

Trailblazer tapped as Joint Chiefs chair

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Air Force fighter pilot nominated as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff got his callsign by ejecting from a burning F-16 fighter jet high above the Florida Everglades and falling into the watery sludge below.

It was January 1991, and then-Capt. CQ Brown Jr. had just enough time in his parachute above alligator-full wetlands for a thought to pop into his head. “Hope there’s nothing down there,” Brown said in an interview at the Aspen Security Forum last year.

He landed in the muck, which coated his body and got “in his boots and everything.” Which is how the nominee to be the country’s next top military officer got his callsign: “Swamp Thing.”

Brown, now a four-star general and the Air Force chief, was nominated by President Joe Biden on Thursday. If confirmed, Brown would replace Army Gen. Mark Milley, whose term ends in October.

The callsign reveal was a rare inner look into Brown, who keeps his cards close to his chest. He’s spent much of his career being one of the Air Force’s top aviators, one of its few Black pilots and often one of the only African Americans in his squadron.

To this day, his core tenets are to “execute at a high standard, personally and professionally,” Brown said this month at an Air Force Association conference in Colorado. “I do not play for second place. If I’m in, I’m in to win — I do not play to lose.”

He’s been many firsts, including the Air Force’s first Black commander of the Pacific Air Forces, and most recently its first Black chief of staff, making him the first African American to lead any of the military branches.

If confirmed, he would be part of another first — the first time the Pentagon’s top two posts were held by African Americans, with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin the top civilian leader. Brown would not be the first

African American to be chairman, the Pentagon’s top military post; that distinction went to the late Army Gen. Colin Powell.

Brown, 60, has commanded the nation’s air power at all levels. Born in San Antonio, he is from a family of Army soldiers. His grandfather led a segregated Army unit in World War II and his father was an artillery officer and Vietnam War veteran. Brown grew up on several military bases and states, which helped instill in him a sense of mission.

His nomination caps a four-decade military career that spans his commission as a distinguished ROTC graduate from Texas Tech University in 1984 to his White House nomination this week. He was widely viewed within military circles as the front-runner for the chairmanship, with the right commands and a track record of driving institutional change, attributes seen as needed to push the Pentagon onto a more modern footing to meet China’s rise.

Typhoon brings over 2 feet of rain to parts of Guam

Associated Press

HAGATNA, Guam — Guam’s governor gave the all-clear Thursday after Typhoon Mawar tore through the remote U.S. Pacific territory the night before, ripping off roofs, shredding trees and leaving much of the island of about 150,000 people without power and utilities.

There were minor injuries reported but no fatalities, according to the office of Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero. She declared the “all clear” Thursday evening, returning the island to its typical condition of typhoon readiness as the National Weather Service lifted a typhoon watch.

She thanked the people of Guam for keeping themselves safe and protected during the storm.

“We now continue to focus our efforts on repairing infras-

tructure and restoring services to residents,” Leon Guerrero said in a statement. “After speaking with department leaders and seeing the incredible rapid response to the storm, I am confident we will make significant progresses toward restoration of services.”

Survey and work crews were assessing damage at military installations, which were limited to essential personnel only, according to Joint Region Marianas.

The central and northern parts of the island received more than 2 feet of rain as the eyewall passed. The island’s international airport flooded and the swirling typhoon churned up a storm surge and waves that crashed through coastal reefs and flooded homes.

“We are waking up to a rather

disturbing scene out there across Guam. We’re looking out our door and what used to be a jungle looks like toothpicks — it looks like a scene from the movie ‘Twister,’ with trees just thrashed apart,” Landon Aydlett, a National Weather Service meteorologist, said in a briefing streamed online.

“Most of Guam is dealing with a major mess that’s going to take weeks to clean up,” he added.

The strongest typhoon to hit the territory of roughly 150,000 people since 2002, Mawar briefly made landfall around 9 p.m. Wednesday as a Category 4 storm at Andersen Air Force Base on the northern tip of the island, weather service officials said.

The scope of the damage was difficult to ascertain early on,

with power and internet failures making communication on the far-flung island difficult. Leon Guerrero said in a video message late Thursday morning that roads were passable, but residents should avoid driving and stay home due to ongoing strong winds.

Guam Power Authority said crews were working to restore power to critical and priority facilities such as a hospital, water wells and wastewater facilities. Guam Waterworks Authority was working to restore water service and had issued a notice advising customers to boil water.

The storm could threaten Taiwan next week. It strengthened to 165 mph winds Thursday and regained its status as a super typhoon, according to the weather service.

USMC effort allows feedback from subordinates

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

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps is testing a program that allows subordinates to give feedback and rate their leaders to better develop Marines who are in charge of others and maximize talent, the service said.

The pilot program is part of the Marine Corps' Talent Management 2030 plan that was announced in 2021. Some of the plan's goals are to modernize the Marine Corps, increase career flexibility and improve leadership through 360-degree feedback by the start of the next decade.

