

Top Marine reflects on citizenship journey

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

MIAMI — Sgt. Maj. of the Marine Corps Carlos Ruiz talked Tuesday about becoming a U.S. citizen as he watched 60 new Americans swear allegiance to the United States for the first time aboard the USS Bataan.

“In the ceremony like this, it doesn’t hit you until — you’ll notice the people are all staring at their [naturalization] certificates — you see your name on that certificate, and it feels like you’re just being born again,” Ruiz said, recalling the moment the magnitude of his decision dawned on him. “You feel like now you’re a card-carrying U.S. citizen. You feel like, ‘I am part of it. I could do anything now.’”

The top enlisted Marine smiled wide as he led the newest group of American citizens in

the Pledge of Allegiance from a stage set up inside the amphibious assault ship docked at the port of Miami for its first Fleet Week. Some 12 years earlier, it was Ruiz — already a Marine gunnery sergeant and serving as a drill instructor — affirming his allegiance to the United States.

Ruiz continues to carry a copy of his naturalization certificate with him in the form of a photograph on his phone. Just in case, he said, “no one believes I am a U.S. citizen.”

Ruiz and Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro participated in the ceremony Tuesday hosted aboard the Navy ship as symbol of American might for its newest citizens. Like Ruiz, Del Toro is a naturalized citizen, who emigrated from Cuba as a child refugee and earned his citizen-

ship in 1978 just before entering the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md.

Del Toro said he wanted to host a naturalization ceremony aboard the Bataan as a reminder that there is a price for America’s freedoms. The ship, he noted, is named in honor of the American prisoners of war who in 1942 were forced by their Japanese captors to endure a brutal 65-mile trek to a prisoner-of-war camp in the Philippines during World War II. Some 1,000 Americans died on the march.

“Freedom does not come cheap,” the Navy secretary said after the ceremony. “It’s not necessarily free. It has to be earned, and it is earned by the citizens of our great country, people who come to this nation from all across the world, you

know, to live the American dream and fulfill the American dream.”

Del Toro implored the 60 new Americans who came from 24 countries to find some way to serve and give back to their new country. Perhaps, he joked, they should join the Navy or Marine Corps, telling them he could swear them into the military shortly after the ceremony.

He used his and Ruiz’s experiences as examples of what immigrants can accomplish when afforded the opportunities. Del Toro graduated from the Naval Academy in 1983 and served 22 years in the Navy as a surface warfare officer, reaching the rank of commander before retiring. In 2021, he became Navy secretary, the top civilian in charge of the Navy and Marine Corps.

Lawmakers: US in Indo-Pacific vulnerable to China

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. military bases in the Indo-Pacific region are sorely lacking hardened aircraft shelters, leaving them vulnerable to devastating airstrikes in a potential conflict with China, lawmakers warned.

Recent war games show the United States would lose 90% of its aircraft on the ground, rather than in air combat, due to insufficient base protection, a group of Republican lawmakers wrote in a letter to the secretaries of the Air Force and Navy.

“Unclassified analysis suggests China has enough weapons to overwhelm our air and missile defenses protecting those bases,” they wrote. “Strikes on U.S. bases could immobilize vital air assets, disrupt logistical chains and significantly weaken our ability to respond in a conflict.”

Rep. John Moolenaar of Michigan, the chairman of the House Select Committee

on the Chinese Communist Party, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and 11 other lawmakers are urging Pentagon leaders to act.

They are calling for the construction of more hardened aircraft shelters, which are reinforced hangars used to protect military aircraft, as well as underground bunkers and other “passive” defenses.

China has built over 400 hardened aircraft shelters in the past decade, and the U.S. has only constructed 22 in Japan and South Korea, according to research. There are no such shelters in the Northern Mariana Islands or Guam, an island commonly referred to as the “tip of the spear” of U.S. power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

The shelters do not provide complete protection from missile attacks, but they would force China to use more force to destroy each aircraft and increase the survivability of American air assets, lawmakers argued. They acknowledged it might not be feasible or sensible to construct shelters at

all U.S. bases in the Indo-Pacific, but described the slow pace of construction as “deeply troubling.”

“The limited investment into hardened aircraft shelters is a symptom of a broader problem within the [Defense Department]: We are spending hardly any money on military construction to improve base resilience in the Indo-Pacific,” lawmakers wrote.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has provided Congress with a list of \$11 billion in priorities that are unfunded under the White House’s 2025 defense budget request. The Pentagon will spend about 2% of its current construction budget on base resilience projects in the region, according to the letter.

“If our bases in the Indo-Pacific lack the resilience to survive attacks and continue operating, our ability to deter China and respond quickly in the Taiwan Strait will be greatly diminished,” lawmakers wrote.

Balikatan had many firsts in Philippines

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The annual Balikatan exercise concluded in the Philippines on Friday after more than two weeks of training that underlined U.S. support for its oldest defense ally in the Pacific, one facing Chinese intimidation.

Balikatan — Tagalog for “shoulder to shoulder” — concluded with speeches at the Philippine armed forces headquarters in Manila and with farewells around the country.

