

## Biden: US won't supply Israel for Rafah strike

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said he would not supply offensive weapons that Israel could use to launch an all-out assault on Rafah — the last major Hamas stronghold in Gaza — over concern for the well-being of the more than 1 million civilians sheltering there.

Biden, in an interview with CNN on Wednesday, said the United States was still committed to Israel's defense and would supply Iron Dome rocket interceptors and other defensive arms, but that if Israel goes into Rafah, "we're not going to supply the weapons and artillery shells used."

Biden acknowledged that "civilians have been killed in Gaza" by the type of heavy bombs the U.S. has been supplying — his first validation of what administration critics have been loudly protesting, even if he still stopped short of taking responsibility. His threat to hold up artil-

lery shells expanded on earlier revelations the U.S. was going to pause a shipment of heavy bombs.

However, Israel's military spokesman said the army has the weapons it needs to press ahead with its offensive in Rafah. Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari was asked at a news conference whether the army can conduct the operation without U.S. arms.

"The army has armaments for the missions it plans, and for the missions in Rafah too — we have what we need," Hagari said.

Meanwhile, a shipment of humanitarian aid left a port in Cyprus and was on its way to the U.S.-built pier in Gaza, the first delivery to the newly built ramp, Cyprus' foreign minister said Thursday.

The relief is desperately needed, with the United Nations saying people in Gaza are on the brink of famine and as Israeli troops ordered the evacuation of 100,000 Palestinians from Ga-

za's southern city of Rafah.

The U.S. vessel, loaded with much needed humanitarian assistance, departed from the Larnaca port with the aim of transferring as much aid to Gaza as possible through the maritime corridor, said Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos.

The trip comes some two months after Biden gave the order to build the large floating platform several miles off the Gaza coast that will be the launching pad for deliveries.

Biden's comments and his decision last week to pause the shipment of heavy bombs to Israel are the most striking manifestations of the growing daylight between his administration and Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. Biden said Wednesday that Israel's actions around Rafah had "not yet" crossed his red lines, but has repeated that Israel needs to do far more to protect the lives of civilians in Gaza.

The shipment was supposed to consist of 1,800 2,000-pound bombs and 1,700 500-pound bombs, according to a senior U.S. administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter. The focus of U.S. concern was the larger explosives and how they could be used in a dense urban area.

"Civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs and other ways in which they go after population centers," Biden told CNN. "I made it clear that if they go into Rafah — they haven't gone in Rafah yet — if they go into Rafah, I'm not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities, that deal with that problem."

"We're not walking away from Israel's security," the Democratic president continued. "We're walking away from Israel's ability to wage war in those areas."

## Senators argue DOD needs more funds to invest in future

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Senate appropriators on Wednesday criticized the proposed Defense Department budget for fiscal 2025 as too low to invest in future military technology and meet threats from an increasingly dangerous world.

The White House's request for an \$895 billion defense budget sticks to a spending cap mandated by law last year, but lawmakers on the Senate Appropriations Committee indicated they will attempt to find a way around it to boost the Pentagon's coffers.

"We must be clear-eyed that this budget request would represent a real cut in funding for the Department of Defense," said Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, the top Republican on the committee.

The proposed spending plan represents a 1% increase from the prior year and falls nearly \$14 billion short of the \$22.5 billion needed to cover rising fuel costs and other expenses, according to Collins.

Sen. Jon Tester of Montana, the Democratic chairman of the committee's defense subpanel, said the military services and combatant commands have provided Congress with unfunded priorities lists that total more than \$20 billion.

He also said the request for fiscal 2025, which begins Oct. 1, is \$10 billion below the funding level that the Pentagon had planned for before congressional fighting over the debt limit imposed caps on federal spending.

"We need a bigger number," Tester said during a hearing on the defense budget re-

quest. "If we're going to invest in future technologies, this number has to be bigger."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon prioritized near-term readiness and support for service members over longer-term modernization investments, such as fifth- and sixth-generation aircraft, as a result of the budget cap.

"We had to make some tough, but responsible choices," he told senators. "We decided not to invest in some modernization that would not deliver results before 2030, and we invested in our people and our families."

Troops are set to receive a 4.5% pay raise under the budget request. Austin said the Defense Department would be able to make up for the 2025 funding shortfall in modernization if lawmakers ensure future budgets include meaningful growth.

# China responds to Navy's Taiwan Strait trip

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

China's military labeled a U.S. guided-missile destroyer's Wednesday trip through the Taiwan Strait as "provocative" and dispatched aircraft and ships in response, state media reported.

The USS Halsey's passage through the 110-mile-wide channel that separates mainland China from Taiwan "demonstrates the United States' commitment to upholding freedom of navigation for all nations as a principle," the U.S. 7th Fleet said in a news release that night.

"No member of the international community should be intimidated or coerced into giving up their rights and freedoms,"

the Navy said in its release. "The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows."

Cmdr. Megan Greene, 7th Fleet spokeswoman, acknowledged Stars and Stripes' request for additional information but was not immediately able to provide a response Thursday morning.

