finals in 47

years in the league. Denver is making its fifth straight playoff appearance, and the ultimate stage is now just one win away.

"I learn a lot about this team every time we play," Caldwell-Pope said. "We have that dog mentality where no matter if we're up, down, we're going to continue to fight and play our game, and do it at a high level. We're going to continue to do that for the rest of these games."

Denver blew a 14-point lead in Game 3, but made a decisive 13-0 run in the fourth quarter to snap the Lakers' nine-game home winning streak since March 26, including seven straight victories since the regular season ended. The Nuggets excelled down the stretch with Murray and Jokic repeatedly running a two-man pick-and-roll game suggested by "Coach Jokic," according to coach Michael Malone.

"This group is capable of doing great things, and they believe," Malone said. "Belief is a very powerful thing."

No team has rallied from a 3-0 playoff series deficit in NBA history.

"I can't speak for the guys right now because I don't know what's going through all their minds, but I still [believe]," said LeBron James, who had 23 points, 12 assists and seven rebounds. "So it's time to go right back home and start to refuel and start the treatment process and recovery process and get ready for Monday. My mindset is always locked in."

Anthony Davis had 28 points and 18 rebounds for the seventh-seeded Lakers, who hadn't lost three straight games since early February. Los Angeles' prolonged, desperate surge ever since the trade deadline has finally run out of steam against the powerhouse Nuggets.

"They've been at the top of the food chain for a reason, and have a plethora of guys that can hurt you, as was on full display tonight," Lakers coach Darvin Ham said. "But you know, circumstances are what they are.

Difficult, but not impossible."

James hit three three-pointers after starting the series 0-for-13 from distance, and Austin Reaves added 23 points and seven rebounds. But Rui Hachimura was the only other Lakers scorer to crack double figures with 13 points, and they couldn't counter the Nuggets' balanced effort down the stretch.

"Our backs have been against the wall (for) probably about the last two months, maybe more than that since the trade deadline," Reaves said. "We can either come out Monday and go home, or we can fight for another day. And with the group of guys that we've got, I know what that answer will be."

Jokic's streak of four consecutive triple-doubles ended in a fairly quiet game for the two-time MVP, who got his fourth foul in the third quarter. But Murray scored 17 points in a dynamic first quarter following his 23-point fourth quarter two nights ago, and he had 30 points by halftime of Game 3.

Tkachuk scores another OT winner for Panthers

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Matthew Tkachuk finished off a second straight overtime win — this time needing only a few minutes instead of four extra periods — then pointed again toward the door along the boards that led to the locker room.

He skated over as Florida Panthers teammates joined him, then motioned to lead them off the ice.

It was time to celebrate the latest big moment in a growing list of them this postseason for a team that needed a late push just to make the playoffs, but now stands just two wins away from the Stanley Cup Final.

Tkachuk finished a feed from Sam Reinhart at the 1:51 mark of overtime to help the Panthers

beat the Carolina Hurricanes 2-1 on Saturday night, taking a 2-0 series lead in the Eastern Conference finals.

It marked an eighth straight road win in these playoffs and helped Florida improve to 6-0 in overtime in the postseason.

"We're a confident group no matter where we're playing," forward Sam Bennett said.

There certainly is no reason to feel otherwise, not as they close in on their first Stanley Cup Final since 1996 — also the last time they made it to the East finals.

The Panthers rallied from a 3-1 first-round deficit to stun Boston after the Bruins' record-setting regular season, then blew past Toronto in a five-game second-round series. Now

they've won the first two games on the road for the second straight series, this time against the team that had the league's second-best regular-season record.

The Panthers took the series opener in epic fashion, beating the Hurricanes on Tkachuk's goal with 12.7 seconds left in the fourth OT early Friday to end the sixth-longest game in NHL postseason history — along with the longest game in the history of each franchise.

The hours since had become what Panthers coach Paul Maurice called "a race to recover" with both teams paying a "huge cost."

This time, Tkachuk came through on the power play much quicker as Florida pressed an

advantage when Carolina's Jacob Slavin lost his stick. Bennett sent a pass to the left side for Reinhart, who zipped the puck across to Tkachuk for the easy finish against a sprawled-out Antti Raanta in what amounted to a 2-on-0 opportunity.

Then came his point to the exit, which he did after players started gathering to celebrate with him after Game 1. Only this time, it was a much shorter skate being on the same end of the ice.

"Let's get out of here, it's been a lot of hockey the last two games," Tkachuk said of the message, adding: "It's just great to end it early. Great pass to start by [Bennett] and a great pass by [Reinhart] to make it really, really easy for me, so it was awesome."

Rays get 3 home runs to top Brewers

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Harold Ramírez, Yandy Díaz and Christian Bethancourt homered, and the major league-leading Tampa Bay Rays beat the Milwaukee Brewers 8-4 on Saturday.

Tampa Bay leads the major's with 90 homers and 286 runs. The Rays have allowed 160 runs.

"So, overall with the offense I am very, very happy," Rays manager Kevin Cash said.

Zach Eflin (6-1) allowed three runs, four hits and struck out eight for the Rays (34-14), who improved to 21-3 at home this season. It ties the 1978 Boston Red Sox for best start at home through 24 games since 1901.