The exercise began April 22 and encompassed 11,000 U.S., 5,000 Filipino and a smaller number of Australian and French troops training in and near the South China Sea.

China has claimed virtually the entire sea and has territorial disputes with neighboring countries, including the Philippines.

On April 30, a China coast guard ship’s water cannons damaged one of two Philippine coast guard vessels at Scarborough Shoal, a feature controlled by Beijing inside the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone. An escalating number of similar encounters have hap-

pened at Second Thomas Shoal, a submerged reef controlled by Manila in the South China Sea.

Balikatan included naval gunnery involving American, French and Filipino ships near Palawan, a Philippine island that’s 150 nautical miles east of Second Thomas Shoal.

The Marine Corps used its new amphibious combat vehicle overseas for the first time during the drills, launching them from the USS Harpers Ferry for a simulated assault on shore targets on Palawan.

Balikatan also included coastal-defense training and a ship-sinking exercise on northern Luzon, and air-assault raids in the Batanes, a group of islands in the Luzon Strait south of Taiwan.

The Army deployed its Patriot missile-defense system to Clark Air Base for the first time during the exercise.

“Every Balikatan is increasingly more complex,” Philippine exercise director Maj. Gen. Marvin Licudine said at the closing ceremony, according to a U.S. Department of Defense statement Friday.

Navy probes apparent drone footage of carrier

By ALEX WILSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy investigated overhead social media imagery of the USS Ronald Reagan but has not concluded that a drone flew over the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet, a base spokesman said.

Aerial photos and videos of the aircraft carrier were posted to X over the past two months by @Xiao_Hao_4. Four photos posted April 4 show the Ronald Reagan, the amphibious command ship USS Blue Ridge, several destroyers and portions of the base’s coastline and interior.

Another post on May 8 presented two more photos and a video apparently shot from a drone that flew directly over the aircraft carrier.

The base is aware of the imagery and Naval Criminal Investigative Service “investigated their authenticity,” base spokesman Justin Keller said.

The investigation revealed no indication that a drone flew over the Ronald Reagan, Keller added.

He referred additional questions, including whether the images were determined to be real

or fake, to NCIS on Friday. A spokesperson for the service did not immediately respond to a comment request.

The base and its ships “have several force protection measures in place every day, and at no time was the security” of the base or the crew of the USS Ronald Reagan in question, Keller wrote.

The X account, which predominantly posts in Chinese and claims responsibility for the imagery, describes itself as a “Secret account for Secret contents.”

The account holder, who has not been publicly identified, did not respond to a request for comment.

Japan Defense Minister Minoru Kihara addressed the Izumo video during a Friday news conference and said it’s a “high possibility” the footage is authentic.

“The Ministry of Defense and the Self-Defense Forces take the results of this analysis extremely seriously, as damages caused by drones to defense-related facilities could seriously impede Japan’s defense,” he said, according to a transcript posted on the ministry’s website.

Navy tests surface drone that can dive for days

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

LIBREVILLE, Gabon — The U.S. Navy is testing an autonomous drone that can operate above and below the surface in a bid to help African countries battling piracy, the illicit drug trade and other illegal activities in the Gulf of Guinea.

The TRITON drone’s introduction during the Obangame Express multinational exercise is designed to determine wheth-

er it’s suitable for long-term, sustained use in the region, Rear Adm. Michael Mattis, director of Strategic Effects, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, said Tuesday.

The two-week exercise comes as the United States focuses on the partners in West Africa that it’s still legally able to work with, especially following a recent coup in Niger, where the U.S. was forced to abandon a \$110 million aerial

drone base. Russia and China have made their own inroads in the region.

The exercise, which ends May 17, includes launching and recovering the drone from the expeditionary sea base USS Hershel “Woody” Williams, and conducting vessel boarding, searches and seizures, Mattis said.

Those activities will help determine if TRITON can be used reliably in a region where it isn’t

easy for the Navy to quickly source supplies and repairs. The testing will also show whether the drone is a good fit for countries like Gabon, Ghana and Cameroon, which have smaller navies and limited resources, Mattis added.

“The idea is that we have long periods of operations, (and) that we push these vehicles to their limits of endurance and sustainability, and we understand where those things are,” he said.

Cohen brings challenge in hush money trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — He once said he would take a bullet for Donald Trump. Now Michael Cohen is prosecutors' biggest piece of legal ammunition in the former president's hush money trial.

But if Trump's fixer-turned-foe is poised to offer jurors this week an insider's view of the dealings at the heart of prosecutors' case, he is also as challenging a star witness as they come.

There is his tortured history with Trump, for whom he served as personal attorney and problem-zapper until his practices came under federal inves-

tigation. That led to felony convictions and prison for Cohen but no charges against Trump, by then in the White House.

Cohen, who is expected to take the stand Monday, can address the jury as someone who has reckoned frankly with his own misdeeds and paid for them with his liberty. But jurors will likely also learn that the now-disbarred lawyer has not only pleaded guilty to lying to Congress and a bank, but recently asserted, under oath, that he wasn't truthful even in admitting to some of those falsehoods.

