

USS Ronald Reagan bids farewell to Japan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Nearly 400 sailors in their dress whites manned the USS Ronald Reagan's rails Thursday morning as the aircraft carrier steamed out of Tokyo Bay on its final deployment from Japan.

The ship's departure from the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet concludes nearly a decade of Navy history in the Indo-Pacific region. The Ronald Reagan is scheduled to make its final patrol before relocating to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Wash.

During its tenure at Yokosuka, the carrier took part in doz-

ens of multinational exercises, visited more than 15 foreign ports and covered more than 460,000 miles on its annual, six-month deployments, according to U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel.

"As impressive as those numbers are, they miss one critical element: the dedication of our sailors and airmen and women of this ship, the Ronald Reagan," he told reporters from the ship's flight deck ahead of its departure. "That dedication cannot be quantified, but it is measured."

The Ronald Reagan, commissioned in July 2003, carries a crew of more than 5,000 and better than 60 aircraft, accord-

ing to the Navy.

Replacing the Ronald Reagan will be the USS George Washington, which is on a deployment that includes scheduled port calls in Brazil, Chile and Peru.

It's expected to arrive later this year, but additional details have not been disclosed. A portion of the two carriers' crews will exchange places at some point, but an exact number was not immediately available, Task Force 70 spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Seth Koenig told Stars and Stripes on the pier.

The Ronald Reagan first arrived in Yokosuka in 2015, when it replaced the George Washington, which relocated to New-

port News, Va., for mid-life nuclear refueling and maintenance.

Since then, the Ronald Reagan has led Carrier Strike Group 5 as the Navy's only aircraft carrier homeported overseas.

Its presence in the region served as a "tangible sign of America's commitment to our closest allies here and throughout the region," Rear Adm. Gregory Newkirk, strike group commander, told reporters from the flight deck.

"I cannot emphasize enough how much we, and the world, benefit from the incredible strength of our U.S.-Japan alliance," he said.

Pentagon report finds sexual assaults down in military

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Thousands fewer active-duty service members experienced sexual assaults or sexual harassment last year than in 2021, according to a Pentagon report released Thursday.

Pentagon officials said they believe some 6,800 fewer active-duty service members experienced unwanted sexual contact in fiscal year 2023 than in 2021 based on confidential surveys the Defense Department sends active-duty troops every other year. The drop last year to about 29,000 sexual assaults — ranging from unwelcomed groping to rape — was statistically significant, Pentagon officials said.

It was the first recorded drop in unwanted sexual contacts in eight years.

Elizabeth Foster, the executive director of the Pentagon's Office of Force Resiliency,

which oversees sexual assault and suicide prevention efforts, said it was not possible to determine precisely what led to the drop in sexual assaults last year. She said she was "cautiously optimistic" the new report showed the Pentagon was finally on the right track in reducing sexual assault cases among troops.

"We have a lot more work to do," Foster told reporters Thursday. "We need to continue to focus on driving down these numbers. We cannot take our eye off the ball. We must continue to focus on this if this change is going to be enduring."

The Pentagon has worked for years to drive down the rates of sexual assaults and harassment within its ranks, a scourge that has long drawn the ire of Congress and, top Pentagon officials have conceded, likely had a negative im-

pact on military recruiting.

Foster said new efforts implemented in the military in recent years after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin commissioned an independent review of the Pentagon's sexual assault prevention efforts in 2021 likely contributed. The Pentagon has invested heavily in implementing dozens of findings from that commission, nearly doubling its sexual assault prevention budget to more than \$1 billion in 2023 and 2024.

The Pentagon has used that funding to stand up brand new offices to prosecute sexual assault cases outside of the traditional military chain of command and establish a professionalized prevention workforce. To date, the Defense Department has hired about 1,000 trained prevention specialists to serve at bases around the globe, Foster said. The department intends to employ

about 2,500 prevention specialists by 2028, she said.