The U.S. routinely sends warships and, less frequently, aircraft, through the strait in transits it describes as a routine means of traveling between the South China Sea and East China Sea.

China considers Taiwan, a functionally democratic island, to be a breakaway province that must be reunified with the main-

land, by force if necessary. It typically condemns Navy trips through the waterway as aggressive and destabilizing for the region.

Within an hour of the announcement, Beijing issued its statement on the Halsey's transit. Naval Senior Capt. Li Xi "slammed the U.S.'s provocative move," the state-sponsored China Military Online wrote just after midnight Thursday.

China's Eastern Theater Command "organized naval and air forces" to monitor the Halsey's passage and said 7th Fleet had "publicly hyped" the situation, it wrote Wednesday in a post to its official Weibo account.

The transit comes just as Chinese President Xi Jinping is

wrapping up a five-day tour of Europe, where he's visited France, Serbia and Hungary to strengthen ties.

He arrived in Hungary late Wednesday night, The Associated Press reported that day.

The Halsey's passage through the strait is at least the third for a U.S. destroyer this year. The guided-missile destroyer USS John Finn made the last two announced transits on Jan. 24 and March 5, evoking similar responses from Beijing.

A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon made its own trip through the Taiwan Strait on April 17. China's Eastern Theater Command at the time said it scrambled fighter jets to monitor the surveillance aircraft's movements.

## Videos show arrested US soldier with Russian girlfriend

*The Washington Post*

The American soldier, Gordon Black, seemed smitten with the Russian woman he met while stationed until last month in South Korea. She poked fun at him, called him her "husband," prompted him to swear in Russian. Then, last fall, she returned to the Far Eastern Russian city of Vladivostok without him.

The woman, Alexandra Vashchuk, even photoshopped him out of a picture with her.

But when the lovestruck 34-year-old Army staff sergeant followed her to Russia—without notifying his commanders or getting permission—he landed in jail. He is charged with stealing from her, was ordered held until July 2 and faces up to five years in prison.

Black, 34, is married but going through a divorce, family members told The Washington Post. He was supposed to be on leave, returning to Fort Cavazos in Texas. Instead, he traveled to Vladivostok last month to see his girlfriend, they said.

Russian media reported that he flew there last month. The State Department has warned Americans against traveling to Russia, and the Pentagon has barred military personnel from traveling to the country.

Details of Black's murky love affair with Vashchuk, 31, were uncovered by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Mark Krutov, who traced her TikTok account, which has since been made private. In one video, the staff sergeant stands in his uniform looking at Vashchuk with doe-eyed incomprehension as she speaks in Russian, using a derogatory term for an American. "I came home, and there was this pindos," she said. "That's funny. Who are you? Who are you, man?"

Black takes a step, leans over and smooches her phone screen.

"Oh God! Also funny, this chevron right here," she says, touching the military patch on his shoulder. "It says KATUSA. You're not a saboteur by chance?"

The Korean Augmentation to

the United States Army (KATUSA) is a training academy of the 8th Army in South Korea.

On Friday, Black faced the Perovomaisky district court in Vladivostok, charged with "theft causing significant damage." He was ordered jailed until at least July 2, pending trial.

Russian courts often prolong pretrial detention periods. For example, American journalist Evan Gershkovich of The Wall Street Journal, who was arrested while on assignment last year and charged with spying, has been jailed in Lefortovo high-security prison for more than a year. Gershkovich, his employer and U.S. officials vehemently deny the charges against him. But Russian courts have repeatedly prolonged his detention and denied his appeals to be released.

Black's arrest potentially complicates difficult back-channel negotiations between Washington and Moscow over the release of Americans held by Russia. Western officials have cited a

growing Russian practice of hostage diplomacy — imprisoning Americans as bargaining chips to be used in prisoner exchanges.

The relationship vibe between Black and his Russian paramour seemed odd, according to social media videos. In one — which she captioned, "How does your husband assess relations between Russia and America?" — he gave a rambling answer critical of the U.S., President Joe Biden and NATO, parroting Kremlin talking points justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"The relationship definitely isn't good now," Black said, referring to the U.S. and Russia. "It was definitely better under Trump."

"America, I think, NATO is pretty aggressive, honestly," he added. "I understand Russia's position, obviously. They want to defend their country, you know."

Moscow contends that its 2022 invasion was a response to Western aggression, complaining that Washington is using Ukraine as a proxy to dismember Russia.

# Houthi rebels claim Gulf of Aden strikes

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Yemen's Houthi rebels on Thursday claimed responsibility for two missile attacks in the Gulf of Aden on two Panama-flagged container ships that caused no damage.

The comments by Yemeni military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree come as the allies of Hamas continue to pressure Israel over its continuing war on the militant group in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis insist their assaults on shipping through the crucial waterway leading to the Suez Canal and onward to the Mediterranean Sea will continue as long as the war goes on. Meanwhile, Iran has already launched an unprecedented drone-and-missile attack on Israel amid the war, bringing a yearslong shadow conflict between the two nations out into the light.