And there is Cohen's new per-

sona — and podcast, books, and social media posts — as a relentless and sometimes crude Trump critic.

As Trump's trial opened, prosecutors took pains to portray Cohen as just one piece of their evidence against Trump, telling jurors that corroboration would come via other witnesses, documents and the ex-president's own recorded words. But Trump and his lawyers have assailed Cohen as an admitted liar and criminal who now makes a living off tearing down his former boss.

"What the defense is going to want the jury to focus on is the

fact that he's a liar" with a blemished past and a tetchy streak, said Richard Serafini, a Florida criminal defense lawyer and former federal and Manhattan prosecutor.

"What the prosecution is going to want to focus on is 'everything he says is corroborated — you don't have to like him,'" Serafini added. "And No. 2, this is the guy Trump chose."

In testimony, he will need to explain his prior disavowals of key aspects of the hush money arrangements and to convince jurors that this time he is telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

US debt tops \$34T, efforts to address it appear dead

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — For Mike Johnson it was effectively a Day 1 priority.

It's well past time, the newly elected House speaker said in October, to establish a bipartisan commission to tackle the federal government's growing \$34.6 trillion in debt. "The consequences if we don't act now are unbearable," he said, echoing warnings from his predecessor and other House Republicans.

More than six months later, the proposal appears all but dead, extinguished by vocal opposition from both the right and the left.

The collapse underscores an unyielding dynamic in Washington, with lawmakers in both parties loath to consider the unpopular tradeoffs that would be necessary to stem the nation's swelling tide of red ink — particularly in an election year. Facing the reality that any fiscal commission would almost certainly suggest that Americans pay more or get less from their government, lawmakers have time and again done what they do so well: punt the problem to the next Con-

gress. And they seem poised to do so again.

Many Democrats and left-leaning advocacy groups oppose the commission because they fear it would recommend cuts to Social Security benefits. Some Republicans and right-leaning groups are against it as well, fearing the panel would recommend tax increases. They've labeled the commission a "tax trap."

"I'm disappointed that we haven't got as much momentum as I thought we would," said Rep. Jodey Arrington, the Republican chairman of the House Budget Committee. "The speaker supported it, endorsed it from the outset. But I think there are some outside groups that have weighed in, that have said that this is a backdoor way to raise taxes, and it scared some of my Republican colleagues."

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., sponsor of the debt commission bill in the Senate, was even more pessimistic.

"No one seems to care," Manchin said. "It's a shame, \$34.6 trillion in debt. No one cares about it."

1st recipient of genetically modified pig kidney dies

Associated Press

BOSTON — The first recipient of a genetically modified pig kidney transplant has died nearly two months after he underwent the procedure, his family and the hospital that performed the surgery said Saturday.

Richard "Rick" Slayman had the transplant at Massachusetts General Hospital in March at the age of 62. Surgeons said they believed the pig kidney would last for at least two years.

The transplant team at Massachusetts General Hospital said in a statement it was deeply saddened by Slayman's passing and offered condolences to his family. They said they didn't have any indication he died as a result of the transplant.

The Weymouth, Mass., man was the first living person to have the procedure. Previously, pig kidneys had been temporarily transplanted into brain-dead donors. Two men received heart transplants from pigs, although both died within months.

Slayman had a kidney transplant at the hospital in 2018, but he had to go back on dialysis last

year when it showed signs of failure. When dialysis complications arose requiring frequent procedures, his doctors suggested a pig kidney transplant.

In a statement, Slayman's family thanked his doctors.

"Their enormous efforts leading the xenotransplant gave our family seven more weeks with Rick, and our memories made during that time will remain in our minds and hearts," the statement said.

They said Slayman underwent the surgery in part to provide hope for the thousands of people who need a transplant to survive.

"Rick accomplished that goal and his hope and optimism will endure forever," the statement said.

Xenotransplantation refers to healing human patients with cells, tissues or organs from animals. Such efforts long failed because the human immune system immediately destroyed foreign animal tissue. Recent attempts have involved pigs that have been modified so their organs are more humanlike.

Assault nets land for Russia near Kharkiv

Associated Press

VILCHA, Ukraine — Thousands more civilians have fled Russia's renewed ground offensive in Ukraine's northeast that has targeted towns and villages with a barrage of artillery and mortar fire, officials said Sunday.

The intense battles have forced at least one Ukrainian unit to withdraw in the Kharkiv

region, capitulating more land to Russian forces across less defended settlements in the so-called contested "gray zone" along the Russian border.

By Sunday afternoon, the town of Vovchansk, with a pre-war population of 17,000, emerged as a focal point in the battle. Volodymyr Tymoshko, the head of the Kharkiv regional police, said Russian forces were

in the outskirts of the town and approaching from three directions.

At least 4,000 civilians have fled the Kharkiv region since Friday, when Moscow's forces launched the operation, Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said on a social media. Heavy fighting raged Sunday along the northeast front line, where Russian forces attacked 27 settlements in the

past 24 hours, he said.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Saturday that Moscow's forces had captured five villages on the border of Ukraine's Kharkiv region and Russia. These areas were likely poorly fortified due to the dynamic fighting and constant heavy shelling, easing a Russian advance.

