

GAO finds F-35 jet engines overworked

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lockheed Martin's F-35 engines are being overworked and could lead to an extra \$38 billion in overhauls in the next few decades to help cool radar and other components of the fighter jets, according to government auditors.

"The cooling system is overtasked, requiring the engine to operate beyond its design parameters," the Government Accountability Office wrote in its 91-page annual report released Tuesday. "The extra heat is increasing the wear on the engine, reducing its life, and adding \$38 billion in maintenance costs."

Unless there is an effective fix, engine overhauls might come sooner than expected and add another item to the Pentagon's \$1.7 trillion estimate to operate and maintain the fleet until its operational end in the late 2080s.

The concern is with the F-35s power and thermal management system, or PTMS, to cool the parts of the aircraft's systems that generate heat. The management system transfers pressure from the fighter jet's single engine to cool other

components. However, the more air pressure transferred, the hotter the engine gets.

"The PTMS, however, needs more air pressure from the engine to cool subsystems than originally anticipated, which is reducing the life of the engine," the GAO wrote.

The power system, based on designs by Lockheed Martin's subcontractor that produces its engines, Pratt and Whitney, can't keep up with the cooling demands of the jet's increasingly complex avionics as well as new capabilities already installed or planned through 2035 during an upgrade program called Block 4, according to the GAO.

The GAO's report disclosed that the cost of the Block 4 upgrade has grown by an additional \$1 billion to \$16.5 billion, and half of Lockheed's 2022 aircraft deliveries were late.

However, the demand for F-35s has grown internationally.

Global interest in the fighter jet has increased since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and tensions with China have increased.

This latest GAO report comes one week after the auditors published a report that found the Pentagon is not keeping track of tens of thousands of spare parts for F-35 fighter jets worth millions of dollars because it did not know who is responsible for doing it.

The U.S. military and many nations such as Israel and Japan have been flying the F-35 Lightning II for several years, which creates a need for various parts to be kept at locations in many countries around the globe. The Pentagon maintains a global pool of spare parts that ally countries can tap into when needed. However, there is no Defense Department system to monitor those inventories and keep track of the parts, according to the GAO report.

The F-35 is the most expensive weapon in U.S. military history, and variants of the fighter are being flown by the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

Lockheed Martin has so far produced and delivered more than 900 of the fifth-generation fighter jets to the U.S. military and allied governments, including Italy, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea and Britain.

Chinese fighter jet accused of 'aggressive' intercept

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**

Stars and Stripes

U.S. military officials on Tuesday accused a Chinese fighter jet of flying too closely last week to an American reconnaissance jet over the South China Sea.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command officials described the May 26 intercept of an Air Force RC-135 in international airspace by a Chinese J-16 fighter jet as an "unnecessarily aggressive maneuver." The command accused the Chinese jet of flying too closely in front of the U.S. aircraft.

Handheld video of the intercept shot from inside the cockpit of the RC-135 showed the U.S. jet shaking violently moments after the Chinese fighter crossed directly in front of it.

It was not immediately clear Tuesday

how close the two aircraft came to each other. A statement issued by Indo-Pacific Command said the incident occurred while the U.S. aircraft "was conducting safe and routine operations over the South China Sea in international airspace, in accordance with international law."

"The United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate — safely and responsibly — wherever international law allows, and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Joint Force will continue to fly in international airspace with due regard for the safety of all vessels and aircraft under international law," the statement reads. "We expect all countries in the Indo-Pacific region to use international airspace safely and in accordance with international law."

Tense intercepts between Chinese and

U.S. aircraft over the South China Sea have occurred occasionally in recent years, especially as China has built up an increasingly large military presence in the region and claimed portions of the sea for itself.

In December, the Pentagon released video of a Chinese Navy J-11 fighter jet passing within just 10 feet of an RC-135 Rivet Joint over the South China Sea. In that incident, military officials said, the U.S. pilot was forced to take evasive maneuvers to keep from hitting the Chinese plane.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin last year warned his Chinese counterpart, Gen. Wei Fenghe, that such aggressive incidents by China's pilots over the South China Sea "increases the risk of an accident."

Biden to pick No. 2 Marine officer to lead

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is expected to nominate the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Eric Smith, to lead the service as commandant, selecting a senior officer who has led troops in combat and served more recently in a key role as the service attempts to transform itself after two decades of counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Smith, 58, has served as the No. 2 officer in the Marine Corps since October 2021. If confirmed, he will replace Gen. David Berger, who has been commandant since July 2019 and sought to reorient the service to an island-hopping force that can better counter China in the Pacific. Smith's nomination could be disclosed by the White House any day, two officials familiar with the issue said, speaking on the condition of anonymity ahead of an official announcement.

Smith's selection comes amid a broader remaking of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as

Berger and a couple of other officers retire. Among the other changes expected, Gen. Randy George has been nominated to replace Gen. James McConville as chief of staff of the Army, and Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown Jr., the current chief of staff of the Air Force, has been tapped to replace Army Gen. Mark A. Milley as Joint Chiefs chairman. No nomination has been announced to replace Brown atop the Air Force.