Saree in a prerecorded statement claimed attacks on the MSC Diego and MSC Gina. The Joint Maritime Information Center, a U.S.-led coalition

of nations operating in the Mideast, said those two missile attacks happened early Tuesday.

"Neither were hit and all crew on board are safe," the center said. "The vessels were last reported proceeding to next port of call."

The center added that the vessels were "likely targeted due to perceived Israeli affiliation."

Both vessels were operating for Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Co., which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Saree did not say why it took the rebels two days to claim the attacks. He also claimed the Houthis targeted the MSC Victoria, another container ship, in the Indian Ocean. An attack on that vessel, however, has not been reported or acknowledged by any authorities.

The Houthis have said their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are aimed at pressuring Israel to end its war against Hamas in Gaza.

# Deputies killed airman after entering wrong apartment

Associated Press

MIAMI — The family of a 23-year-old Black U.S. Air Force airman who was fatally shot by sheriff's deputies at his off-base apartment in Florida last week will join civil rights attorney Ben Crump for a news conference Thursday calling for transparency in the investigation.

Crump said in a statement released Wednesday that Okaloosa County Sheriff's deputies responding to a disturbance call at the apartment complex in Fort Walton Beach burst into the wrong unit and fatally shot Senior Airman Roger Fortson when they saw he was armed with a gun. Fortson was home alone and on a FaceTime call with a friend when deputies arrived at his door, Crump said.

Fortson was based at the Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field.

According to Crump, the woman, whom the attorney didn't identify, said Fortson heard a knock at the door. He asked who was there but didn't get a response. A few minutes later, Fortson heard a louder knock but didn't see anyone when he looked through the peephole, Crump said, citing

the woman's account.

The woman said Fortson was concerned and went to retrieve his gun, which Crump said was legally owned.

As Fortson walked back through his living room, deputies burst through the door, saw that Fortson was armed and shot him six times, according to Crump's statement. The woman said Fortson was on the ground, saying, "I can't breathe," after he was shot, Crump said.

Fortson died at a hospital, officials said. The deputy involved in the shooting was placed on administrative leave pending an investigation.

The woman said Fortson wasn't causing a disturbance during their FaceTime call and believes that the deputies must have had the wrong apartment, Crump's statement said.

"The circumstances surrounding Roger's death raise serious questions that demand immediate answers from authorities, especially considering the alarming witness statement that the police entered the wrong apartment," Crump said.

The Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

# Navy offers bonuses for 14 different language abilities

By SHANNON RENFROE

Stars and Stripes

Sailors proficient in Russian or any one of 13 other high-demand languages may be able to add a one-time \$500 bonus to their paycheck under a new Navy testing program.

Central and Eastern Europe dominate the list, with 11 of the 14 languages chosen for the bonus program. They include Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Slovak and Ukrainian. The three others are Hausa, Kurdish-Sorani and Thai.

Multilingual sailors can test for up to two languages in a month, which would make them eligible for a one-time \$1,000 bonus.

Because the service aims to identify untapped linguistic skills, rated language professionals aren't eligible for the extra cash.

That group includes foreign area officers, cryptologic interpreters and graduates of the Defense Language Institute.

Navy personnel who are already receiving a regular monthly foreign language proficiency bonus through a lan-

guage-coded assignment are also ineligible.

Skill in most of the selected languages will be assessed through Defense Language Proficiency Tests or an oral interview, which must be done no later than Sept. 30.

Assessments will be based on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale. Sailors can qualify for the bonus either by scoring a 2+ on the listening and reading portions of a proficiency test or by achieving the same score in speaking via the interview.

However, there is no profi-

ciency test for Estonian, Latvian and Slovak, so an interview is the only option. For Lithuanian, an interview isn't possible, leaving the proficiency test as the sole evaluation method.

The 2+ rating is generally considered to be close to the level of understanding of an educated native speaker.

These languages support current operations with partners and allies, aligning with those identified as critical by the Defense Department and the Navy, according to an administrative message issued in late April.



# Daniels spars with Trump's attorneys

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump's defense attorneys grilled Stormy Daniels on Thursday over the transaction at the center of the former president's hush money trial, pressing her on why she accepted a \$130,000 payment to keep quiet about her alleged sexual encounter with Trump instead of going public.

"Why didn't you do that?" attorney Susan Necheles asked, wondering why Daniels didn't hold a news conference as she had planned to tell reporters about the 2006 encounter, which Trump has denied ever happened.

"Because we were running out of time," Daniels said.

Did she mean, Necheles asked, that she was running out of time to use the claim to make money?

"To get the story out," Daniels countered. The negotiations happened in the final weeks of the 2016 presidential campaign, a critical point in the case against Trump because prosecutors are arguing that he and his allies snatched up these potentially damaging stories and buried them in an illegal effort to influence the November results. Trump has denied any wrongdoing.