Ukraine's leadership has not confirmed Moscow's gains.

Israeli forces push into Rafah, also return to northern Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces were battling Palestinian militants across the Gaza Strip on Sunday, including in parts of the devastated north that the military said it had cleared months ago, where Hamas has exploited a security vacuum to regroup.

Israel has portrayed the southern Gaza city of Rafah as Hamas' last stronghold, saying it must invade in order to succeed in its goals of dismantling the group and returning scores of hostages. A limited operation there has expanded in recent days, forcing some 300,000 people to flee and drawing warnings from Egypt, where an official said it is putting the country's decades-old peace treaty with Israel at risk.

But the rest of the war-ravaged territory seems to provide ample opportunities for Hamas. Israel has yet to offer a detailed plan for postwar governance in Gaza, saying only that it will maintain open-ended security control over the coastal enclave, which is home to some 2.3 million Palestinians.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected postwar plans proposed by the United States for the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to govern Gaza with support from Arab and Muslim countries. Those plans depend on progress toward the creation of a Palestinian state, something to which

Netanyahu's government is deeply opposed. With the two close allies divided, Gaza has been left without a functioning government, leading to a breakdown in public order and allowing Hamas to reconstitute itself in even the hardest-hit areas.

The war began when Hamas and other militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking another 250 hostage. Israel's air, land and sea offensive has killed more than 35,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants in its figures. Israel says it has killed over 13,000 militants.

Palestinians reported Israeli bombardment overnight in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp and other areas in the northern Gaza Strip, which has suffered devastation and been largely isolated by Israeli forces for months. U.N. officials say there is a "full-blown famine" there.

The United Nations' agency for Palestinian refugees, the main provider of aid in Gaza, said 300,000 people have fled Rafah since the operation began there. Most are heading to the heavily damaged nearby city of Khan Younis or Mawasi, a crowded tent camp on the coast where some 450,000 people are already living in squalid conditions.

Report not definitive regarding Israel violating humanitarian law with US weapons in Gaza

The Washington Post

The Biden administration announced Friday that it was "reasonable to assess" that Israel violated international law using U.S. weapons in its military campaign in Gaza, but found there was insufficient information to draw a firm conclusion in any specific instances, meaning American military aid could continue to flow to the country.

The findings were contained in a convoluted 46-page unclassified report that President Joe Biden ordered this year in response to growing alarm from Democrats in Congress about Israel's conduct in the conflict. Despite clear internal concerns that U.S. weapons may have been used in war crimes, the report concluded that assurances provided by Israel that it is not violating U.S. or international law were credible, a finding at odds with assessments made by the United Nations and major international aid groups.

The report also said that Israeli "action or inaction ... contributed significantly" to the insufficient flow of food and other critical aid to Palestinian civilians. While it cited improvements in recent weeks, the assessment predated the shutdown of aid flows into southern Gaza last week as Israel began an offensive in Rafah.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., whose proposed legislation pro-

pelled Biden to order the report, accused the administration Friday of failing "to do the hard work of making an assessment and duck[ing] the ultimate questions" that it was expected to answer. Van Hollen — who said he was dismayed by the relatively small number of incidents considered in the report and who described the administration's evaluation of whether U.S. weapons have been involved in violations of international law as "woefully inadequate" — also noted the report's many contradictions.

Many Republicans dismissed the entire discussion as a distraction, though they appeared to embrace the bottom line that aid would continue to flow to Israel.

The report "serves no purpose other than to provide political cover to the president with his base," House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul, R-Texas, said in a statement. "This self-imposed reporting requirement is wholly redundant and unnecessary, and only contributes to politically-motivated anti-Israel sentiment."

The report said it was "reasonable to assess" that U.S. defense articles "have been used by Israeli security forces since October 7 in instances inconsistent" with its international humanitarian law obligations, according to an executive summary of the report.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cruise ship sails into port with dead whale on bow

NY NEW YORK — A cruise ship sailed into a New York City port with a 44-foot dead whale across its bow, marine authorities said.

The whale, identified as an endangered sei whale, was caught on the ship's bow when it arrived at the Port of Brooklyn, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration fisheries spokesperson Andrea Gomez said.

A spokesperson for the Geneva-based MSC Cruises said the whale was on the MSC Meraviglia, which docked at Brooklyn before sailing to ports in New England and Canada.

"We immediately notified the relevant authorities, who are now conducting an examination of the whale," officials with the cruise line said in a statement.

The dead whale was relocated to Sandy Hook, N.J., and towed to shore there to allow for better access to equipment and to conduct a necropsy, Gomez said.

State prohibits use of cell phones while driving

PA HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania will join the majority of states that ban motorists from handling a cell phone for almost any purpose while driving, as backers of the legislation hope to reduce distracted driving accidents and deaths after nearly two decades of pressing the measure.