Smith, an infantry officer, previously served as the deputy commandant for combat development and integration, a role in which he helped develop Berger's vision for the future service, known as Force Design 2030.

The plan has proved controversial with some Marines for decisions that include cutting the service's tanks and reducing howitzer artillery in favor of greater investments in drones and long-range missiles.

As assistant commandant, Smith has defended the plan, saying that war games and

exercises will sharpen the service's concepts for the future.

"We're going to keep going as fast as we can go," Smith said last year, speaking at a conference hosted by Defense News. "For those who say, 'You shouldn't be focused on China,' China is the pacing threat ... but that doesn't mean you're not capable of dealing with Russia, North Korea or Iran. It's that you always go against the fastest runner, and then you hope that the next runner is a little bit slower."

The plan has garnered significant opposition, with some retired generals even calling it a misguided effort that will damage national security.

Other influential Marine Corps veterans have defended the concept, saying the service must evolve to meet the times.

Smith was born in Kansas City, Mo., and grew up in Plano, Texas. He attended Texas A&M University and became an officer in 1987.

North Korea blames fuel for failed satellite launch

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea's first military spy satellite, launched Wednesday, failed in-flight and crashed after the rocket's engine lost thrust, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

The rocket lost power after the "abnormal starting" of a second-stage engine during the flight, KCNA announced hours after the launch.

The "unstable character of the fuel used" was behind the failure, according to a spokesman for the North Korean National Aerospace Development Administration quoted by KCNA.

A second satellite launch will be conducted as soon as possible, the report added.

The space launch vehicle lifted off at 6:29 a.m. from North

Pyongan Province, about 70 miles north of Pyongyang, and flew south over Baengnyeongdo, an island near the Northern Limit Line that marks the westernmost point of South Korea, according to a text message from South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

It flew "abnormally" before falling into the Yellow Sea about 125 miles west of South Korea's Eocheong Island and 100 miles southwest of Seoul. The South Korean military salvaged an object that is presumed to be part of the space launch vehicle, according to the Joint Chiefs.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, in a statement Tuesday evening in Hawaii, called the launch a "brazen violation" of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions.

South Korea and Japan issued take-cover and evacuation warnings following the launch.

Australian general: US said in '21 war crimes issue could limit ties

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — The United States has warned that allegations of war crimes against Australian soldiers in Afghanistan could prevent U.S. forces from working with Australia's Special Air Service Regiment, Australia's defense force chief said on Wednesday.

Gen. Angus Campbell told a Senate committee that he received a letter from the U.S. defense attache in Canberra in March 2021 suggesting the elite SAS may have been "tainted" by the allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan raised in an Australian war crime investigation report that was made public in 2000.

Campbell said "one individual" had his "posted position adjusted" following the letter.

The letter warned that the Brereton report, which detailed "credible information" that Australian soldiers had unlawfully

killed 39 Afghan prisoners and civilians, could trigger a U.S. law that prevents the country's military working with units linked to gross violations of human rights.

"I received a letter from the defense attache of the United States Armed Forces based in Canberra, to me, indicating that the release of the Brereton report and its findings may initiate Leahy Law considerations," Campbell said.

Campbell said he did not believe he informed the defense minister at the time and had not informed the current defense minister, Richard Marles.

Campbell later corrected himself, telling the Senate committee that records showed he had informed the previous government's defense minister in 2021.

The U.S. never applied Leahy Law restrictions to the Australian military and 12 months after the letter marked the "conclusion of the issue," Campbell said.

Biden, McCarthy rally parties for debt vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hard-fought to the end, the debt ceiling and budget cuts package is heading toward a crucial House vote as President Joe Biden and Speaker Kevin McCarthy assemble a coalition of centrist Democrats and Republicans to push it to passage over fierce blowback from conservatives and some progressive dissent.

Biden is sending top White House officials to meet early Wednesday at the Capitol to shore up support ahead of voting. McCarthy is working furiously to sell skeptical fellow Republicans, even fending off challenges to his leadership, in the rush to avert a potentially disastrous U.S. default.

Despite deep disappointment from right-flank Republicans that the compromise falls short of the spending cuts they demanded, McCarthy insisted he would have the votes needed to ensure approval.

“We’re going to pass the bill,” McCarthy said as he exited a lengthy Tuesday night meeting at the Capitol.

Quick approval by the House and later in the week by the Senate would ensure government checks will continue to go out to Social Security recipients, veterans and

others and would prevent financial upheaval at home and abroad. Next Monday is when the Treasury has said the U.S. would run short of money to pay its debts, risking an economically dangerous default.

The package leaves few lawmakers fully satisfied, but Biden and McCarthy are counting on pulling majority support from the political center, a rarity in divided Washington, testing the leadership of the Democratic president and the Republican speaker.

Overall, the 99-page bill restricts spending for the next two years, suspends the debt ceiling into January 2025 and changes policies, including new work requirements for older Americans receiving food aid and greenlighting an Appalachian natural gas line that many Democrats oppose.