Daniels returned for more testimony Thursday, avoiding eye

contact with the former president as she walked into the Manhattan courtroom and made her way to the witness stand.

Trump's lawyers have sought to paint the porn actor as a liar and extortionist who's trying to take down Trump after drawing money and fame from her story about him.

Turning pointedly to Daniels' career as an adult film actor, writer and director, Necheles asked: "You have a lot of experience in making phony stories about sex appear real?"

"The sex in those films is real, just like the sex in that room," Daniels replied. "The character themes might be different, but

the sex is very real. That's why it's pornography, not a B movie."

Daniels was first called as a witness Tuesday, describing what she said happened during their 2006 encounter in graphic detail.

Her testimony has been an extraordinary moment in what could be the only criminal case against the presumptive Republican presidential nominee to go to trial before voters decide in November whether to send him back to the White House. Trump has pleaded not guilty and casts himself as the victim of a politically tainted justice system working to deny him another term.

## Heavy storms hit South amid week of deadly weather

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Tenn. — A wave of dangerous storms began crashing over parts of the South on Thursday, a day after severe weather with damaging tornadoes killed at least three people in the region.

A heavy line of storms swept into Atlanta near the end of the morning rush hour. Busy hub airports in Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C., reported delays. The National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center cited an "enhanced risk" for severe weather from Texas to South Carolina.

The storms continue a streak of torrential rains and tornadoes this week from the Plains to the Midwest and, now, the Southeast. At least four people have died since Monday. The weather comes on the heels of a stormy April in which the United States had 300 confirmed tornadoes, the second-most on record for the month and the most since 2011.

Nearly a quarter-million homes and businesses still lacked power Thursday in several Southern states after storms the night before, according to PowerOutage.us.

One in Tennessee damaged homes, injured people, toppled power lines and trees, and killed a 22-year-old man in a car in Claiborne County, north of Knoxville, officials said. A second person was killed south of Nashville in Columbia, where officials said a likely tornado blew homes off their foundations.

Torrential rains led to a flash flood emergency and water rescues northeast of Nashville. A temporary ground stop was issued at Nashville's main airport, and the weather service issued a

tornado emergency, its highest alert level, for nearby areas.

Schools were closed Thursday in several Tennessee counties. In Georgia, some districts north of Atlanta canceled in-person classes or delayed start times because of storm damage overnight that included fallen trees on houses and vehicles around Clarksville. No injuries were reported there.

A strong tornado damaged at least 20 homes in northern Alabama's DeKalb County and caused injuries but no deaths, officials said.

## House rejects Greene's effort to oust Speaker Johnson

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hard-line Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene tried and failed in a brazen push to oust House Speaker Mike Johnson, but the resounding rejection by Republicans and Democrats tired of the turmoil does not guarantee an end to the GOP chaos.

One of Donald Trump's biggest supporters in Congress,

Greene stood on the House floor late Wednesday and read a long list of "transgressions" she said Johnson had committed as speaker, from his passage of a \$95 billion national security package with aid for Ukraine to his reliance on Democrats to wield power.

Colleagues booed in protest. But Greene soldiered on, criticizing Johnson's leadership as

"pathetic, weak and unacceptable."

After Greene triggered the vote on her motion to vacate the Republican speaker from his office, Republican Majority Leader Steve Scalise quickly countered by calling first for a vote to table it.

An overwhelming majority, 359-43, kept Johnson in his job, for now.

"As I've said from the beginning, and I've made clear here every day, I intend to do my job," Johnson said afterward. "And I'll let the chips fall where they may. In my view, that is leadership."

It's the second time in a matter of months that Republicans have worked to oust their own speaker, an unheard of level of party upheaval with a move rarely seen in U.S. history.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Abortion rights measure knocked off ballot

**NY** ALBANY — A New York judge on Tuesday blocked a politically important abortion rights amendment from appearing before voters on the November ballot, dealing Democrats a setback as the party moved to focus battleground races in the state around abortion access.

State Supreme Court Justice Daniel J. Doyle found that state lawmakers failed to follow procedural rules around passing constitutional amendments, incorrectly approving the amendment before getting a written opinion on the language from the attorney general.

Democrats passed the Equal Protection of Law Amendment last year to bar discrimination based on “pregnancy outcomes” or “gender expression” — provisions intended to protect abortion rights and a person’s right to seek gender-affirming care. The amendment wouldn’t explicitly preserve a woman’s right to have an abortion but backers said it would have the practical effect of protecting reproductive rights.

## Suit over teen student’s gender expression nixed

**ME** PORTLAND — A federal judge dismissed a lawsuit brought by a Maine woman who accused school officials of encouraging her teen’s gender expression by providing a chest binder and using a new name and pronouns, without consulting parents.

U.S. District Judge Jon Levy acknowledged his decision that a mother such as Amber Lavigne “might expect school offi-

cial to keep her informed about how her child is navigating matters related to gender identity” but he concluded that she failed to establish legal claims for which the school district could be held liable.