In addition to the lower number of sexual assaults experienced by service members, a higher percentage of those assaulted reported their cases to authorities, according to the report. The military services received 7,266 sexual assault reports from active-duty troops in 2023, which represented about 25% of those who confidentially reported unwanted sexual contact. That was an improvement from a rate of about 20% of military sexual assault victims reporting their case in 2021, the last year the Pentagon gathered that data before 2023.

The report also found sexual harassment was down for male and female service members. The Pentagon determined about 24.7% of active-duty troops experienced sexual harassment in 2023, down from about 28.6% in 2021.

Lawmaker's jab doesn't halt military spouse jobs measure

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A retired Army general now serving as a House lawmaker argued Wednesday that a military spouse's struggle to have a fulfilling career is just part of the sacrifice of a family in the service and doesn't need protection.

"We cannot fashion our decisions on national security based on the individual needs of people that signed up of their own volition for a job that they wanted to pursue," Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., said during a hearing of the House Oversight Committee. "We're happy that they want to serve. We're happy that they want to sacrifice, but that's what comes with the territory. If that's not for you, we need insurance salesmen and we need people to clean pools and we need all kinds of things in America."

Perry, whose district includes the Army's Carlisle Barracks, made the comments during the committee's debate about a bill that would offer military spouses working for the federal government flexibility during military-mandated moves. He first enlisted in the Army in 1980 and retired in 2019 as a one-star general in the Pennsylvania National Guard.

Rep. Jasmine Crockett, D-Texas, a committee member who sponsored the bill alongside Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., said she ex-

pected the committee would at least agree with the idea of supporting military families.

"We need to do everything that we can for the best military that we have, and that means supporting them in whatever capacity we can, and it starts with this bill," she said.

The Resilient Employment and Authorization Determination to Increase National Employment of Serving Spouses Act, or READINESS Act, allows for spouses preparing to move with their service member to request a determination about whether their job can be completed remotely on a temporary basis, be reassigned to the new duty station or be transferred to a comparable job.

If none of these options fit, the bill allows the employee to go into nonpay status for up to six months. The spouse would retain their nonfinancial benefits while their employer would be allowed to fill the position. The measure would also apply to spouses of foreign service employees.

The bill passed through the committee Wednesday on a vote of 30-13. However, Republicans were able to add an amendment to exempt any employees working in a diversity, equity and inclusion office from receiving the benefit. Crockett called the amendment a "poison pill."

USS Truman preps for Red Sea mission

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

MIAMI — The USS Harry S. Truman will soon lead a Navy strike group into the volatile Red Sea, where U.S. sailors have fought almost daily for months to down drones and missiles launched by Houthi rebels from Yemen.

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and its 6,000-some sailors have spent recent months training in the western Atlantic Ocean for that mission — a rare, pre-planned deployment expected to take the ship into a hostile environment. In recent weeks, its sailors have been undergoing flight deck testing, its pilots knowing that later this year they will be tasked with shooting down drones and munitions launched by the Iran-backed Houthis.

"They know that they're most likely going to be entering a weapon engagement zone," said Adm. Daryl Caudle, the leader of U.S. Navy Fleet Forces Command. "I believe, personally, that puts higher stakes on why what we do [in training] is so important. ... For this group, this [deployment] is not with the mindset that they're just going to go

drill holes in the water somewhere — this is, 'We're going to be employed for combat.'"

But with combat on the minds of the Truman's sailors and preparations being made to deploy to the hostile waters of the Red Sea, the 1,000-foot-long, 104,000-ton aircraft carrier made a rare appearance in Miami to have the ship's sailors participate recently in the city's first Fleet Week.

There was some "pushback" from Navy planners, Caudle admitted. An aircraft carrier had never participated in a U.S. Fleet Week anywhere. But when Fleet Week kicked off May 5, the Truman sat stoic, anchored just a few miles off the coast of Miami Beach — its sailors gathered on the flight deck to wave emphatically at their counterparts aboard the USS Bataan, as the amphibious assault ship entered Miami's port.

The crew used the voyage from its home base in Norfolk, Va., to Miami and back — the Truman returned Friday to Norfolk — to conduct extra tactical training at sea, Caudle said. The carrier's time in Miami was largely meant to give sailors a fun port call and to interact with the local community.