For more than two hours late Tuesday as aides wheeled in pizza at the Capitol, McCarthy walked Republicans through the details, fielded questions and encouraged them not to lose sight of the bill’s budget savings.

The speaker faced a sometimes tough crowd. Leaders of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus spent the day lambasting

the compromise as falling well short of the spending cuts they demand, and they vowed to try to halt passage by Congress.

“This deal fails, fails completely,” Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., the chairman of the Freedom Caucus, said earlier in the day, flanked by others outside the Capitol. “We will do everything in our power to stop it.”

A much larger conservative faction, the Republican Study Committee, declined to take a position. Even rank-and-file centrist conservatives were unsure, leaving McCarthy desperately hunting for votes.

Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., said after the “healthy debate” late into the night she was still a no.

Ominously, the conservatives warned of potentially trying to oust McCarthy over the compromise.

“There’s going to be a reckoning,” said Rep. Chip Roy of Texas.

The House aims to hold procedural votes Wednesday afternoon with final action expected in the evening. It would then send the bill to the Senate, where Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell are working for passage by week’s end.

Defendant’s lawyers admit in court he killed 11 in Pittsburgh synagogue

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Robert Bowers carried out the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history when he killed 11 people and injured seven others by storming a Pittsburgh synagogue and shooting everyone he could find. On that, everyone agrees.

Even though Bowers’ defense acknowledged at the outset of his federal trial Tuesday that he was the gunman, they hope to spare the suburban truck driver from a possible death sentence over the Oct. 27, 2018, massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue.

Bowers “shot every person he saw” that day in the building, his lead lawyer, Judy Clarke, said in her opening statement. But she questioned whether Bowers had acted out of hatred, as prosecutors contend, or an irrational belief that he needed to kill Jews to save others from the genocide he claimed they were enabling by helping immigrants come to the U.S.

“He had what to us is this unthinkable, nonsensical, irrational thought: that by killing Jews, he would attain his goal,” Clarke said. “There is no making sense of this senseless

act. Mr. Bowers caused extraordinary harm to many, many people.”

Prosecutors, who rejected Bowers’ offer to plead guilty in exchange for taking the death penalty off the table, began by describing the terror he sowed as he moved through the synagogue, firing indiscriminately.

Jurors heard a 911 call played by Tree of Life Rabbi and attack survivor Jeffrey Myers, who took shelter in the first minutes of the attack.

“I hear people screaming,” he said on the call, his voice shaky and urgent. “The person is still shooting.”

On the witness stand, Myers testified that he was in front of the congregation at the start of the service and, after hearing gunfire in the lobby, urged worshippers to flee if they were able — and told those who were elderly and frail to lie down or hide.

Prosecutors say Bowers made incriminating statements to investigators and left an on-line trail of antisemitic statements that they say shows the attack was motivated by religious hatred. Police shot Bowers three times before he surrendered.

2 Saudi astronauts, others return from space station trip

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A private flight carrying two Saudi astronauts and other passengers returned to Earth late Tuesday night after a nine-day trip to the International Space Station.

The SpaceX capsule carrying the four parachuted into the Gulf of Mexico 12 hours after undocking from the orbiting lab.

The Saudi government picked up the multimillion-dollar tab for its two astronauts: Rayyanah Barnawi, a stem cell researcher who became the first Saudi woman in space; and fighter pilot Ali al-Qarni.

Barnawi wiped away tears as she wrapped up her experiments and prepared to leave the space station.

A Knoxville, Tenn., businessman who started a race car team, John Shoffner, paid his own way to the space station.

The ticket-holders were accompanied by retired NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson, who now works for the Houston company that chartered the flight, Axiom Space.

Ethnic Serbs rally in Kosovo after peacemaker clashes

Associated Press

ZVECAN, Kosovo — Hundreds of ethnic Serbs on Wednesday gathered in a town in northern Kosovo, days after clashes that injured 30 soldiers from a NATO-led peacekeeping force and over 50 Serbs, provoking fears of a renewal of the region's bloody conflicts and prompting the Western military alliance to send in additional troops.

The Serbs reiterated that they want the Kosovo special police and ethnic Albanian officials they call “fake” mayors to withdraw from northern Kosovo. The crowd then spread a huge Serbian flag.

Wednesday's protest outside the city hall in Zvecan, 28 miles north of the capital, Pristina, was peaceful as of late morning. On Monday, ethnic Serbs tried to storm municipal offices and fought with both Kosovo police and the peacekeepers.

Serbs are a minority in Kosovo, but a majority in parts of the country's north bordering Serbia. Many reject the Albanian-majority territory's claim of independence from Serbia. A former province of Serbia, Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence is also not recognized by Belgrade.

The United States and the European Union recently have stepped up efforts to solve the dispute as the war rages in Ukraine. NATO said it will send 700 more troops to northern Kosovo to

help quell violent protests after the clashes on Monday. The NATO-led peacekeeping mission, KFOR, currently consists of almost 3,800 troops.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged “all parties to take immediate actions to de-escalate tensions.” Blinken described violence against soldiers from the multinational force known as KFOR as “unacceptable.”