According to the lawsuit, a school counselor provided the chest binder and instruction on how to use it. The mother, who has since begun home-schooling her teen, said the school also began calling the 13-year-old by a different name and pronouns.

## Funeral home regs pass amid shocking cases

**CO** DENVER — Colorado lawmakers passed a bill Monday to overhaul the state’s lax funeral home oversight, joining a second measure aimed at regulating the industry that passed last week.

Both follow a series of horrific incidents at funeral homes, including sold body parts, fake ashes and the discovery of 190 decaying bodies.

The cases have devastated hundreds of families. Many learned their child’s or parent’s remains weren’t in the ashes they received, but instead decaying sometimes for four years in a bug-infested building oftentimes stacked atop each other.

The bill passed Monday, which would require routine inspections of Colorado funeral homes, will head to Colorado Gov. Jared Polis’ desk for a signature after the House considers a minor change by the Senate. The second bill would require funeral directors and other industry roles to be licensed. Those qualifications would include background checks, de-grees in mortuary science, pas-

sage of a national examination and work experience.

## Mother dies from fall at daughter’s graduation

**OH** COLUMBUS — A woman who fell from the stands to her death during a graduation ceremony at Ohio State University last weekend has been identified as a woman whose daughter was receiving her diploma.

The Franklin County Coroner’s Office said the 53-year-old was pronounced dead at the scene, just outside Ohio Stadium in Columbus on Sunday. The Columbus Dispatch reported the death was being investigated as an apparent suicide, citing coroner documents.

An investigation continues into how the woman fell from the stadium, which the school says is 136 feet tall, to the pavement below. However, Ohio State police do not suspect foul play and believe the fall was not accidental, university spokesperson Ben Johnson said Tuesday.

It happened as the last graduates were filing into the stadium. According to the commencement program, the woman’s daughter was among those graduating.

## Transgender activists flood tip line with hoaxes

**UT** SALT LAKE CITY — Transgender activists have flooded a Utah tip line created to alert state officials to possible violations of a new bathroom law with thousands of hoax reports in an effort to shield trans residents and their allies from any legitimate complaints that could lead to an investigation.

In the week since it launched,

the online tip line already has received more than 10,000 submissions, none of which seem legitimate, Utah Auditor John Dougall said. The form asks people to report public school employees who knowingly allow someone to use a facility designated for the opposite sex.

Utah residents and visitors are required by law to use bathrooms and changing rooms in government-owned buildings that correspond with their birth sex.

## Disney receives key OK to expand theme parks

**CA** ANAHEIM — Disney has received a key approval to expand its Southern California theme parks in its first push to make major changes to its iconic Disneyland in decades.

The Anaheim City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to approve the plan to transform Disney’s 490-acre campus in densely-populated Southern California by moving parking to a multi-story structure and redeveloping a massive lot with new entertainment and rides. It was a second, required vote for the plan after the council gave initial approval last month. The approved zoning changes and ordinances require another 30 days for changes to take effect.

The proposal doesn’t expand the parks’ physical footprint but will help Disney create new, immersive experiences for visitors. It requires Disney to invest at least \$1.9 billion in the project over the next decade and spend tens of millions of dollars on street improvements, affordable housing and other infrastructure.

— From wire reports

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# Injured Brunson leads Knicks past Pacers

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — Jalen Brunson left the locker room on an injured leg, walked onto the court and sent the Madison Square Garden crowd into a frenzy, just as Willis Reed had exactly 54 years earlier.

As the roars turned into “MVP! MVP!” chants, Brunson tried to block out the pain in his body and the noise all around him as he warmed up at half-time.

“It was really cool to hear, but I just knew that I had to get my mind in the right place to figure out how I was going to attack the second half,” Brunson said.

He shook off his right foot injury to score 24 of his 29 points in the final two quarters, leading the New York Knicks to a 130-121 victory over the Indiana Pacers on Wednesday night for a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

On the anniversary of Reed’s dramatic emergence from the locker room before Game 7 of the 1970 NBA Finals to lead the Knicks to their first title, Brun-

son had missed the entire second quarter while the Pacers surged ahead to a double-digit lead.

Reed’s teammates have said they didn’t know if he would play that night. Brunson’s had no doubt.

“I mean, he’s a warrior. That’s all I got,” Donte DiVincenzo said. “There was no doubt in my mind that he’ll be back. All season long, no matter what is thrown at him, injury bug or whatever, he always bounces back. And we knew the severity of the game and everything, so we knew, everybody had confidence he was coming back.”

Brunson fell short of becoming the second player in NBA history to score 40 or more points in five straight playoff games, but he gave the Knicks everything they needed to move halfway to their first Eastern Conference finals appearance since 2000.

“He’s a great leader, so I think the players all have respect for that, when a guy goes out and is willing to give whatever he has,

and so that says a lot about him,” Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau said.

OG Anunoby added a career playoff-high 28 points before leaving with a left hamstring injury in the third quarter for the injury-riddled Knicks, who have already lost three key players to season-ending injuries.