Army pares down troops' online training requirements

By BRIAN ERICKSON
Stars and Stripes

The Army has eliminated hundreds of hours of online training courses that service officials say no longer serve a purpose.

Enlisted soldiers are no longer required to take Distributed Learning Courses one through six, which account for 253 hours of mouse clicks and keyboard entries.

On the officer side, the Distance Learning Prerequisite for Commanders Career Course and the Distance Learning Prerequisite for Commanding General Staff Officers Course are no more. The two courses account for a total of 93 hours.

"We are scrubbing everything we are asking our Soldiers to study, because there is only so much time during the day to do

your job," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer said Wednesday in an Army statement.

The Army originally developed the DLC courses in 2010 to improve decision making, communication and leadership skills.

In October of last year, the Army chief of staff directed the Training and Doctrine Command to pare down online training requirements.

After careful consideration, the Army determined that there would be little to no negative impact to the cuts it made, Bill Oglethorpe, director of training and education at the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence, said Wednesday in a statement.

Weimer said the Army has to do some subtraction to make sure "what we are teaching in all those areas is quality, not quantity."

Cohen pressed on crimes, lies in Trump's trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — With prosecutors' hush money case against Donald Trump barreling toward its end, defense lawyers pressed former attorney Michael Cohen on his criminal history and past lies Thursday as they worked to convince jurors not to believe the star witness' pivotal testimony.

Cohen was back in the hot seat for a third day of testimony as defense lawyers painted Trump's fixer-turned-foe as a spurned former employee who will say whatever it takes to put the presumptive Republican presidential nominee behind bars.

Cohen is prosecutors' final witness — at least for now — as they try to prove Trump schemed to suppress a damaging story he feared would torpedo his 2016 presidential campaign and then falsified business records to cov-

er it up. Cohen's cross-examination is a crucial moment for Trump's team to try to chip away at Cohen's credibility, which could determine the former president's fate in the case.

Under questioning from defense attorney Todd Blanche, Cohen admitted to lying under oath when he pleaded guilty to federal charges, including tax fraud, in 2018 as well as lying to Congress about work he did on a Trump real estate deal in Russia.

"It was a lie? Correct?" Blanche asked Cohen about whether he lied to the late U.S. District Judge William H. Pauley III at a court hearing about not being pressured into pleading guilty.

"Correct," Cohen said.

Over several days on the witness stand, Cohen placed Trump directly at the center of the alleged scheme to stifle negative

stories to fend off damage to his White House bid. Cohen told jurors that Trump promised to reimburse him for the money he fronted and was constantly updated about efforts to silence women who alleged sexual encounters with him. Trump has denied the women's claims.

Trump, who has insisted the prosecution is an effort to damage his campaign to reclaim the White House, has said the payments to Cohen were properly categorized as legal expenses because Cohen was a lawyer. The defense has suggested he was trying to protect his family, not his campaign, by squelching what he has said were false, scurrilous claims.

While questioning Cohen, defense lawyers have not focused on the hush money scheme or the criminal charges at issue. Instead, they have peppered him

with questions about his own misdeeds and his new persona as fierce Trump critic to attack Cohen's credibility and motivations.

Blanche confronted Cohen with profane social media posts, a podcast and books he wrote about the former president, getting Cohen to acknowledge that he has made millions of dollars off slamming Trump. In one clip played in court Thursday, Cohen could be heard using an expletive and saying he truly hopes "that this man ends up in prison."

Defense lawyers were expected to question Cohen through the end of Thursday. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office has said it will rest its case once he's done on the stand, though it could have an opportunity to call rebuttal witnesses if Trump's lawyers put on witnesses of their own.

Pro-Palestine encampment dismantled at DePaul University

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Police began dismantling a pro-Palestinian encampment early Thursday at DePaul University in Chicago, hours after the school's president told students to leave the area or face arrest.

Officers and workers in yellow vests cleared out tents and camping equipment at the student encampment, leaving behind yellow squares of dead or dying grass where the tents had stood. Front-loaders were being used to remove the camping equipment.