A German government spokesperson said Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron plan to meet with the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo on Thursday.

Spokesperson Steffen Hebestreit told reporters in Berlin that the meeting will take place on the sidelines of the European Political Community meeting in Chisinau, Moldova.

The confrontation first unfolded last week after ethnic Albanian officials, who were elected in a vote that Serbs overwhelmingly boycotted, entered municipal buildings to take office with an escort of Kosovo police.

When Serbs tried to block the officials, Kosovo police fired tear gas to disperse them. In Zvecan on Monday, angry Serbs again clashed first with the police and later with NATO-led troops who tried to secure the area.

Speaking at an international security forum in Bratislava, Slovakia, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said Kosovo police won't accept the Serbs' demands for a complete withdrawal, but hinted at the possibility of early local elections.

Typhoon weakens, heads to Okinawa

Associated Press

NAHA, Okinawa — Typhoon Mawar appeared to be losing force as it headed Wednesday toward Japan's Okinawa Islands, where the United States maintains a significant military presence, after largely skirting Taiwan and the Philippines.

After tearing across Guam last week, Mawar passed by Taiwan on Tuesday with sustained winds of 96 mph and gusts of up to 118 mph, sending high waves crashing on the island's east coast. In the Philippines, authorities said heavy rains were expected to continue in the country's north through at least Thursday and warned of flooding, possible landslides and gale-force winds before the typhoon exits the country.

As it turns toward Okinawa, Philippine meteorological authorities said Mawar's strength had dropped with sustained winds now of 75 mph and gusts of up to 93 mph. Mawar is expected to gradually pick up speed but steadily weaken, Philippine forecasters said.

Residents on Japan's southern Sakishima Island chain, which includes the Okinawa Islands, were already preparing for the approaching typhoon when a warning siren woke them up Wednesday to alert them of a North Korean rocket launch. Officials urged people to stay indoors or take shelter underground in case of a falling debris.

The rocket failed and did not come anywhere near Japan.

At the moment, it seems that Mawar will not make landfall on Okinawa, home to the capital of Naha and where most of the U.S. forces are based, according to Japan's meteorological agency.

Contestants chase cheese wheel down a hill in chaotic UK race

Associated Press

LONDON — The big cheese of extreme U.K. sports events is back.

Hundreds of spectators gathered Monday to watch dozens of reckless racers chase a 7-pound wheel of Double Gloucester cheese down the near-vertical Cooper's Hill, near Gloucester in southwest England.

The first racer to finish behind the fast-rolling cheese gets to keep it.

The cheese-rolling race has been held at Cooper's Hill, about 100 miles west of London, since at least 1826, and the sport of cheese-rolling is believed to be much older.

The rough-and-tumble event often comes with

safety concerns. Few competitors manage to stay on their feet all the way down the 200-yard hill, and this year several had to be helped, limping, from the course.

Canadian contestant Delaney Irving, 19, won the women's race despite being briefly knocked unconscious.

“I just remember hitting my head, and now I have the cheese,” said Irving, who comes from Nanaimo, British Columbia.

Matt Crolla, 28, from Manchester in northwest England, won the first of several men's races. Asked how he had prepared, he told reporters: “I don't think you can train for it, can you? It's just being an idiot.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Site of fatal warehouse fire sold to nonprofit

CA OAKLAND — A converted artists' warehouse in Oakland that burned down in 2016, killing 36 people, was quietly razed this month in preparation for possible development into badly needed low-income housing.

The property that housed the Ghost Ship warehouse was acquired by The Unity Council, a nonprofit community development organization based in Oakland.

The council's CEO Chris Iglesias told the Bay Area News Group last week that they plan to move forward with care, knowing how sensitive the issue is for the families of those who died when a fire broke out in the warehouse during a Dec. 2, 2016, electronic music party. No cause was determined in the fire, but a likely electrical overload filled the warehouse with smoke and flames that quickly trapped partygoers inside. The building had been illegally converted into a live-work space.

US ends probe into Tesla allowing video games

MI DETROIT — U.S. highway safety regulators have closed an investigation into Tesla allowing video games to be played on center touch screens while vehicles are moving.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says in documents posted Tuesday that Tesla disabled the feature called "passenger play" with an online software update in December of 2021, under pressure from the agency. The agency said in documents that removing "passen-

ger play" resolved its concerns about distracted driving that could be caused by the feature.

The software update covered more than 580,000 vehicles from the 2017 through 2022 model years. One month after the software update went out, Tesla reported that 97% of the vehicles had received it.

The agency said it opened the investigation in December of 2021 after getting a complaint from a Tesla owner that games could be played by the driver while the vehicles are moving.

Student wears barred sash to graduation

CO PARACHUTE — A Colorado student barred from wearing a sash representing the flags of Mexico and the U.S. to her high school graduation did so anyway, partially covering it with another sash representing her participation in a service organization.

"Always stand up for what you believe in," Grand Valley High School graduate Naomi Peña Villasano told the Post Independent of Glenwood Springs, Colo., after receiving her diploma on Saturday in the west-central Colorado town of Parachute.