The program launched in 2022, but under a new phase implemented this year certain Marine leaders will be reviewed and rated by five to 10 subordinates. The subordinates' ratings will be anonymous and the test group will involve selected commanders and some sergeants major, the service wrote in a memo.

"This program will implement a customizable leadership development survey tool specifically designed for the Marine Corps," the memo adds. "The feedback will be presented in a detailed report that the Marine will use to construct a development plan that leverages their identified strengths and addresses any blind spots."

Gen. David Berger, the commandant of the Marines, said when Talent Management 2030 was unveiled that it would help keep "toxic" leaders from being promoted. The plan also lists that as a priority.

However, the Marine Corps said the feedback given this year from subordinate Marines — at least during the trial program — will be used only for development purposes, not evaluations. Also, the reviewed leaders will nominate the subordinates who rate them. After the reviews, the leaders won't know who gave which ratings.

The 360-degree feedback program will expand to a new phase in 2024 that will include Marines from the rank of gunnery sergeant to colonel across the Marine expeditionary forces. After that, the service will decide whether to make the program permanent.

If the Marine Corps chooses to keep the program, it could make any number of changes. The service has already said leaders will no longer get to nominate their reviewers after the trial program. In the future, reviewers will be randomly selected.

If the Marines keep the program, the service could also change it to use the feedback to influence evaluations and promotions, though there are concerns about using the information for that purpose.

"Perhaps the key concern in using 360s beyond developmental purposes is the potential impact on selection boards and the promotion process," California-

based think tank Rand Corp. concluded in a 2015 study into the issue. "The information from raters is usually anonymous and therefore cannot be challenged by the ratee. Information in 360s can sometimes be inaccurate because of rater lack of care or skill in providing ratings. In a high-stakes situation, such as promotions, raters could be dishonest in attempts to positively or negatively impact board selection decisions with no potential for recourse."

Talent Management 2030 seeks to fundamentally improve personnel models within the Marine Corps to modernize, develop and grow the force.

Part of its goal is also to "give individual Marines a say in the trajectory of their careers" and streamline recruiting.

Unlike the other services, the Marine Corps met its recruiting goal in 2022 and it has said it expects to meet its target in 2023 too.

US Navy base fuel spill near Tokyo affects river

By **SETH ROBSON**
AND **HANA KUSUMOTO**
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Aviation fuel spilled from storage tanks on a U.S. Navy base near Japan's capital city Wednesday and flowed into a local river, according to U.S. and Japanese officials.

An undisclosed amount of JP-5 aviation fuel spilled from Naval Air Facility Atsugi into the Tate River, which runs through the base, according to statements from neighboring Ayase city and a base spokesman.

The base fire department responded to the spill around 3:10 a.m. Wednesday, base spokesman Greg Mitchell told Stars and Stripes by phone on Thursday.

"The fuel leak has been stopped," his office said in a statement emailed later that day. "Current efforts are focused on a thorough clean-up. The Navy values the health and safety of the community, and the importance of the environment."

City officials found fuel in the river near the Tachikawa Bridge on Wednesday, according to a statement on the Ayase city website. The city placed a mat at the site to collect the fuel and closed part of a local park that afternoon.

Local officials visited the naval base that day, according to the city's statement.

A full investigation will be carried out, Mitchell said.

Italian navy aids NATO efforts to deter Russia

By **ALISON BATH**
Stars and Stripes

Italy's participation in a NATO exercise in the North Atlantic demonstrates its commitment to bolstering the alliance's efforts to check Russian aggression, Italian navy officials say.

For the crew of the Italian frigate Carlo Margottini, the U.S. 6th Fleet and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO-led Formidable Shield exercise tested their maritime mettle outside the Mediterranean Sea in challenging weather conditions.

"Those elements gave us a strong opportunity to understand how our performances are affected by the cold temperature during open-air activities," said

Cmdr. Giovanni Melchiorre, the ship's commanding officer.

The exercise, which ends Friday, offered insights into how the ship's Italian-made radar and European-made missile defense systems would perform against Russian threats, such as Kalibr and Zircon missiles, an Italian navy spokesperson said Tuesday.

The exercise allowed the two navies to build on shared experiences, such as multi-carrier operations, said 6th Fleet spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Tyler Barker.

"Formidable Shield builds on that strong and enduring maritime relationship by allowing the U.S. and Italian armed forces to train together in more scenarios and situations," Barker said.

Wagner leader hands Bakhmut over to Russia

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The head of the Russian private military contractor Wagner claimed Thursday that his forces have started pulling out of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine and handing over control to the Russian military, days after he said Wagner troops had captured the ruined city.

Yevgeny Prigozhin said in a video published on Telegram that the handover would be completed by June 1. Russia's Defense Ministry didn't confirm this and it wasn't possible independently to verify whether Wagner's pullout from the bombed-out city has begun after a nine-month battle that killed tens of thousands of people.

Prigozhin said his troops would now rest, repair equipment and await further orders.

Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Maliar, said Thursday that regular Russian troops had replaced Wagner units in the suburbs but that Wagner fighters remained inside the city. Ukrainian forces maintain a foothold in the southwestern outskirts, she said. Prigozhin's Bakhmut triumph delivered a badly needed victory for Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has lost momentum and now faces the possibility of a Ukrainian counteroffensive using advanced weapons supplied by Kyiv's

Western allies.

According to top Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak, that counteroffensive is already underway. He said Thursday that it should not be anticipated as a "single event" starting "at a specific hour of a specific day."

Writing on Twitter, Podolyak said that "dozens of different actions to destroy Russian occupation forces" had "already been taking place yesterday, are taking place today and will continue tomorrow."

Prigozhin has a long-running feud with the Russian military leadership, dating back to Wagner's creation in 2014.

During the 15-month war in Ukraine, he has repeatedly and publicly chastised Russia's military leadership, accusing them of incompetence and failure to properly provision his troops as they spearheaded the battle for Bakhmut.

Wagner's involvement in the capture of Bakhmut has added to Prigozhin's standing, which he has used to set forth his personal views about the conduct of the war.

"Prigozhin is ... using the perception that Wagner is responsible for the capture of Bakhmut to advocate for a preposterous level of influence over the Russian war effort in Ukraine," the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank, said.

Microsoft: Chinese hackers may be laying the groundwork for disorder

Associated Press

BOSTON — State-backed Chinese hackers have been targeting U.S. critical infrastructure and could be laying the technical groundwork for the potential disruption of critical communications between the U.S. and Asia during future crises, Microsoft said Wednesday.

The targets include sites in Guam, where the U.S. has a major military presence, the company said.

Hostile activity in cyberspace — from espionage to the advanced positioning of malware for potential future attacks — has become a hallmark of modern geopolitical rivalry.

Microsoft said in a blog post that the state-

sponsored group of hackers, which it calls Volt Typhoon, has been active since mid-2021. It said organizations affected by the hacking — which seeks persistent access — are in the communications, manufacturing, utility, transportation, construction, maritime, information technology and education sectors.

Separately, the National Security Agency, the FBI, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and their counterparts from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Britain published a joint advisory sharing technical details on "the recently discovered cluster of activity."

A Microsoft spokesman would not say why the software giant was making the announcement now.

Jobless claims climb as labor market still tight

Associated Press

U.S. applications for jobless claims rose slightly last week but remain at healthy levels with companies reticent to let go of employees in a tight labor market. The number of Americans filing for jobless claims for the week ending May 20 rose by 4,000 to 229,000 from 225,000 the week before, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The previous week's number was revised down by a significant 17,000. The weekly claims numbers are broadly representative of the number of U.S. layoffs.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week gyrations, was unchanged at 231,750 after the previous week's number was revised down by 12,500. Analysts have pointed to a sustained increase in the four-week averages as a sign that layoffs are accelerating, but are reluctant to predict that a spike in layoffs is imminent.

Overall, 1.8 million people were collecting unemployment benefits the week that ended May 13, about 5,000 more than the previous week. Since the pandemic purge of millions of jobs three years ago, the U.S. economy has added jobs at a breakneck pace and Americans have enjoyed unusual job security. That's despite interest rates that have been rising for more than a year and fears of a looming recession. Early this month, the Fed raised its benchmark lending rate for the 10th time in a row in its bid to cool the economy and bring down four-decade high inflation. Though the labor market still favors workers, there have been some recent indications that the Fed's policy actions are working.

In April, U.S. employers added a healthy 253,000 jobs and the unemployment rate dipped to 3.4%, matching a 54-year low. But the figures for February and March were revised lower by 149,000 jobs, potentially signaling that the Fed's rate policy strategy is starting to cool the job market.

The government also recently reported that U.S. job openings fell in March to the lowest level in nearly two years.

The Fed is hoping to achieve a so-called soft landing — lowering growth just enough to bring inflation under control without causing a recession. Economists are skeptical, with many expecting the U.S. to enter a recession later this year.

Markets are hoping that the Fed hits pause on its rate hikes at its next meeting.

GOP pushes debt ceiling talks to brink

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans are pushing debt ceiling talks to the brink, displaying risky political bravado as they prepare to leave town Thursday for the holiday weekend just days before the U.S. could face an unprecedented default that could hurl the global economy into chaos.

Speaker Kevin McCarthy said he's directed his negotiating team "to work 24/7 to solve this problem."

Arriving at the Capitol, McCarthy, R-Calif., said that "every hour matters" in talks with President Joe Biden's team as they work toward a budget deal. Republicans are demanding spending cuts the Democrats oppose, and McCarthy said a deal could come together "at any time."

But it's clear the Republican speaker — who leads a Donald Trump-aligned party

whose hard-right flank lifted him to power — is now staring down a potential crisis.