Just across the street from where the encampment was spread across a grassy ex-

ppanse of DePaul's campus known as "The Quad," a few dozen protesters stood along a sidewalk in front of a service station, clapping their hands in unison as an apparent protest leader paced back and forth before them, speaking into a bullhorn.

All of the protesters at the encampment "voluntarily left" the area when police arrived early Thursday, said Jon Hein, chief of patrol for the Chicago Police Department.

"There were no confrontations and there was no resistance," he said at a news briefing. "As we approached, all the subjects voluntarily left the area."

Hein said, however, that two people, a male and female in their 20s, were arrested outside the encampment "for obstruction of traffic."

The student-led DePaul Divestment Coalition, who are calling on the university to divest from Israel, set up the encampment April 30. The group alleged university officials walked away from talks and tried to force students into signing an agreement, according to a student statement late Saturday.

"I don't want my tuition money to be invested in my family's suffering," Henna Ayesh, a Palestinian student at DePaul and Coalition member, said in the statement.

Jobless benefit applications down following last week's high

Associated Press

Fewer Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week as layoffs remain at historically low levels even as other signs that the labor market is cooling have surfaced.

Jobless claims for the week ending May 11 fell by 10,000 to 222,000, down from 232,000 the week before, the Labor Department reported Thursday. Last week's applications were the

most since the final week of August 2023, though it's still a relatively low number of layoffs.

The four-week average of claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week fluctuations, rose by 2,500 to 217,750.

Weekly unemployment claims are considered a proxy for the number of U.S. layoffs in a given week and a sign of where the job market is headed. They have remained at historically low levels

since millions of jobs were lost when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in the spring of 2020.

In April, U.S. employers added just 175,000 jobs, the fewest in six months and a sign that the labor market may be finally cooling off. The unemployment rate inched back up to 3.9% from 3.8% and has now remained below 4% for 27 straight months, the longest such streak since the 1960s.

The government also recently reported 8.5 million job openings in March, the lowest number of vacancies in three years.

Though layoffs remain at low levels, companies have been announcing more job cuts recently, mostly across technology and media. In total, 1.79 million Americans were collecting jobless benefits during the week that ended May 4. That's up 13,000 from the previous week.

China, Russia reaffirm ties at summit

Associated Press

BEIJING — Russian President Vladimir Putin thanked Chinese leader Xi Jinping for his effort to resolve the Ukraine conflict at a Beijing summit Thursday, where the two leaders reaffirmed a “no-limits” partnership that has grown deeper as both countries face deepening tensions with the West.

Putin’s two-day state visit to one of his strongest allies comes as his country’s forces are pressing an offensive in northeastern Ukraine’s Kharkiv region in the most significant border incursion since the full-scale invasion began.

The largely symbolic visit stressed partnership between two countries that both face challenges in their relationship with the United States and Europe.

“Both sides want to show that despite what is happening globally, despite the pressure that

both sides are facing from the U.S., both sides are not about to turn their backs on each other anytime soon,” said Hoo Tiang Boon, a professor who studies Chinese foreign policy at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University.

While both leaders said they were seeking an end to the war in Ukraine, they offered no new specifics in their public remarks Thursday afternoon. China has significant influence as a key supporter of Russia in its invasion.

The country has claimed to take a neutral position in the conflict, but it has backed Moscow’s contentions that Russia was provoked into attacking Ukraine by the West, and continues to supply Russia with key components that Moscow needs for its production of weapons.

China proposed a broadly worded peace plan in 2023, but it was rejected by both Ukraine

and the West for failing to call for Russia to leave occupied parts of Ukraine.

“China hopes for the early return of Europe to peace and stability and will continue to play a constructive role toward this,” Xi said, speaking alongside Putin.

His words were an echo of what China said last year when it first offered a broad plan for peace outlining general principles for ending the war in Ukraine.

Putin said he will inform the Chinese leader in detail about “the situation in Ukraine,” and said “we appreciate the initiative of our Chinese colleagues and friends to regulate the situation.” He added that the two planned to engage in further foreign policy discussions at an informal meeting later Thursday.