Peña Villasano challenged school officials in court after they said she would be banned from graduation ceremonies if she wore the sash that has stars and stripes on one side and a cactus, eagle and a serpent to represent the Mexican flag on the other side.

A federal judge had ruled Friday that the school district could bar Peña Villasano from wearing the sash at graduation. However, with her flag sash partially covered with a gold Key Club In-

ternational one, no one tried to stop Peña Villasano from crossing the stage to receive her diploma.

Motorist with sign about bomb is halted at border

ME HOULTON — The driver of vehicle with a sign indicating there was an explosive device on board led Maine State Police on a chase on Interstate 95 to the Canadian border on Monday, officials said.

A trooper fired shots after the motorist attempted to maneuver the truck toward the Canadian port of entry in Woodstock, New Brunswick, and the man surrendered without injury, state police said.

A state trooper noticed the sign on the vehicle indicating the motorist had an explosive device of some sort after attempting to stop the motorist around 10:40 a.m. Monday. Tony Holford, 42, of Providence, R.I., was charged with aggravated reckless conduct, terrorizing, and failure to stop, state police said.

1 dead, 4 missing after fishing charter boat sinks

AK SITKA — The U.S. Coast Guard has suspended its search for four people missing after the fishing charter boat they were on was found partially submerged near the southeast Alaska community of Sitka. A fifth person was found dead Sunday.

The search, which spanned more than 20 hours and covered about 825 square miles was suspended Monday night, the Coast Guard said.

Kingfisher Charters on Sunday evening reported that a 30-

foot aluminum charter vessel with five people aboard was overdue, the Coast Guard said in a statement. The boat was last seen earlier that day near Sitka.

The Coast Guard found the boat partially submerged off an island about 10 miles west of Sitka and recovered a body after reaching the site Sunday evening, according to statements from the Coast Guard.

Nun's body shows little decay since 2019 death

MO GOWER — Hundreds of people flocked to a small town in Missouri this week and last to see a Black nun whose body has barely decomposed since 2019. Some say it's a sign of holiness in Catholicism, while others say the lack of decomposition may not be as rare as people think.

Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster was exhumed in April, according to a statement from the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, in Gower, Mo.

The nuns had been preparing for the addition of a St. Joseph shrine, and that involved "the reinterment of the remains of our beloved foundress, Sister Wilhelmina," the statement said.

When they exhumed Lancaster, they were told to expect only bones, since she had been buried in a simple wooden coffin without any embalming four years ago. Instead, they discovered an intact body and "a perfectly preserved religious habit," the statement said. The nuns hadn't meant to publicize the discovery, but someone posted a private email publicly and "the news began to spread like wild-fire."

— From wire reports



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Stanley Cup Final will end with 1st-time champ

Associated Press

Jon Hamm is excited for this Stanley Cup Final between the Florida Panthers and Vegas Golden Knights.

“Stoked, man,” the actor and noted hockey fan said. “I live in L.A., so that’s a half-hour flight away for me.”

The NHL is pumped, too. Even though the ratings will likely sag without big markets involved, the Sun Belt series will feature two teams that have never before won the Cup. It is also a chance for the league to show off its success growing in the United States beyond traditional hockey hotbeds.

“It’s so refreshing and it’s so amazing,” retired player Anson Carter said. “When you constantly hear people saying hockey can’t work in the South or the Sun Belt markets, they’re wrong.”

Carter has heard his friends back home in Canada complaining about the NHL not wanting teams north of the border to win championships, and he has dismissed it. In his view, Canada’s Cup drought dating to 1993 isn’t the fault of many of the Canada-born executives, coaches and

players now working for Vegas or Florida.

“It’s not like there’s all American folks working for American teams — that’s not what it is,” said Carter, now an analyst for Turner Sports. “It just so happens that you have these teams in these markets that are having success. It’s cyclical, I’m sure, but I think it’s great for our game.”

Commissioner Gary Bettman has gotten flak over the years for markets like Quebec City (to Colorado) and Hartford (North Carolina) losing their teams. He has seen it more as growing the NHL’s footprint — something which got the league back on national television in the early 1990s when he took over and expanded hockey into the American South and West.

As Hamm — a St. Louis native and lifelong Blues fan — pointed out, none of the four cities in the conference finals had a team when he began watching the sport in the 1970s. This trend has not come out of nowhere: With Hamm’s Blues being one of the exceptions, 11 of the last 18 teams in the Stanley Cup Final are in a market that

did not have a team before 1991.

St. Louis beat Boston in the 2019 Final, and Bruce Cassidy is back as coach of Vegas after being on the losing end four years ago with the Bruins.

“I’ve been there once, and it didn’t work out,” Cassidy said after his Golden Knights beat the Stars in Game 6 of the West finals on Monday night. “It’s what you want, but so do 31 other teams, right? And only two get to go there. ... You have to enjoy these moments.”

Fans in South Florida certainly are. While Vegas is in the final for the second time in its six seasons of existence, the Panthers are back for the first time in 27 years after sweeping Carolina in the East finals.