Lawmakers are tentatively not expected back at work until Tuesday, just two days from June 1, when Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has said the U.S. could start running out of cash to pay its bills and face a federal default.

Fitch Ratings agency placed the United States' AAA credit on "ratings watch negative," warning of a possible downgrade because of what it called the brinkmanship and political partisanship surrounding the debate over lifting the debt ceiling.

"This is a battle between extremism and common sense," said Democratic Rep. Katherine Clark, of Massachusetts, the minority whip.

The Republicans, she said, "want the American people to make an impossible

choice: devastating cuts or devastating debt default."

Weeks of negotiations between Republicans and the White House have failed to produce a deal — in part because the Biden administration never expected to be having to negotiate with McCarthy over the debt limit, arguing it should not be used as leverage to extract other partisan priorities.

McCarthy is holding out for steep spending cuts that Republicans are demanding in exchange for their vote to raise the nation's borrowing limit. The White House has offered to freeze next year's 2024 spending at current levels and restrict 2025 spending, but the Republican leader says that's not enough.

"We have to spend less than we spent last year. That is the starting point," said McCarthy.

DeSantis campaign gets off to glitchy start on Twitter

Associated Press

MIAMI — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis launched his 2024 presidential campaign on Wednesday with firm words but a disastrous Twitter announcement that did little to counter criticism that the 44-year-old Republican may not be ready to take on former President Donald Trump.

While he tried to project confidence, DeSantis' unusual decision to announce his campaign in an online conversation with Twitter CEO Elon Musk ultimately backfired. The audio stream crashed repeatedly, making it virtually impossible for most users to hear the new presidential candidate in real time.

"American decline is not inevitable — it is a choice. And we should choose a new direction — a path that will lead to American revitalization," DeSantis said on the glitchy stream, racing through his conservative accomplishments. "I am running for president of the United States to lead our great American comeback."

While his critics in both parties delighted in the rocky start, DeSantis' announcement marks a new chapter in his extraordinary rise from little-known congressman to two-term governor to a leading figure in the nation's bitter fights over race, gender, abortion and other divisive issues.

DeSantis' path to the Republican presi-

dential nomination will not be easy.

He enters the race looking up at Trump in early polls while facing serious questions about his far-right policies, his campaign-trail personality and his lack of relationships across the Republican ecosystem. He has generated significant interest among GOP primary voters by casting himself as a younger and more electable version of the 76-year-old former president.

He did not mention Trump even once in his discussion with Musk that ultimately spanned more than an hour. But he said he was ready to fight.

"Buckle up when I get in there, because the status quo is not acceptable," DeSantis said.

Oath Keepers founder sentenced to 18 years in prison

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The founder of the Oath Keepers extremist group was sentenced Thursday to 18 years in prison for orchestrating a weeklong plot that culminated in his followers attacking the U.S. Capitol in a bid to keep President Joe Biden out of the White House after the 2020 election.

Stewart Rhodes is the first person charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack to be sentenced for seditious conspiracy, and his sentence is the longest that has been handed down so far in the hundreds of Capitol riot cases.

It's another landmark in the Justice Department's sweeping Jan. 6 investigation, which has led to convictions against the top leaders of two far-right extremist groups that authorities say came to Washington prepared to fight to keep President Donald Trump in power at all costs.

Prosecutors had urged the judge in Washington's federal court to put Rhodes behind bars for 25 years, saying he remains a threat to American democracy.

In remarks before the judge handed down his sentence, Rhodes called himself a "political prisoner" and said his only crime

is opposing those who are "destroying" the country.

At Thursday's hearing, in a first for a Jan. 6 case, U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta agreed with prosecutors to apply enhanced penalties for "terrorism," under the argument that the Oath Keepers sought to influence the government through "intimidation or coercion."

Judges in previous sentencings had shot down the Justice Department's request for the so-called "terrorism enhancement" — which can lead to a longer prison term — but Mehta said it fits in Rhodes' case.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Traveler took backhoe to airport, charged with theft

IL MARION — A southern Illinois man has been charged with theft for allegedly stealing a backhoe to drive about 10 miles to an airport to catch a flight, authorities said.

Security camera footage shows a Carbondale man arriving at Veterans Airport of Southern Illinois atop a backhoe and leaving it in the airport parking lot Thursday, the Williamson County Sheriff's Office said.

Footage captured the man walking across the street from the lot to the airport lobby, carrying a guitar case, the sheriff's office said.

The owner of the backhoe arrived at the airport a short time later and identified the equipment as belonging to his company, the sheriff's office said. The owner said the machine, typically used to move large debris, had been parked at a job site.

Man sentenced for shooting campaigner

MI IONIA — A western Michigan man who pleaded no contest to shooting an 84-year-old woman campaigning against abortion rights at his home was sentenced to community service Tuesday.

Richard Harvey, 75, was ordered to complete 100 hours of community service. Judge Suzanne Hoseth Kreeger also gave him a suspended jail sentence of two months and a delayed sentence of one year on probation.