After Russia’s newest offensive in Ukraine last week, the 2-year-old war has entered a criti-

cal stage, as Ukraine’s depleted military waits for new supplies of anti-aircraft missiles and artillery shells from the U.S. after months of delay.

Before their remarks, the two leaders signed a joint statement on deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership between their two nations on their 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties, after their initial meeting. Xi said China and Russia will continue to uphold a position of non-alliance and non-confrontation.

Thursday’s meeting was yet another affirmation of the friendly “no limits” relationship they signed in 2022, just before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Since then, Russia has become increasingly economically dependent on China as Western sanctions cut its access to much of the international trading system.

‘Lone wolf’ is charged in shooting of Slovakia’s PM

Associated Press

BANSKA BYSTRICA, Slovakia — The Slovak interior minister said Thursday that a “lone wolf” has been charged in the shooting that seriously wounded Prime Minister Robert Fico and prompted soul-searching among leaders in the deeply divided society.

Fico, 59, was in serious but stable condition Thursday, a hospital official said, after the populist leader was hit multiple

times in an attempt on his life that shook the small country and reverberated across the Continent weeks before European elections.

The attempted assassination has shocked the small central European nation, with many blaming the attack in part on extreme political polarization that has divided the country.

Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok said Wednesday that an initial investigation found “a

clear political motivation” behind the attack on Fico while he was attending a government meeting in a former coal mining town. However, he said Thursday that the suspect charged was a lone wolf who “did not belong to any political groups.”

The minister did not specify what the motivation was. Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond, and his return to power last year on a pro-Russian, anti-American

message led to even greater worries among fellow European Union members that he would abandon his country’s pro-Western course.

The attempt on Fico’s life came at a time of high division in Slovakia, as thousands of demonstrators have repeatedly rallied in the capital, Bratislava, and around the country to protest his policies. It also comes just ahead of June elections for the European Parliament.

France imposes emergency in New Caledonia amid unrest

Associated Press

PARIS — France imposed an emergency Wednesday in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia for at least 12 days, boosting security forces’ powers to quell deadly unrest in the

archipelago where indigenous people have long sought independence.

Armed clashes and other violence that erupted Monday following protests over voting reforms have left four people

dead, including a gendarme, and injured more than 300, French authorities said.

French military forces were being deployed to protect ports and airports, to free up police and security forces battling

looting, arson and other violence, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced as the emergency measures kicked in at 8 p.m. Paris time, which was 5 a.m. Thursday in New Caledonia.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

3 charged in Bulger's killing have plea deals

DC WASHINGTON — Three men charged in the 2018 prison killing of notorious Boston gangster James “Whitey” Bulger have reached plea deals with prosecutors, according to court papers filed Monday.

The plea deals for Fotios “Fred” Geas, Paul J. DeCologero and Sean McKinnon were disclosed nearly six years after the 89-year-old gangster was beaten to death in his cell at a troubled West Virginia prison.

Geas, a onetime Mafia hitman, and DeCologero, a Massachusetts gangster, were accused of repeatedly hitting Bulger in the head while McKinnon served as a lookout.

Bulger, who ran the largely Irish mob in Boston in the 1970s and ’80s, served as an FBI informant who ratted on the main rival to his gang. He became one of the nation’s most-wanted fugitives after fleeing Boston in 1994 thanks to a tip from his FBI handler that he was about to be indicted. He was captured after more than 16 years on the run.

In 2013, he was convicted in a string of 11 killings and dozens of other gangland crimes.

Man gets 3 years for post of school shooting threat

NH CONCORD — A man who posted a Snapchat video last year threatening to shoot up a New Hampshire high school was sentenced to a little over three years in prison on Tuesday.

Kyle Hendrickson, 26, had pleaded guilty to charges of interstate threatening communications and possessing a firearm in a

school zone.

In a video posted in April 2023, Hendrickson was in a vehicle with a gun outside of Portsmouth High School, saying, “Imma gonna shoot up the school.” The incident, police said, was caught by Snapchat, which relayed it to the FBI who then contacted local police. The school district was closed for the day as a precaution.