Tickets on the secondary market were going for over \$400 as of Tuesday morning. Brett Goldberg, CEO of the online marketplace Tickpick, said there are benefits to having teams in nontraditional markets get this far because fans want to come out for a special occasion.

“The demand for these events now, it’s almost new,” he said. “Viewership-wise maybe

you take a hit by not having the New York and the California markets, but this is what builds franchises. And so, long term it’s certainly a good thing.”

The only thing hotter than the weather in Las Vegas and South Florida is Panthers goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, who has won 11 of his past 12 games, stopping 438 of 465 shots for a 1.95 goals-against average and .942 save percentage. He has not allowed a goal in nearly 100 minutes of overtime this postseason.

“Their goaltender’s playing well,” Vegas captain Mark Stone said. “We’re going to have to find ways to try and get to him.”

Also playing well for the Panthers is Matthew Tkachuk, who has four game-winning goals so far and fired-up celebrations worthy of his status as a playoff MVP contender.

In the NHL postseason for the first time in his career, Jack Eichel leads the Golden Knights in scoring with 18 points. But he was held without a goal the entire Dallas series, so Jonathan Marchessault took over with a team-high seven points to get back in the Final.

Neither rest nor rust concern Nuggets before NBA Finals

Associated Press

Aaron Gordon bristled at the notion the Denver Nuggets must operate the “rust versus rest” seesaw with 10 days between their Western Conference title celebration and the start of the NBA Finals against the Miami Heat.

Rest?

“We’ve been working,” Gordon declared about 15 hours after the Nuggets learned who they’ll have to beat to secure the franchise’s first Larry O’Brien gold ball trophy. “It’s not like we’ve had our hands back and feet kicked up.”

Rust?

“We’ve been locked in, in the gym, working diligently,” Gordon insisted. “So we feel like we’re in a good space. It’s been a good balance of work to rest. Happy we have home-court advantage.”

Miami’s 103-84 shellacking of the Celtics in Boston in Game 7 on Monday sent the Heat to Denver for Game 1 on Thursday night. Had the Celtics been the first of 151 teams to overcome a 3-0 deficit in a best-of-seven basketball series, the Nuggets would have headed East for Games 1 and 2.

Instead, the Nuggets get to stay in the Mile High City, where they’ve been since returning from their 113-111 win over the Lakers on May 22, and host a Heat team that’s been playing every other night and won’t have much time to acclimate to the city’s mile-high altitude.

So yes, Gordon acknowledged, he was actually rooting for Jimmy Butler to come to Denver this week, and not because he wanted to avoid Jayson Tatum, either.

“You always want to keep home court,” Gordon said. “So first and foremost, what we

worked for all season was to get home-court advantage.”

Top-seeded in the West for the first time in franchise history, the Nuggets have won all eight of their playoff games at Ball Arena, pushing their league-best home record to 42-7, while going 12-3 overall in these playoffs.

The Heat haven’t won in Denver since Nov. 30, 2016, but it’s the Nuggets who are novices on this stage.

Miami has been to the Finals many times before, winning it all in 2006, 2012 and 2013. The Nuggets are one of six teams who have never won an NBA title. This is their first championship series appearance since losing to Julius Erving and the New York Nets in 1976, the final season of the ABA.

“We’ve got the utmost respect for them. They fight and they scrap, they have no quit in them,” Gordon said.

Stearns ousts Ostapenko at French Open

Associated Press

PARIS — Like many a kid, Peyton Stearns enjoyed participating in sports and tried her hand at plenty.

“Soccer, gymnastics, basketball, tennis, whatever,” the 21-year-old American said Wednesday at the French Open after eliminating 2017 champion Jelena Ostapenko 6-3, 1-6, 6-2 to reach the third round at a Grand Slam tournament for the first time.

Then Stearns paused, before adding with a chuckle: “Well, not so much tennis.”

By her own admission, she came to tennis relatively late for someone who would end up at its highest level, starting private lessons at age 8. It wasn't until about three or four years later, the 2022 NCAA champion for the University of Texas as explained, that she decided to focus on holding a racket.

“Gymnastics was very structured. I didn't like that so

much. I liked to do what I want when I wanted,” said Stearns, who had never played in the French Open's main draw until this week. “I chose tennis because I loved that you can just hit the living daylights out of the ball.”

So that's what she does, and did quite effectively against the 17th-seeded Ostapenko, out-hitting a big hitter — Stearns compiled more winners, 30-29 — and leaving the field at Roland Garros with just one remaining woman who has won the title there: No. 1 Iga Swiatek, the champion in 2020 and 2022, who plays her second-round match Thursday. Barbora Krejčíková, the 2021 winner, lost in the first round.

“Sometimes I surprise myself with how lethal my ball comes off (the racket) sometimes for my opponents, and how it really puts them in trouble,” Stearns said. “Maybe I didn't realize that earlier on,

but playing against top players, I realize that it is true. It comes off pretty heavy and big and that's how I play. Definitely helps with confidence.”

Her victory over Ostapenko can be placed alongside a slew of other early upsets in Paris, where the sometimes-odd bounces of the red clay and the changing weather conditions can contribute to unexpected outcomes.