Despite the great start, the Rays hold just a 3½ game lead over Baltimore (30-16) in the tough AL East.

Jason Adam entered with two on in the ninth and retired both his batters to get his sixth save.

The Brewers (24-21), tied with Pittsburgh for first in the

NL Central, got homers from Owen Miller and Brian Anderson. Milwaukee has lost four of five.

The Brewers' rotation has been depleted by injuries, including Brandon Woodruff (right shoulder) and Wade Miley (muscle in back of shoulder). They have six pitchers on the IL.

Orioles 6, Blue Jays 5 (10): Ryan Mountcastle scored the go-ahead run in the 10th inning when third baseman Matt Chapman's throw hit him in the back on Austin Hays' grounder, and visiting Baltimore became the second team to reach 30 wins.

Rangers 11, Rockies 5: Corey Seager had a two-run home run among three hits and Jon Gray won in his first start against his former club as host Texas (28-17) got within one win of the franchise's best record through the first 45 games.

Yankees 7, Reds 4 (10): Aaron Judge had a go-ahead single in the 10th inning for his fourth hit of the game, and vis-

iting New York beat Cincinnati after cutting outfielder Aaron Hicks.

Astros 3, Athletics 2: Yordan Alvarez hit a tiebreaking home run in the eighth inning to propel host Houston over Oakland.

Diamondbacks 4, Pirates 3: Pavin Smith hit a go-ahead, two-run homer in the seventh inning to lift visiting Arizona over Pittsburgh.

Red Sox 4, Padres 2: Emmanuel Valdez hit a three-run homer and Chris Sale allowed just three hits — two of them home runs — in seven innings and visiting Boston sent San Diego to its fourth straight loss and 11th in 13 games.

Marlins 1, Giants 0: Braxton Garrett and three relievers combined on a three-hitter, and visiting Miami scored an unearned run in the eighth inning on a Jon Berti single to beat San Francisco.

Phillies 12, Cubs 3: Aaron Nola (4-3) struck out 10 in seven sharp innings, Kyle Schwarber hit a grand slam and host Phila-

delphia snapped a five-game losing streak.

Nationals 5, Tigers 2: Patrick Corbin won consecutive starts for the first time since last summer and Lane Thomas had a go-ahead, two-run single in the fifth inning that stopped host Washington's four-game losing streak.

White Sox 5, Royals 1: Jake Burger hit a three-run double in the sixth inning, helping starter Lucas Giolito and host Chicago beat Kansas City.

Cardinals 6, Dodgers 5: Nolan Gorman hit a tiebreaking, three-run homer off Victor González in the eighth following an intentional walk to Paul Goldschmidt to lift host St. Louis to the win.

Mariners 7, Braves 3: Logan Gilbert (2-2) gave up Matt Olson's two-run homer in the first inning, then retired 15 consecutive hitters in a win for visiting Seattle.

Twins 6, Angels 2: Joey Gallo homered for the fourth time in seven games, his 11th this season for visiting Minnesota.

Rosenqvist leads charge for McLaren in qualifying

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Ganassi, Ganassi, Ganassi. It was practically the only name mentioned as the four-car organization returned to Indianapolis Motor Speedway poised to defend last year's Indianapolis 500 victory.

Arrow McLaren Racing pushed them aside on the first day of Indy 500 qualifying.

Felix Rosenqvist, a former Chip Ganassi Racing driver, no less, led the McLaren charge Saturday by posting the fastest four-lap average. His late afternoon run of 233.947 mph was the third-fastest, four-lap qualifying effort in race history.

He bumped new teammate Alexander Rossi from the top spot — a position he'd held near-

ly six hours.

"It was pretty mind blowing how we found so much speed," Rosenqvist said. "What a run. Just a fun time to be in an Arrow McLaren. We are definitely looking good right now."

When the gun fired to signal the end of the day, all four McLaren drivers were inside the top 12 and advanced into Sunday's shootout for the pole. All four Ganassi drivers also landed inside the top 12, including defending winner Marcus Ericsson in 10th and was stuck in a long line of traffic as drivers not inside the top 12 debated pulling their times and taking another shot at logging four fast laps around the historic 2.5-mile oval.

Conversely, Team Penske

struggled mightily and only reigning IndyCar champion Will Power advanced into the top 12. Josef Newgarden and Scott McLaughlin never put together a strong enough four-lap average run to move them up through the field. McLaughlin will start from 14th, three spots ahead of Newgarden.

"Unfortunately that's just what we had," Newgarden said. "We really went aggressive, as aggressive as you can go, and it just wasn't there. We seem to be able to figure out most situations, but for whatever reason, this cruel mistress is just, you know, she's tricking us, and I don't understand how so."

The first four rows of the field will be set Sunday in a final

round of qualifying for the fastest 12 drivers.

Team Penske had it easy, though, compared with a panicked Rahal Letterman Lanigan organization. As Graham Rahal, Christian Lundgaard and Jack Harvey slogged their way around the speedway, the team made a late-day adjustment to move the setup from Katherine Legge's car onto the other three. Legge, the only woman entered in the May 28 field, was clearly the fastest of the Rahal cars and the team was desperate at the end of the day.

Ultimately, Rahal, Harvey and Lundgaard joined Sting Ray Robb of Dale Coyne Racing as the slowest four drivers of the day.