But they got Brunson back and received huge efforts again from his two Villanova teammates. DiVincenzo scored 28 points and Josh Hart had 19 points, 15 rebounds and seven assists for the No. 2-seeded Knicks.

Tyrese Haliburton rebounded from a poor Game 1 with 34 points, nine assists and six rebounds for the Pacers, who finished the game without coach Rick Carlisle after he got two technical fouls and was ejected.

“Small-market teams deserve an equal shot,” Carlisle said during a postgame complaint about the officiating. “They deserve a fair shot no matter where they are playing.”

The series moves to Indiana for Game 3 on Friday and Game 4 on Sunday.

Former Knicks forward Obi Toppin added 20 points in another strong effort by Indiana’s reserves, but the Pacers hurt themselves by shooting just 10-for-17 (59%) from the free-throw line.

Brunson made a 3-pointer for a 24-13 lead in the first quarter, giving the Knicks 10 baskets in their first 14 shots in a blistering start. But after Toppin made one for the Pacers on the other end, Brunson began waving to the bench for a substitution as he ran down the court on offense. That was early in an 11-0 run by Indiana to tie it.

The Pacers then made 15 of 22 shots in the second quarter, which Brunson sat out entirely, outscoring the Knicks 37-27 to take a 73-63 lead.

Brunson would only say he felt some discomfort and that once he warmed up, he knew he was going back into the game.

“I had a decision to make and I made a decision,” Brunson said.

## Jokic claims MVP award for third time in four seasons

*Associated Press*

Nikola Jokic did it all again. And the MVP trophy is his again.

Jokic, the Denver Nuggets star from Serbia, was announced Wednesday night as the NBA’s Most Valuable Player — his third time winning the award in the past four seasons, a feat that just six other players in league history have accomplished.

He averaged 26.4 points, 12.4 rebounds and 9.0 assists. Others averaged more in each category — and Jokic has had better years in each of those categories — but he was the only player to rank in the NBA’s top 10 in points, rebounds and assists per game this season.

Jokic got 79 of a possible 99

first-place votes from the panel of reporters and broadcasters who cast ballots on awards when the regular season ended.

“It’s got to start with your teammates,” Jokic said on TNT, where the award was announced. “Without them, I’m nothing. Without them, I cannot do nothing. Coaches, players, organization, medical staff, development coaches ... I cannot be whoever I am without them.”

It likely was not a coincidence that Jokic appeared on television for the award announcement wearing a T-shirt commemorating the life of one of his mentors, Golden State assistant coach Dejan Milojevic, who died earlier this year.

Oklahoma City’s Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was second and

Dallas’ Luka Doncic was third, both getting into the top three of MVP voting for the first time. With Jokic from Serbia, Gilgeous-Alexander from Canada and Doncic from Slovenia, it marked the third consecutive season that three players born outside the U.S. finished 1-2-3 in the MVP balloting.

This time, the foreign dominance atop the NBA was even more pronounced: Milwaukee’s Giannis Antetokounmpo, who is from Greece, was fourth — so this became the first time in the award’s 69-year history that international players went 1-2-3-4 in the voting. It also became the sixth consecutive year that a player born outside the U.S. won the award.

Jokic appeared on all 99 bal-

lots, with 18 second-place votes and two third-place. Gilgeous-Alexander also appeared on every ballot, with 15 first-place votes, 40 second-place, 40 third-place, three fourth-place and one fifth-place.

Doncic was on all but one ballot and got four first-place votes. Antetokounmpo got one first-place vote on his way to fourth. New York’s Jalen Brunson was fifth, followed by Boston’s Jayson Tatum, Minnesota’s Anthony Edwards, Sacramento’s Domantas Sabonis and Phoenix’s Kevin Durant.

“Some people say it’s the best player on the best team,” Jokic said, when asked to define an MVP. “To me, it’s the guy who’s the most valuable, the team couldn’t play without him.”



# Canucks rally from 3 down, stun Oilers

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Conor Garland broke a tie with 5:34 left and the Vancouver Canucks overcame a three-goal deficit to beat the Edmonton Oilers 5-4 on Wednesday night in Game 1 of the second-round playoff series.

Garland took a short pass from Dakota Joshua, faked a slap shot at the right circle and slipped a wrist shot between goalie Stuart Skinner's legs from a sharp angle for Vancouver's second goal in 39 seconds and third in 4:48.

"Everybody wants to be in that moment," Garland said. "We understand when you have to execute and when you dig a hole like that, you got to execute

if you want to get back in the game. And I think that was the biggest thing in the third, that we just executed and buried our chances."

Game 2 is Friday.

Elias Lindholm got the comeback started with 2:59 left in the second period. J.T. Miller cut it to 4-3 at 9:38 of the third, and Nikita Zadorov tied it with 6:13 remaining.