Harvey also must pay restitution and cannot have any contact with the woman he shot, Joan Jacobson.

Jacobson was shot Sept. 20 at Harvey's home in Odessa Township. Jacobson told investigators that she was asking a woman at the home to vote against a proposed constitutional amendment that would guarantee the right to abortion in the state when she was told to leave. The amendment later passed.

Harvey has said the shooting was accidental, but Jacobson has maintained she believes it was intentional after she had argued with Harvey's wife, Sharon Harvey.

Jacobson was treated at a hospital for a shoulder wound.

Professor fired after on-campus confrontation

NY NEW YORK — A New York City college has fired an adjunct professor who was recorded on video berating abortion opponents on campus earlier this month and who on Tuesday reportedly threatened a journalist with a machete.

A Hunter College spokesperson confirmed art professor Shellyne Rodriguez was fired after the May 2 incident in which she is seen on video calling the abortion opponents' information display "propaganda" and shoving some of the materials off the students' table.

"Hunter College strongly condemns the unacceptable actions of Shellyne Rodriguez and has taken immediate action," the spokesperson, Vince DiMicoli, told the New York Post on Tuesday. "Rodriguez has been relieved of her duties at Hunter College effective immediately, and will not be returning to teach at the school."

The Post reported that one of

its reporters went to Rodriguez's apartment Tuesday morning to question her about the confrontation.

"Get ... away from my door, or I'm gonna chop you up with this machete!" Rodriguez told the reporter as he stood outside her door, the Post reported.

Rodriguez came out and put a machete to his neck, then chased him down the street and kicked him in the shins, the newspaper reported.

Police said they were investigating.

Tweets put gambling regulator on paid leave

ME AUGUSTA — Maine's top gambling regulator has been placed on paid administrative leave following tweets posted from his personal account about women and a white nationalist group, spokesperson for the state's Department of Public Safety said Tuesday.

Milt Champion, executive director of the Gambling Control Unit, was placed on leave May 17 because of the tweets, Lt. Thomas Pickering, of the Maine Department of Public Safety, wrote in an email to The Associated Press. Champion's case is "pending a review that is being conducted by the Bureau of Human Resources," Pickering wrote.

The tweets were sent May 6 and May 14, and subsequently removed.

In one of them, Champion tweeted about being told it was inappropriate to refer to women as "ladies" and then added a pejorative term for women. In the other, he replied that "at least they are not burning down cities

and looting stores" in response to a tweet about a white nationalist group marching on the U.S. Capitol.

County ordered to close 'unsuitable' youth prisons

CA LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles County has two months to move about 300 young people out of its troubled juvenile halls after California regulators on Tuesday determined the facilities are "unsuitable for the confinement of youth."

The Board of State and Community Corrections voted unanimously to impose a 60-day deadline for the closure of Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar and Central Juvenile Hall in Boyle Heights.

The state board, which inspects the youth prisons, said the county has been unable over a period of two years to correct problems including inadequate safety checks, low staffing, use of force and a lack of recreation and exercise. Board members rejected requests from the county for more time to address the issues.

The Los Angeles County Probation Department, which oversees the juvenile halls, said while it was disappointed by the imposed deadline, "It is time for the department to discontinue using these facilities for housing pre-disposition youth."

The young people will be moved to the currently shuttered Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall in Downey, which was closed four years ago amid a dwindling population and allegations of abuse by staff.

— From wire reports

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Penske facing pressure to get results

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Will Power and Scott McLaughlin joined Josef Newgarden behind a table draped in a checked flag Wednesday, the trio of IndyCar drivers the very definition of focus. Their eyes were trained on the project before them, fingers nearly twitching.

Anticipating the start, all three dove into the work, moments before the emcee yelled, “Go!”

That sums up the competitive atmosphere at Team Penske, though, that at a community event days before the Indianapolis 500, all three drivers angled for a head start against a bunch of elementary school kids. They were in a race to build an IndyCar out of some masking tape and cardboard, and those couple of extra seconds counted.

Just like they do at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

It's there, at the historic oval owned by Roger Penske, that

his team has struggled with time lately. Power only qualified 12th for Sunday's race to match the best starting position of any Team Penske driver since 2019, the year before “The Captain” purchased the speedway. McLaughlin will start a row back in 14th and Newgarden another row back in 17th place.

Ahead are all four cars from Arrow McLaren and both from A.J. Foyt Racing, two other Chevrolet-powered teams.

“There's no place to hide. We're just not fast enough,” Newgarden admitted. “I feel terrible for our team because I am front and center of being able to witness the amount of work that's gone into this place. It's not from a shortage of effort. We're obviously missing something else. I don't know what we're missing, but I know we're missing it.”

The team's race performance has been a little better.

Newgarden finished fifth in

2020 and led the race a year ago before finishing 13th. In between, Simon Pagenaud finished third behind this year's pole sitter Alex Palou and Helio Castroneves, who spent the majority of his career with Penske and won three Indy 500s there before capturing his record-tying fourth in 2021 with Meyer Shank Racing.