Gov. Josh Shapiro's office said Thursday that the Democrat will sign the bill, 18 years after he first introduced a similar bill when he served in the

state House of Representatives. The ban will take effect a year after he signs it, which is expected in the coming days.

Under the bill, police can ticket a driver who is handling their phone for almost any reason. Drivers can still use their phone to make phone calls or for other functions, such as listening to music, if they are using it hands-free with technology such as a docking station, Bluetooth or speakers.

The ban applies to motorists sitting in traffic or stopped at a traffic light, but does not include drivers parked on the side of the road or another place where the vehicle can remain stopped safely.

New rule: Dogs entering US must be 6 months old

DC WASHINGTON — All dogs coming into the U.S. from other countries must be at least 6 months old and microchipped to help prevent the spread of rabies, according to new government rules published Wednesday.

The new rules require vaccination for dogs that have been in countries where rabies is common. The update applies to dogs brought in by breeders or rescue groups as well as pets traveling with their U.S. owners.

The new rules take effect Aug. 1 when a temporary 2021 order expires. That order suspended bringing in dogs from more than 100 countries where rabies is still a problem.

The new rules require all dogs entering the U.S. to be at least 6 months, old enough to be vaccinated if required and for the shots to take effect; have a microchip placed under their

skin with a code that can be used to verify rabies vaccination; and have completed a new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention import form.

Judge OKs discussion of critical race theory

AR LITTLE ROCK — A federal judge has ruled Arkansas cannot prevent two high school teachers from discussing critical race theory in the classroom, but he stopped short of more broadly blocking the state from enforcing its ban on "indoctrination" in public schools.

U.S. District Judge Lee Rudofsky issued a narrow preliminary injunction Tuesday evening against the ban, one of several changes adopted under an education overhaul that Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed into law last year.

His ruling prohibited the state from disciplining the teachers for teaching, mentioning or discussing critical race theory — an academic framework dating to the 1970s that centers on the idea that racism is embedded in the nation's institution.

Facility that mistreated residents nears closure

IA GLENWOOD — An Iowa facility for people with intellectual disabilities is set to permanently close after federal investigators said patients' rights were violated there.

The 28 residents at the state-run Glenwood Resource Center will be moved out by the end of June and 235 staff members

have been notified that they will be laid off, according to reporting by the Des Moines Register. The facility had 152 patients and about 650 staff members when Gov. Kim Reynolds announced in 2022 that it would close.

Scathing reports by the U.S. Department of Justice have condemned Iowa's treatment of people with intellectual and development disabilities. A report in December 2020 found that the Glenwood Resource Center likely violated the constitutional rights of residents by subjecting them to human experiments, including sexual arousal research, some of which were deemed dangerous by federal investigators.

Man paralyzed after being hit with taser sues officer

CO DENVER — A man who said he was paralyzed after being hit with a Taser while running from police in Colorado filed a federal lawsuit Thursday against one of the officers, seeking \$100 million in damages.

Lawyers for Jacob Root, who was suspected of stealing a car, allege Officer Robert Comstock fired a Taser at his back without warning that incapacitated him and prevented him from using his hands or arms to break his fall to the ground. Root fell face first and broke his neck after falling off a sidewalk and into the street in the May 16, 2022 incident, according to the suit.

Root can be heard asking officers "I can't move. Is that normal?" soon after the fall, which was recorded on police body camera footage released by Root's lawyers.

— From wire reports

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Tatum, Celtics regain control of series

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Green uniforms. Big shots. Championship-level intensity.

The Boston Celtics looked much more like themselves in Game 3.

Jayson Tatum scored 33 points, Jaylen Brown added 28 and the No. 1-seeded Celtics bounced back from a stumble at home, beating the Cleveland Cavaliers 106-93 on Saturday night to take a 2-1 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

The Celtics didn't mess around after dropping Game 2 on their home parquet floor by 24 on Thursday. They couldn't.

"We don't come to Cleveland for the weather, so let's go," said Brown, who went 13-for-17 from the field. "There's nothing complicated about it: Play defense and the rest will take care of itself. We could have done better, but we kept them under 100."

The lackluster performance — Boston was favored by double digits — in Game 2 was

reminiscent of the first round, when the Celtics lost the second game against Miami before winning three in a row to eliminate the Heat.

"Tonight was a great test, an opportunity for us to come out and respond, and play better and harder," said Tatum, who added 13 rebounds and six assists. "There was a purpose behind every play. We did a good job communicating our actions."

Tatum scored on a three-point play and the Celtics opened the second half with 14 straight points to take a 23-point lead.

That was way too much for the Cavs.

"We felt like trying to punch them in the face right away was the right option," said Jrue Holiday, who scored 15 of his 18 points in the first half. "J.B. (Brown) told us it wasn't over and we knew that. We've been up 20 in the fourth quarter here and they came back and won."

Donovan Mitchell scored 33 points for Cleveland, but the All-Star guard aggravated a left knee injury in the fourth quarter and was labored. With Boston up 13 and in control, Mitchell left the court with 1:19 left and walked directly to the locker room.