"Maybe four or five months ago, or maybe last year, you might have seen some frustration, some laziness or when something frustrated us, we take a bad penalty," coach Rick Tocchet said. "If you look at it, when they're 4-1, I thought we still stayed disciplined. We weren't pinching, we weren't

selling the farm. And I think that's maturity of the year, how we've kind of built our resolve."

Joshua scored early in the second period and assisted on Lindholm's goal.

"The belief is always there," Joshua said. "Just to know that you got to keep playing to the end, anything can happen."

Arturs Silovs stopped 14 shots for the Canucks.

Zach Hyman scored twice for Edmonton to take the playoffs goals lead with nine.

"They're a good team and they were doing everything they could to come back and we were doing everything we could to hold on to the lead," said Oilers captain Connor McDavid, who was limited to an assist.

"That happens in the playoffs. You try to hold on to lead and sometimes you're maybe a little too passive."

**Panthers 6, Bruins 1:** Aleksander Barkov had two goals and two assists, Sam Reinhart added four assists and host Florida tied the second-round series with Boston at a game apiece.

The Panthers chased Bruins starter Jeremy Swayman early in the third period after four straight goals, then added two more against Linus Ullmark.

Charlie Coyle had the goal for the Bruins, who lost to Florida for the first time in six meetings this season. The series shifts to Boston for Game 3 on Friday night and Game 4 on Sunday night.

## Ohtani interpreter set to plead guilty in betting case

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The former interpreter for Los Angeles Dodgers star Shohei Ohtani has agreed to plead guilty to bank and tax fraud in a sports betting case in which prosecutors allege he stole nearly \$17 million from the Japanese baseball player to pay off debts, federal prosecutors said Wednesday.

The scandal surrounding Ipepei Mizuhara shocked baseball fans from the U.S. to Japan when the news broke in March.

Mizuhara will plead guilty to one count of bank fraud and one count of subscribing to a false tax return, the U.S. Justice Department announced. The bank fraud charge carries a maximum of 30 years in federal prison, and the false tax return charge carries a sentence of up to three years in federal prison.

The plea agreement says Mizuhara will be required to pay Ohtani restitution that could total nearly \$17 million, as well as more than \$1 million to the IRS. Those amounts could change prior to sentencing.

Mizuhara will enter his guilty plea in the coming weeks and is set to be arraigned May 14, prosecutors said.

Mizuhara exploited his personal and professional relationship with Ohtani to plunder millions from the two-way player's account for years, at times impersonating Ohtani to bankers, prosecutors said.

### Nadal posts comeback victory at Italian Open

ROME — For a brief stretch on Thursday, Rafael Nadal looked every bit of a weary 37-year-old player nearing retirement.

Struggling to produce pace off both sides with his groundstrokes, committing an uncharacteristically high number of unforced errors and unable to stay in rallies, Nadal dropped the first set of his first-round match at the Italian Open against qualifier Zizou Bergs.

Then the fist-pumping, virtually-unbeatable-on-clay, 22-time Grand Slam champion version of Nadal emerged and the

Spaniard rallied for a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory before an adoring crowd in what will likely be his final tournament at the Foro Italico.

Nadal was playing only his 10th match this year after missing nearly all of 2023 with a hip injury that required surgery. He's hoping to be competitive one last time at the French Open, where he is the record 14-time champion.

Rome, where he is a 10-time champion, is Nadal's last big warmup tournament before Roland Garros starts on May 26.

### Hornets hire Celtics assistant Lee as coach

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Charlotte Hornets named Charles Lee as their head coach on Thursday, hoping he'll turn around the long-struggling NBA franchise.

The 39-year-old Lee joins the Hornets after serving as the Boston Celtics top assistant coach. Lee will complete the Celtics' playoff run before joining the Hornets on a full-time

basis. Lee spent five seasons under Mike Budenholzer before joining the Celtics last summer.

Lee replaces Steve Clifford, who announced before the end of the regular season that he was stepping down as Hornets coach after two seasons in his second stint with the club.

### Maple Leafs fire Keefe after early playoff exit

TORONTO — Sheldon Keefe is out as coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs, fired Thursday after another early exit from the NHL playoffs.

The move had been expected after Toronto lost to rival Boston in Game 7 last weekend, the fourth time in five years under Keefe that the team has lost in the first round.

"Today's decision was difficult," general manager Brad Treliving said in a statement. "Sheldon is an excellent coach and a great man. However, we determined a new voice is needed to help the team push through to reach our ultimate goal."

# Pirates calling up Skenes for MLB debut

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Paul Skenes era is ready to begin in Pittsburgh.

The top pick in last year's amateur draft will make his major league debut for the Pirates on Saturday when they face the Cubs, a person with direct knowledge of the decision told The Associated Press.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity Wednesday because the Pirates hadn't explicitly announced the promotion, although the club did send out a hype video of Skenes with "5.11.24."

The 21-year-old, taken with

the first pick last summer following a couple of standout years at LSU, has dominated opponents at Triple-A Indianapolis. Skenes, whose fastball regularly hits triple digits, is 0-0 with a 0.99 ERA in seven Triple-A starts, with 45 strikeouts in 27⅓ innings.