“When you look at the past few years, you've got to start up front, when you look at who's won the race and where they have started from,” said Team Penske president Tim Cindric, who will be inducted into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame on Friday. “It's much tougher in the race to get to the front from the back.”

From the middle of the pack, too.

There appears to be no single reason why Team Penske has been a tick off the past few years, though its recent Indy 500 results have curiously coincided with the addition of aero-

screens in IndyCar to improve driver safety.

In 2019, the last year before their introduction, Power qualified second, Pagenaud third and Newgarden fourth. Pagenaud wound up winning an 18th Borg-Warner Trophy for the team while Newgarden and Power also finished in the top five.

“I think Indy, there's a lot of recipes that can work here, and I think our approach of trying to get the details right has always been true at this team,” Newgarden said. “I don't think we're going to change that. But sometimes there's different elements that we may not look at the right way, and we go back and we look at them again and say, ‘Can we look at them differently?’ I think that has been a core thing for us, just trying to reassess every little detail in the way that we're examining it.”

Unfortunately for Penske, everyone else is likewise examining every little detail.

Tkachuk, Panthers sweep Hurricanes, move to Final

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Matthew Tkachuk delivered for Florida, again. Sergei Bobrovsky denied Carolina, again.

The wait is over: After 27 years, the Florida Panthers — a hockey punchline no more — are again going to play for the game's grandest prize.

Tkachuk got his second goal of the game with 4.9 seconds left, lifting the Panthers past the Carolina Hurricanes 4-3 and into the Stanley Cup Final for the first time since 1996 after sweeping the Eastern Conference final.

The Panthers will play either Vegas or Dallas for the Stanley Cup starting sometime next week; Vegas currently leads the Western Conference title series 3-0.

“This was pure joy,” Panthers coach Paul Maurice said.

Bobrovsky stopped 36 shots to cap his stellar series — four games, four one-goal wins, three of them basically in sudden death, a .966 save percentage after stopping 174 of the 180 shots he faced. The first two wins were in overtime, and this one also may as well have been.

The Panthers scored 10 goals in the series, and Bobrovsky ensured those were all they needed. They were the No. 8 seed, the last team in, the longest of long shots — which is consistent with their history, after not winning a single playoff series in 26 years, a drought that ended last season.

And now, beasts of the East. Tkachuk arrived last summer saying he wanted to bring Florida a Cup. He's four wins away.

“It's amazing,” Bobrovsky said. “We showed the resilience ... and we're lucky to have Chucky on our side. He knows how to score big goals.”

NHL Senior Vice President Brian Jennings was the one tasked with presenting the Prince of Wales Trophy. After some photos, Aleksander Barkov — the captain who had two assists, one of them on the game-winner — grabbed it, and skated it away. Some teams touch it. Some don't. A few of the Panthers did, but Barkov didn't pass it around.

That'll wait for the big prize.

“It's hard to explain right now. Everything just happened so quick,” Barkov said. “It means a lot. It definitely does. ... It hasn't been easy, and nobody said it's going to be easy.”

Added Tkachuk: “We earned that thing, and definitely didn't do it the easy way. We earned it.”

Ryan Lomberg and Anthony Duclair had the other goals for Florida, which swept a series for the first time in franchise history.

Jordan Staal — his brothers Eric and Marc play for the Panthers — took a tripping penalty with 57 seconds left in regulation, setting up the power-play that Tkachuk finished off after getting into the slot and beating Frederik Andersen to set off a wild celebration.

“Eastern Conference champions,” Florida defenseman Aaron Ekblad said. “It's really cool. No doubt about it. But we have our eyes on something different.”

Nuggets make Denver a basketball town

Associated Press

DENVER — It took 3,787 regular-season games and 29 trips to the playoffs, countless ripoffs of rainbow uniforms and even more “yeah, buts” than any city should have to stomach. Finally, 47 seasons into an entertaining, often frustrating and almost always overlooked journey in the NBA, Denver is at the center of the basketball world.

The Nuggets — yes, those sometimes-lovable and often-forgettable Nuggets — are in the NBA Finals.

The way they made it says everything about their near half-century in the league, and just how different this team is from every Denver team, even the really good ones, that preceded it.

The Nuggets brushed aside their long-held irrelevance by completing their first sweep in 44 NBA playoff series. They did it against the Los Angeles Lakers, the team that has caused them so much of their pain. Before the Western Conference finals, Denver was 0-7 in playoff series against the Lakers.

“It’s almost like shock a little bit,” Nuggets forward Aaron Gordon said, echoing a senti-

ment certainly being felt across the franchise’s long-suffering fan base. “You’re just like unsure, like, are you sure we don’t have more time on the clock? Are you sure we don’t have another quarter to play or another game to play?”