Afterward, Mitchell didn't say anything about the injury, but bemoaned Cleveland's slow start after halftime.

"It changed the game," he said. "Give them credit. They came out with a sense of urgency. It's tough to come back from that. They came out with an intention."

Cleveland got within nine three times in the fourth but the Celtics, who went just 8-for-35 on 3-pointers in Game 2, got back-to-back 3s from Payton Pritchard and Derrick White to slow the Cavs' comeback.

Game 4 is Monday in Cleveland.

"We need everybody to be on the same page and everybody

to come out with the same effort," Brown said. "The rest will take care of itself because we've got enough talent in this locker room."

Down by 23 and unable to stop Tatum, the Cavs clawed back.

They cut Boston's lead to 15 by the end of the third, and scored the first six points in the fourth, sending their towel-waving crowd at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse looking for another upset into a frenzy.

But whenever the Celtics needed a bucket, they went to either Tatum or Brown, who broke down Cleveland's defense for layups or made tough, contested jumpers.

"When they get going, that's who they are," Mitchell said. "We fought and we clawed back but that start of the third quarter, that's what did it."

Evan Mobley added 17 points and Darius Garland and Caris LeVert 15 apiece for the Cavs, who lost for the first time at home in these playoffs.

Irving, Doncic help Mavs turn back Thunder again

Associated Press

DALLAS — Luka Doncic already had a balky right knee and an achy left ankle when he fell hard on his back while battling his primary defender, Lu Dort, for a loose ball.

Not only did Doncic win the ensuing jump ball, the NBA scoring champion tracked down the loose ball that followed with his Dallas Mavericks clinging to a late lead.

"Everything," Doncic said when asked what hurt, a few minutes after walking gingerly to the locker room with Dallas having beaten Oklahoma City 105-101 on Saturday to secure a 2-1 lead in the Western Conference semifinals. "I'm just battling out there."

The same could be said for plenty of others.

Kyrie Irving scored 22 points, including a running left-hander in the lane in the final minute to help the Mavs hold on.

Doncic also had 22 points to go with 15 rebounds, and P.J. Washington Jr. scored 27,

just two shy of his playoff high from Dallas' Game 2 victory.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 31 points, 10 rebounds and four blocks, but was called for a charge with Doncic defending on a drive with 29 seconds left and the Thunder trailing by five.

Chet Holmgren, who scored 13 points, also had four blocks as Oklahoma City finished with 10. But the Thunder were out-rebounded 16-5 on the offensive glass by the scrappy Mavs, who had a 16-9 edge in second-chance points.

Top-seeded Oklahoma City has lost consecutive games after starting 5-0 in the playoffs. Game 4 is Monday night in Dallas.

"It's extremely competitive," Holmgren said. "Both teams really want it. If you take the result out of it, it's everything that you want to be going through in a basketball game."

Irving bounced back from just the third single-digit scoring game of his lengthy playoff career with 14 points in the second

half, including six consecutive Dallas points in the fourth quarter that helped the Mavs to their biggest lead of the final period at nine.

The Dallas lead was three after a missed 3-pointer from Gilgeous-Alexander when Irving drove across the lane and hit a runner for a 104-99 lead with 39 seconds to go.

The eight-time All-Star, coming off just eight shots and nine points when Dallas evened the series in Oklahoma City, was 10-for-17 from the field and had seven assists to lead the team for the second game in a row.

"One of my coaches just came up to me and said I waited too long, so obviously I've got to be better on my end," said Irving, who made all four of his fourth-quarter shots. "We're going against a young team. So we just want to continue to do the things that get us these W's, and it starts on the defensive end."

Washington had a 19-point first half for the second consecutive game, once again finishing three points shy of the combined total before the break for Irving and Doncic.

Oettinger, Stars take 2-1 series lead

Associated Press

DENVER — Tyler Seguin and Logan Stankoven scored two goals each and goaltender Jake Oettinger thwarted Colorado's high-powered offense, stanching the Avalanche's third-period comeback prowess in a 4-1 win Saturday night that gave the Dallas Stars the upper hand in their Western Conference second-round series.

"I don't think a coach has ever seen a perfect game, but I'll tell you that's as close to a perfect road game as you can play, in my mind, in this situation," Stars coach Peter DeBoer said after Dallas took a 2-1 series lead.

"We knew they going to come out guns blazing in the first period. You knew their home record. They had challenged their best players, their coach had, after the last game," DeBoer said. "So, we knew we were going to get a lot thrown at us early in that game. And our

composure throughout the night I thought was outstanding."

The Stars have yet to play from behind in this series against Colorado's high-octane offense led by Cale Makar, Valeri Nichushkin, Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen.

Dallas killed three power plays for the second straight game and Seguin scored the tie-breaking goal in the second period for a 2-1 lead that Oettinger held up — he stopped 29 of 30 shots — with a pair of empty netters in the closing minutes finally giving Dallas some breathing room.

"We knew coming into this rink, how these guys play. And we also know how we play on the road," Seguin said. "So we knew it'd be a big challenge. I think next game is going to be a bigger challenge."