No. 5 seed Caroline Garcia of France was defeated by Anna Blinkova 4-6, 6-3, 7-5, meaning 17 of 32 seeded women already were gone before the second round was halfway finished. In the men's bracket, No. 2 seed Daniil Medvedev bowed out Tuesday against a qualifier ranked 127nd.

“I feel like at Roland Garros, it's tricky with the clay,” said No. 3 Jessica Pegula, who advanced Wednesday when her opponent, Camila Giorgi, stopped playing because of

knee pain after dropping the first set. “You can see — to me, it feels like — a lot more upsets.”

Do not tell Stearns hers was a stunning result, even though she is ranked 69th in her first full season on tour and carried a 0-1 career Slam record into this week.

“I expected this out of myself. Maybe not this early in my career. ... I'm ahead of what I projected myself doing,” she said, “but by no means cutting myself short.”

She had her own little cheering section at Court 14, a group that included her mother, Denise, Stearns' coach, her coach's girlfriend and a friend, which helped.

So did Stearns' boundless self-belief, which she said allowed her to settle down amid some feelings she described as “crazy, nerve-wracking, overwhelming — all the emotions into one.”

Football schedule debate tops SEC meetings agenda

Associated Press

DESTIN, Fla. — Kirby Smart sounded ready to be done with the Southeastern Conference's great schedule debate.

“The most overrated conversation in the world,” the Georgia coach said Tuesday.

As is tradition, the Southeastern Conference took over a resort hotel on the Florida Gulf Coast for its spring meetings this week. The hottest topic is what the nation's toughest football conference plans to do with its schedule starting next season when Texas and Oklahoma join to make it a 16-team league with no divisions.

The options are sticking with an eight-game slate, but shifting to one annual rivalry game instead of the current two, or going to nine games with three annual rivals. The SEC has been trying to figure this out for more than a year.

“I'm a history teacher by trade,” Missouri coach Eli Drinkwitz said. “And every time I come to one of these meetings I'm blown away that the 13 colonies actually formed a union, but we can't agree

on an eight- or nine-game schedule.”

Either way, punting divisions fixes one big problem for the SEC: Infrequent meetings between some league members.

The most glaring example is how Texas A&M has played Georgia just once since joining the SEC in 2012, and the Aggies are still awaiting a visit to College Station by the Bulldogs.

“Four years, you will play everybody, home and away,” said Smart, whose team has won two straight national titles. “I get the traditional rivalries, you have three, you have two, you have one. You have this, you have that. You guys need something to write about bad when you start talking about this.”

Despite Smart's ambivalence, the eight-or-nine conversation does matter a lot to fans.

With an eight-game schedule that protects only one annual opponent, Auburn-Georgia — the Deep South's oldest rivalry, played 127 times — Alabama-Tennessee, and maybe the renewal of the Texas-Texas A&M rivalry, are among the nota-

ble matchups likely to become every-other-year games.

Aggies coach Jimbo Fisher said that when the Longhorns arrive, he would like Texas A&M's annual rival to be Texas. But that would mean shelving Texas-Oklahoma every other year.

“LSU's become a great rivalry for us,” Fisher said. “But as you go traditional rivalries of A&M, you'd say Texas.”

While LSU coach Brian Kelly stopped short of fully committing to a number of conference games, he said he wouldn't want to give up playing Alabama every year and the only way to do that would be a with a nine-game conference schedule.

The SEC football coaches and athletic directors met separately on Tuesday and will gather together Wednesday.

There is no guarantee the schedule question will be settled this week. Commissioner Greg Sankey has said there is still time for more consideration. He even acknowledged the possibility of a short-term solution, landing on a model but with a commitment to it for only a year or two.

Cubs' bullpen shuts down Rays' offense

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Nico Hoerner homered and the Chicago Cubs made the most of a rare gaffe by Tampa Bay, handing Shane McClellan his first loss of the season with a 2-1 victory over the Rays on Tuesday night.

The game was tied at 1 when Ian Happ led off the sixth with a shallow fly ball that dropped between Tampa Bay second baseman Brandon Lowe and right fielder Josh Lowe in a miscommunication between the fielders.

Happ hustled into second with a double. After Seiya Suzuki struck out and Trey Mancini bounced to second, Mike Tauchman hit a tiebreaking RBI single into left field.

That was enough for Chicago, which topped the majors' best team for the second straight day after entering the series with a four-game losing streak.

Julian Merryweather (1-0), Mark Leiter Jr. and Adalberto Alzolay combined for four innings of one-hit ball in relief of Kyle Hendricks. Merryweather earned his first major league win, and Alzolay got six outs for his second save.

McClellan (8-1) allowed six hits, struck out seven and walked two in 5½ innings. The left-hander was bidding to become the first pitcher in franchise history to begin a season 9-0.

Rangers 10, Tigers 6: Reliever Grant Anderson won in an overpowering major league debut and visiting Texas beat Detroit to improve to 35-19, the best record in franchise history at the one-third mark.