With all due respect to Dan Issel, Alex English and Carmelo Anthony, Nikola Jokic is the best player to put on a Denver uniform. He recorded his eighth triple-double of the playoffs in Monday night’s 113-111 win over LA, surpassing a record for a single postseason held by Wilt Chamberlain.

Jokic, who was 0.2 assists short of averaging a triple-double this season, got beat out for his third straight MVP this season by Philly’s Joel Embiid. Fans see it all as par for the course in a city where the team that debuted in the ABA as the Denver Rockets — not the better-known, better-respected Denver Broncos — really put the town on the national sports map. That was in 1967.

The Nuggets were good enough to be a no-brainer when the ABA folded in 1976 and the NBA sought to invite a few teams

to join.

Between then and now, the city has seen its share of the spotlight. John Elway brought two Super Bowl titles home and Peyton Manning another. The Colorado Avalanche, who share a home (Ball Arena) and an owner (Stan Kroenke) with the Nuggets, have won hockey’s Stanley Cup three times, including last year. Even the Colorado Rockies have been to the World Series. The Nuggets’ only trip this close to the title came in 1976 when they lost in the last ABA final to Julius Erving and the Nets.

Before this week, Denver made the NBA conference finals four times, and lost all four.

While NBA titles, and the fanfare that comes with them, have been built on the shoulders of megastars for decades, the Nuggets never were part of that scene.

In fact, Jokic was the exact opposite of that when he arrived in 2014. Rather, he was a doughy second-round draft pick known only to the insiders who followed the Serbian hoops scene.

“Everybody gets cracked up into his stats but I don’t think a lot of people talk about, like, this

part of his game,” LeBron James of the Lakers said after the sweep, as he pointed toward his head, indicating Jokic’s mastery of the cerebral part of hoops. “Maybe it’s not talked about it, because a lot of people don’t understand it, but I do. He’s special.”

Great as Jokic has been, it’s the addition of another under-the-radar player, guard Jamal Murray, and his return to full health that helped get this team over the top.

Murray was a lottery pick out of Kentucky in 2016. Murray blew up in the bubble during COVID, bringing Denver within a series of the finals. He missed the next two playoffs due to a devastating knee injury. Murray averaged 32.5 points in the four-game sweep of LA.

“I think our chemistry is at an all-time high, the way we play, the way we read the game without even speaking,” Murray said. “It’s just beautiful basketball, honestly.”

With the Nuggets in their first NBA Finals after all these years, it will be hard to find anyone in Denver who would argue with that.

Swiatek, Gauff could meet in French quarterfinals

Associated Press

PARIS — Carlos Alcaraz and the man he just replaced atop the rankings, 22-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic, were placed in the same half of the French Open field in Thursday’s draw and could face each other in the semifinals.

Alcaraz is seeded No. 1 at a Grand Slam tournament for the first time and was automatically placed in the top section of the bracket. Djokovic is No. 3 and so could have ended up on either half — had he landed in the bottom, he and Alcaraz only could have met in the final at Roland Garros, where 14-time champion Rafael Nadal will be

missing for the first time since he made his debut at the clay-court major in 2005.

Play begins Sunday.

Typically, the previous year’s singles champions are invited to appear at the draw, so 2022 women’s winner Iga Swiatek was present Thursday. Nadal, of course, was not. Still, he was the first player mentioned at the outset of the ceremony by French Tennis Federation president Gilles Morreton, who noted, “Unfortunately, he cannot play the tournament this year.”

Swiatek did not appear to show any ill effects from the hurt right thigh that caused her

to stop playing in the third set of her quarterfinal match in Rome last weekend. She indicated almost immediately that the issue would not prevent her from competing in Paris, where she has won two of her three majors.

“It’s like my favorite tournament in the whole year, so I’m always excited to come back,” said Swiatek, who has been ranked No. 1 for more than a year. “Before the tournament, I get this extra motivation to practice harder, to make everything better.”

The draw put her in a potential quarterfinal against No. 6 Coco Gauff in what would be a

rematch of last year’s French Open final.

Alcaraz, who just turned 20, and Djokovic, who just turned 36, have played each other just once previously, in the semifinals of the Madrid Open in 2022. Alcaraz won that one a day after beating Nadal in the quarterfinals, becoming the first player to defeat both Djokovic and Nadal at the same clay-court tournament. Alcaraz went on to earn a straight-set victory over Alexander Zverev in the final.

It was Zverev who ended Alcaraz’s 14-match winning streak in the French Open quarterfinals last year.

Strikeouts 'not OK' for Grand Canyon's Wilson

Associated Press

Jacob Wilson came of age in baseball when the dictates of analytics removed the shame of striking out if it meant hitting more home runs.

The Grand Canyon shortstop considers himself a throwback to the time when striking out equated to failure.

"Striking out," he said, "is not OK."

His numbers illustrate his mantra. The 21-year-old junior has been the toughest player in NCAA Division I to strike out for two years — 12 times in 478 plate appearances, an average of once every 40. Overall, one of every five plate appearances in Division I resulted in a strikeout the last two seasons.