He is considered among baseball's top prospects and comes with unusual star power for a baseball rookie, in part because of his relationship with LSU gymnast and social media influencer Olivia Dunne.

The Pirates have brought Skenes along slowly during the spring, methodically ramping

up his pitch count at Triple-A. They have given him a little more latitude recently. He threw 75 pitches on April 30 and 66 on Sunday against Buffalo.

Skenes joins a rotation that includes 22-year-old rookie Jared Jones, who has a 2.63 ERA through seven starts and whose 52 strikeouts were ninth in the majors entering Wednesday.

Pittsburgh has floundered of late following a strong start. The Pirates, who are off Thursday, are 6-16 over their last 22 games after falling to the Los Angeles Angels 5-4 on Wednesday.

Skenes' arrival represents a significant milestone for the or-

ganization. General manager Ben Cherington has overseen a top-to-bottom overhaul since taking over in the fall of 2019. Some of the pieces he has acquired and/or developed since his arrival either are on the major league roster (Jones) or on the cusp.

It also starts the clock on Pittsburgh's hopeful return to contention. The Pirates finished last in the NL Central from 2019-22 before taking a step forward last season. The expectation internally is for the competitive window to open either this year or next. Skenes could have an outsized impact on the timeline.

## Contreras' injury highlights danger to catchers

Associated Press

When catcher Willson Contreras of the St. Louis Cardinals was struck on his left arm by a swing Tuesday night, it was felt by former and current backstops all over the big leagues. Everyone from Salvador Perez in Kansas City to managers like Bruce Bochy and Rob Thomson.

It was especially painful for Contreras' brother, William.

"It's hard for me, too, because I love my brother. He plays every day. But he'll be back," said William Contreras, a catcher with the Milwaukee Brewers.

Willson Contreras' broken left forearm was a scary reminder of the increasing danger for catchers who have moved closer to home plate over the years in an effort to steal strike calls at the bottom of the zone — and sometimes even lower.

When a hitter with a long swing stands at the back of the batter's box, there is precious little room to maneuver.

"The risk is high. We just experienced it," St. Louis manager Oliver Marmol said Wednesday. "It's a huge risk, and it's been talked about. Even in the offseason it was a topic of discussion because there was an increase in them. The more catchers are evaluated on framing, the closer they're getting to the hitter to get that low pitch."

Contreras got hurt with New York Mets slugger J.D. Martinez at the plate in the second inning. After he was hit by Martinez's swing, the three-time All-Star tumbled over in obvious pain. He is expected to be sidelined at

least six weeks following surgery for a fractured forearm.

"I've never seen anything like that," said Royals manager Matt Quatraro, who caught in college and the minor leagues. "I feel terribly for him. I didn't go back and watch it in super slow motion, but it's devastating for him."

Martinez was awarded first base on one of 33 catcher interference calls through Tuesday's games, a slight increase from 30 at the same point last year, according to Sportradar. There were 96 catcher interference calls during the 2023 season, up from 74 the previous year and the majors' highest total since at least 1974.

The increase has attracted the attention of Major League Baseball, which has held conversations with teams about the calls and positioning by catchers.

"MLB addressed it in spring training with us," Oakland Athletics manager Mark Kotsay said, "in terms of talking about it with our catchers and making them aware that the catcher injury has increased over the last two years, especially with concussions and being hit in the head. So there's definitely a fine line."

Contreras has been one of St. Louis' best hitters this season, so it's a costly injury for the Cardinals. Bochy, the Texas manager, said that risk has affected how the Rangers position their catchers.

"We back them off just a hair, because, I tell you, the last thing you want to do is not just get hit in an arm, but maybe in the back of the head," said Bochy, a former big league catcher. "That's how close they're getting, especial-

ly when the ball's low."

If the plays continue, Major League Baseball could bring the trend to its competition committee — which includes six owners, four players and one umpire — as part of its process for addressing safety concerns.

In the meantime, players and teams are identifying the hitters who put their catchers at increased risk.

Oakland outfielder Esteury Ruiz and Houston Astros slugger Kyle Tucker drew the most catcher interference calls in 2023 with seven apiece, two more than Chicago White Sox outfielder Luis Robert Jr. and Shohei Ohtani in his final season with the Los Angeles Angels. San Diego Padres infielder Jake Cronenworth has drawn three such calls already this year.

"We're lucky enough to have good analytics on what guys are high risk of catcher's interference, so it gives us kind of the depth piece to be able to move back or move forward on guys," New York Yankees catcher Austin Wells said.

Nationals catcher Riley Adams said he makes notes of hitters whose swing paths could put him in danger. One is Ohtani, who nicked Adams' glove earlier this season.

"Every hitter in the league has a different path. And it's also a little bit about trying to understand which hitter is the guy that gets the barrel in the zone further back," Adams said. "So you've just got to find that balance between getting too close versus being so far away that you make those pitches at the bottom of the zone look a lot lower."