Game 4 is Monday night at Ball Arena, where the Avalanche are now 33-10-1, includ-

ing 2-1 in the playoffs. The Stars were an NHL-best 26-10-5 on the road during the season and have won three of four playoff games away from home.

The Avs pulled goaltender Alexander Georgiev with just under 2 minutes remaining and Seguin scored an empty-netter with 1:37 to go and Stankoven added a second empty-netter with 28 seconds remaining.

"That was one of the best third periods we've played the whole postseason," Oettinger said. "Just being smart and not taking penalties. I don't think they had many scoring chances in the third so we learned from our mistakes in Games 1 and 2."

The Stars regained home-ice advantage in the best-of-seven series by throttling Colorado's high-powered offense that entered the night averaging five goals a game in their first seven playoff games.

Nichushkin was held scoreless for the first time in these

playoffs. He was looking to become the third player in NHL history to have an eight-game goal streak during the playoffs.

The Stars took a 2-1 lead into the third period after breaking the tie on an odd-man rush with just under five minutes left in the second. Evgenii Dadonov skated down the left side and sent a pass through the slot that Seguin redirected past Georgiev, who had 19 saves on 21 shots.

Colorado's only breakthrough came when MacKinnon stickhandled through three Stars players and lifted a backhand that Oettinger stopped. The rebound landed in the crease behind Oettinger, and Rantanen tapped it in to tie it 1-1 midway through the second.

"We did a lot of great things," MacKinnon said, "had a lot of chances, a lot of good looks, just Oettinger was great and we made a couple of big errors that cost us."

Skjei's goal helps Hurricanes stave off elimination

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes turned their last stand into a season-extending victory. Incredibly, it was the struggling power play that got them there.

Brady Skjei scored on the power play with 3:11 left to help the Hurricanes beat the New York Rangers 4-3 on Saturday night, staving off a sweep by winning Game 4 of the second-round playoff series.

Skjei's shot from the point came off a feed from Tuevo Teravainen, with the puck zipping past Igor Shesterkin to catch the upper-right corner of the goal and bang into the net. That was Carolina's first goal with the man advantage in 17 tries in the series, and it finally pushed Carolina ahead for good on a night when the Hurricanes

squandered a two-goal lead.

"I don't care," coach Rod Brind'Amour said of whether there was extra significance to getting the winner with the man advantage. "Not tonight. We've just got to get Ws at this time of year."

The Rangers get another closeout chance Monday night with the 3-1 lead when the series returns to Madison Square Garden for Game 5.

Evgeny Kuznetsov, Stefan Noesen and Sebastian Aho each scored for Carolina, while Frederik Andersen finished with 22 saves as the Hurricanes try to become the fifth team to rally from a 3-0 deficit to win a playoff series and first since 2014.

Everything started with Carolina showing plenty of jump in the first period, running out to

2-0 and 3-1 leads to build momentum.

"Obviously we played a lot of aggression," said Aho, who finished a feed from Jake Guentzel from near the slot for the 3-1 lead with 4:31 left in the first period. "We kind of did what we needed to do. That was a strong start. We want to do that again (in Game 5)."

The Hurricanes tweaked their power-play unit to put Skjei on the top group. And roughly 30 seconds after a tripping penalty by Ryan Lindgren, Skjei converted the winner to send Teravainen and Aho rushing over to hug him and have a tense home crowd roaring in gleeful relief, even if Skjei felt "definitely celebration" instead.

"I feel like going into every game, you try to feel confident

and feel you can be the guy to do it," Skjei said. "Obviously it doesn't happen every night or that often. But that's kind of our mindset going forward here, just win the day."

Will Cuyille, Barclay Goodrow and Alexis Lafreniere scored for the Rangers, while Shesterkin finished with 27 saves.

"It's tough. We dug ourselves a hole early," Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said. "I don't think it was because we weren't ready to play. ... We've got to come out a little bit sharper than that."

"We were competing, we were working, we were trying to do our job offensively. But there's some things defensively that I thought we could've been a little bit better in the first period."

Braves lose no-hitter on homer in 9th

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Atlanta's Max Fried and two relievers combined for a no-hitter through 8½ innings before New York's J.D. Martinez homered to spoil the bid as the Braves beat the Mets 4-1 on Saturday.

Fried opened with seven no-hit innings and Joe Jiménez worked around a pair of walks in the eighth before Raisel Iglesias retired the first two batters of the ninth. Martinez homered just over the wall in right field on the next pitch off Iglesias, who walked Jeff McNeil and allowed an infield single to Harrison Bader before retiring Brett Baty on a fly to center.

"Giving it up with a homer is better than an infield single," Braves catcher Travis d'Arnaud said with a grin.

The Braves have not thrown a no-hitter since Kent Mercker's gem against the Los Angeles Dodgers on April 8, 1994. The no-hitter drought is the fourth-longest in the majors.

Fried walked three in his seven innings, throwing 109 pitches, one shy of his career high.

Blue Jays 10, Twins 8: Ernie Clement broke an 8-all tie with a bases-loaded single in the seventh inning, and host Toronto overcame a six-run deficit to beat Minnesota.