"It's super important, something I take pride in," Wilson said. "My strategy is to put in a competitive at-bat. Put the ball in play, be a hard strikeout and don't be an easy out. That's something my dad always tells me."

Wilson's accomplishment harkens back to another era — Joe DiMaggio struck out 13 times over 622 plate appearances in 1941 and Yogi Berra

whiffed 12 times over 656 in 1950.

Wilson's dad is Grand Canyon assistant Jack Wilson, who retired in 2012 after playing most of his 12-year major league career with Pittsburgh. The elder Wilson struck out once every nine plate appearances in the big leagues, about half the normal rate.

Jacob Wilson is well on his way to a pro career of his own. He's fifth in the nation with a .425 batting average, and he's a projected top-10 overall pick in July's amateur draft because of his talent as a contact hitter and outstanding range and strong arm at short.

Wilson has struck out just five times in 203 plate appearances this season, the best figure in Division I since North Carolina A&T's Marquis Riley struck out four times in 207 plate appearances in 2011. In Division II, Valdosta State's Jakob Sessa has not struck out in 150 plate appearances this season.

Wilson has never been tougher than in the past month. He went into the Western Athletic Conference Tournament on Wednesday having not struck

out in 21 games. During the streak he has swung at 120 pitches and missed just once, according to Synergy Baseball, and has put the ball in play in 80 of 86 plate appearances (he walked four times and was hit by pitch twice). That includes putting the ball in play 25 of 26 times, and driving in 19 runs, when up with runners in scoring position.

The most recent player comparable to Wilson is Ernie Clement. He struck out once every 27 plate appearances over three years at Virginia and was the nation's toughest to strike out in 2017 and in the top five the two previous seasons. Clement is now with the Toronto Blue Jays' Triple-A affiliate in Buffalo, and he said he watched Wilson on television during spring training in Arizona.

Clement spent much of 2022 with the Cleveland Guardians, who relied on a small-ball style to reach the AL divisional series, and he said Wilson's game would make him a high-value player.

"In the playoffs you win games with good defense, baserunning and timely hitting, so

when you're striking out with the bases loaded, that's not doing anybody any good," Clement said. "It's starting to play a big role in today's game and making a little comeback."

Wilson and Clement both said they played a lot of table tennis growing up to develop the hand-eye coordination necessary to have an exceedingly low strikeout rate. Wilson had no idea those games in the basement with his dad would be so helpful to his development.

"My dad and I are very competitive individuals," Wilson said, "and we always find a fun and competitive way to do everything. I was fortunate to have my dad teaching me my hand-eye coordination and how to enhance it to be a better player."

He said he doesn't pay much attention to metrics, perhaps because one of the rare knocks against him is his below-average exit velocity.

"I've seen a lot of people talk about my average exit velocity," he said. "End of day, I'm hitting above .400 and helping my team win, which is my ultimate goal."

Jackson at Ravens voluntary practice after skipping last year

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Lamar Jackson has a simple explanation for why he decided to participate in voluntary practices for the Baltimore Ravens this year.

"New offense," he said. "Had to get that down pat before the season rolls in. Because the season's getting nearer, even though we got a couple months left. But still, just wanted to learn the new offense and get with my guys."

The Ravens are going through something of a honeymoon phase after reaching a \$260 million, five-year deal with Jackson late last month. His presence on the practice field Wednesday was another positive sign. Jackson skipped this part of Baltimore's offseason work last year, although he attended the mandatory camps.

His earlier arrival this year comes as the Ravens prepare for the season under new

offensive coordinator Todd Monken. Jackson is hopeful Baltimore will be able to create big plays in the passing game and rely less on the run — including his own running.

"Just being able to throw the ball down the field," he said. "Running can only take you so far, and I feel like with this new era of teams and offenses in the league, I feel like we need that. Coach Todd Monken, what I'm seeing in this offense so far is looking tremendous."

Jackson said Monken's offense seems more up-tempo. The Ravens put up impressive time of possession numbers in recent seasons, and that has its own benefits, but with a quarterback like Jackson, they could probably do more to put pressure on defenses.

"It's a little college in it — a little college system a little bit. But definitely faster," Jackson said. "It's cool to me. It's new."

It's hard to say how much difference Jackson's attendance at practice in May will make in a season that starts in September. Coach John Harbaugh said he doesn't have a problem with the absences of tight end Mark Andrews and newly acquired receiver Odell Beckham Jr. — but he obviously prefers to have as many players in Owings Mills as possible.

"I think it's important. I'm a coach," Harbaugh said. "I want every player here all the time doing everything they can. Now, is that necessarily the best thing? I don't know. Everybody's got their own circumstance, and that's OK."

Jackson said he may be a different kind of leader going forward, and perhaps his decision to report earlier will help with that.

"I'm going to try to be more of a vocal leader," Jackson said. "Coach was like, 'You need to start speaking more.'"