Anderson struck out seven of the nine batters he faced after taking over for starter Martín Pérez in the fifth inning. He struck out the first four he faced.

Orioles 8, Guardians 5: Anthony Santander hit a bases-clearing triple during his team's five-run second inning,

then added a pair of doubles to lift host Baltimore over Cleveland.

Kyle Gibson (7-3) won his third straight start, allowing three runs and seven hits in 5½ innings. Félix Bautista pitched a perfect ninth for his 14th save in 18 chances.

Dodgers 9, Nationals 3: Freddie Freeman extended his hitting streak to 19 games, capping a four-hit game with an eighth-inning homer, and host Los Angeles defeated Washington.

J.D. Martinez homered and drove in three runs, and Jason Heyward also went deep. Tony Gonsolin (3-1) allowed one run and three hits in six innings. Los Angeles has won 13 of 14 at Dodger Stadium since late April.

Athletics 2, Braves 1: Seth Brown scored on a fielding error by Atlanta third baseman Austin Riley in the ninth inning, and host Oakland recorded consecutive victories for the second time this season.

Braves reliever Raisel Iglesias (1-2) walked three of the first four Oakland batters in the ninth. Jonah Bride hit a sharp grounder that Riley bobbled. Bride easily beat Riley's throw to first as Brown scored, giving the A's their fifth walk-off win of the season and first back-to-back victories since May 5-6 in Kansas City.

Yankees 10, Mariners 2: Aaron Judge homered for the third time in two games, Anthony Volpe and Greg Allen also went deep and visiting New York stretched its winning streak to four.

While Judge hitting another homer will get the headlines, it was Volpe's long ball that broke open the game. With two outs in the third inning, Seattle starter Logan Gilbert (3-3) caught too much of the plate with a 1-2 slider and Volpe drove the pitch 413 feet for a three-run shot and a 6-0 lead. It was Volpe's eighth homer of the

season and snapped a 2-for-22 slide for the rookie.

Astros 5, Twins 1: Alex Bregman and Chas McCormick each homered in the second inning and had two RBIs and host Houston built a big lead early.

Bregman and McCormick connected off Joe Ryan (7-2) to put Houston up 3-0 — and snap Ryan's career-long streak of six starts without allowing a homer.

Diamondbacks 5, Rockies 1: Zac Gallen pitched six shutout innings, Ketel Marte and Evan Longoria homered in the first inning and host Arizona earned its third consecutive win.

Gallen (7-2) gave up five hits and two walks and struck out seven to win for the first time in three starts and lower his season ERA to 2.72. The right-hander hasn't allowed a homer in 63 innings — dating to his second start of the season.

Blue Jays 7, Brewers 2: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Alejandro Kirk each had three hits, Whit Merrifield reached twice and drove in two runs and host Toronto snapped a four-game home losing streak.

William Contreras hit a two-run home run, his second homer in two games, as the Brewers lost for the fourth time in five games.

Reds 9, Red Sox 8: Jose Barrero hit a grand slam to lift visiting Cincinnati to a fourth straight win.

Will Benson had three hits to back Ben Lively (3-2), who pitched 5½ shutout innings. He struck out six for the Reds, who blew it open with a five-run seventh inning.

White Sox 7, Angels 3: Andrew Vaughn drove in three runs, Romy González homered and host Chicago beat Los Angeles.

The White Sox looked as if they were headed toward their fourth straight loss after Los Angeles raced to a 3-1 lead against Lucas Giolito (4-4). But the White Sox turned it around

in a big way, scoring five runs in the fourth against Tyler Anderson (2-1).

Pirates 2, Giants 1: Connor Joe homered against his former team and visiting Pittsburgh snapped a five-game losing streak against San Francisco.

Joe, who played for San Francisco in 2019, homered off John Brebbia in the first inning. Michael Conforto tied the game with an RBI single in the bottom of the inning.

Padres 9, Marlins 4: Xander Bogaerts sparked a five-run ninth inning with a tiebreaking single and Matt Carpenter drove in two runs with his second double of the game, lifting visiting San Diego over Miami.

Bryan De La Cruz hit a two-run homer for the Marlins, who came home after a three-game sweep at the Los Angeles Angels.

Mets 2, Phillies 0: Kodai Senga allowed one hit through seven dominant innings and Francisco Lindor homered to help host New York shut out Philadelphia in the first meeting this season between the NL East rivals.

Eduardo Escobar added an RBI single and Mets center fielder Brandon Nimmo robbed Nick Castellanos of a potential home run with a leaping catch at the fence.

Cardinals 2, Royals 1: Miles Mikolas pitched eight shutout innings, Nolan Arenado hit an RBI double and Nolan Gorman drove in a run with a sacrifice fly as host St. Louis split the two-game set between the I-70 rivals.

Mikolas (4-1) matched a career high with 10 strikeouts and allowed three hits. Giovanny Gallegos replaced Mikolas in the ninth and gave up a double and single to start the inning. Vinnie Pasquantino scored on a fielder's choice by Bobby Witt Jr., cutting the deficit to a run. Gallegos went on to retire the next two hitters and record his seventh save.