Danny Jansen hit a two-run home run while Bo Bichette and Davis Schneider each hit solo homers for the Blue Jays, who came in having lost six of eight.

Vladimir Guerrero Jr. went 4-for-5 with three RBIs in his 11th multihit game of the season. The Twins had won 16 of 18.

Pirates 10, Cubs 9: Paul Skenes struck out seven in four-plus innings in his major league debut and Yasmani Grandal hit a go-ahead three-run homer as host Pittsburgh edged Chicago.

Skenes, the top overall pick in the 2023 draft, showed flashes of why he is considered perhaps the best pitching prospect in a generation. The 21-year-old — who was greeted by a standing ovation by most of the near-capacity crowd — reached 100 mph on 17 of his 84 pitches.

Phillies 8, Marlins 3: Bryson Stott hit a tiebreaking, bases-loaded triple in the sixth inning, and major league-best Philadelphia beat host Miami.

Stott finished with two hits and four RBIs. Catcher J.T. Realmuto had a run-scoring single and threw out two baserunners trying to steal for the Phillies, who have won 13 of 15 to improve to 28-12.

Orioles 5, Diamondbacks 4 (11): Jordan Westburg flicked a game-ending single inside the right field line in the 11th inning for his fourth hit of the day, and host Baltimore beat Arizona.

Gunnar Henderson tied the major league lead with his 12th homer of the season for the Orioles, and Anthony Santander went deep in the eighth to tie the game at 4-all.

Red Sox 4, Nationals 2: Ra-

fael Devers hit a tiebreaking, two-run double in the eighth inning to lift host Boston to a victory over Washington.

The Red Sox snapped a three-game losing streak with just their second victory in eight games.

Rays 7, Yankees 2: Randy Arozarena homered and drove in four runs and host Tampa Bay beat New York.

Arozarena put the Rays ahead 4-2 with a three-run homer in the third inning. The 2023 All-Star has struggled this season — he went 2-for-3 to raise his average to just .154 — but has gone deep four times in his past eight games.

Tigers 8, Astros 2: Mark Canha hit a grand slam in a seven-run second inning, Kerry Carpenter homered twice and host Detroit beat Houston.

Tarik Skubal (5-0) gave up two runs on seven hits and two walks while striking out seven over 6⅓ innings.

White Sox 3, Guardians 1: Mike Clevinger combined with three relievers on a four-hitter, and host Chicago topped Cleveland for its season-high fourth consecutive victory.

Clevinger permitted one run and four hits in 4⅓ innings in his second major league start of the season.

Brewers 5, Cardinals 3: Rhys Hoskins hit a go-ahead three-run home run in the seventh inning and host Milwaukee handed St. Louis its sev-

enth straight loss.

The NL Central-leading Brewers have eight straight wins over the Cardinals.

Rockies 8, Rangers 3: Elias Díaz had two hits, including a tiebreaking single in a six-run seventh inning, Ryan McMahon tied a career high with four hits, and host Colorado won its first series of the season with a victory over Texas.

Jacob Stallings had a two-run single and Charlie Blackmon had a two-run double in the seventh, when the Rockies scored all six runs with two outs.

Dodgers 5, Padres 0: Teoscar Hernández hit a grand slam, James Paxton tossed six scoreless innings to remain undefeated and visiting Los Angeles defeated San Diego.

Freddie Freeman hit a solo homer for the Dodgers, who have won eight of their last nine games.

Giants 5, Reds 1: Matt Chapman hit a grand slam in the first inning to lead struggling San Francisco to a victory over visiting Cincinnati.

Angels 9, Royals 3: Jo Adell hit a three-run homer and Kevin Pillar had three hits and three RBIs in host Los Angeles' victory over Kansas City.

Athletics 8, Mariners 1: Rookie starter Joey Estes struck out five in five solid innings for his first major league win after being called up earlier in the day, and visiting Oakland beat Seattle.

Palou pulls away for Indy GP win, retakes points lead

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Alex Palou's first Indianapolis Grand Prix title fueled his second IndyCar Series title run.

He's hoping another dominant victory on Indianapolis Motor Speedway's road course produces a similar result — perhaps even a more monumental win in two weeks.

The Spaniard beat his top two challengers off pit row on his final stop Saturday

and outmaneuvered three-time race winner Will Power on the race's only restart to beat Power to the yard of bricks by 6.6106 seconds.

Christian Lundgaard finished third, more than eight seconds behind Palou on the 14-turn 2.439-mile course.

"It's tough but it's one of those races that you're not really limited on the tires, so you can just go hard," he said. "I would say last year we had a lot more advantage than this

year, but I would still say the fact we can go 100%, pushing every single lap, maybe that's why we see a bigger differences."

For Palou, it was another milestone moment in his fifth IndyCar season.

The 27-year-old led a race-high 39 of 85 laps, captured his 10th career win, and his first official win this season.

The victory also put Palou atop the season standings, 12 points ahead of Power, with the season's biggest race up next.