In a statement before he was sentenced in federal court in Concord, Hendrickson offered his “deepest apologies” to the school district, students and parents.

“It was never my intention to hurt anyone,” he said.

Sheriff faces questions over series filmed at jail

AR LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas lawmakers on Tuesday raised questions about a sheriff’s decision to allow a Netflix documentary series to be filmed at the county jail, with one critic saying the move exploited inmates.

Pulaski County Sheriff Eric Higgins defended the decision to allow the series, “Unlocked: A Jail Experiment” to be filmed at the county jail. The eight-episode series, which premiered last month, highlights a program giving some inmates more freedom at the Little Rock facility.

The decision has prompted scrutiny from local and state officials, who said they weren’t aware of the series until shortly before its premiere. The series focuses on a six-week experiment that gave inmates in one cellblock more freedom by unlocking their cell doors.

Republican Sen. Jonathan Dismang said he doesn’t have a problem with the sheriff’s reentry program or trying something new to

address recidivism. But he questioned how it could be considered an experiment if it was being filmed.

Ex-official gets probation in COVID payment probe

WV CHARLESTON — A former West Virginia state health official was sentenced Monday to one year of probation for lying about whether or not he verified vendor invoices from a company claiming to have conducted COVID-19 tests for the state.

Timothy Priddy, of Buffalo, W.Va., was sentenced in federal court for his guilty plea to making a false statement to investigators. An indictment filed in October charged Priddy, 49, with lying to federal agents in August 2022 when he said he verified a vendor’s invoices for performing COVID-19 tests as part of a back-to-school program before approving them.

Priddy, who held various managerial positions with the state Bureau for Public Health’s Center for Threat Preparedness, left his job the day the indictment was announced.

Woman pleads guilty in plot to attack power grid

MD BALTIMORE — A Maryland woman pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiring with a neo-Nazi leader from Florida to plan an attack on the power grid in the Baltimore area.

Sarah Beth Clendaniel, 36, of Catonsville, and her alleged co-conspirator, Brandon Russell, believed that sniper attacks on five electrical substations in greater Baltimore “would serve to break

down society,” according to a court filing accompanying her guilty plea.

Clendaniel was charged last year with Russell, an Orlando, Fla., resident who co-founded a neo-Nazi group called Atomwaffen Division. Russell, formerly a Florida National Guard member, served five years in prison after pleading guilty to explosives charges that stemmed from a deadly shooting.

Clendaniel and Russell began exchanging letters around 2018 while they were serving prison sentences. They developed a romantic relationship, the court filing says. Clendaniel pleaded guilty to two counts: conspiracy to damage electrical facilities and being a felon in possession of a firearm.

State closer to requiring gas stove pollutant labels

CA SACRAMENTO — California could require all new gas stoves sold in the state to carry a label warning users about pollutants they can release that have been linked to respiratory illnesses.

The state Assembly approved a proposal Monday that would require the label on gas stoves or ranges made or sold online after 2024, or sold in a store after 2025. The bill now heads to the state Senate.

In 2019, Berkeley, Calif., became the first city in the United States to adopt a ban on natural gas in new homes and buildings, but courts blocked that law upon a challenge from the California Restaurant Association. The city halted enforcement of its policy after a federal court refused to hear an appeal.

— From wire reports

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Celtics reach third straight East finals

Associated Press

BOSTON — Al Horford wanted to savor the moment.

With play stopped and the Celtics' victory no longer in doubt, Horford turned in the direction of the sideline, walked a few paces, stopped and extended his hands overhead, bringing an already raucous TD Garden crowd to its feet in applause.

The task was done.

Jayson Tatum had 25 points and 10 rebounds, and Boston beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 113-98 on Wednesday night to advance to the Eastern Conference finals for the third straight season.

Horford added 22 points, 15 rebounds, five assists and six of Boston's 19 3-pointers to help the Celtics post their third consecutive win and wrap up the series in five games.

"We had a great opportunity at home to handle this, and I knew it was going to take a lot more than handling it normally," said Hor-

ford, who joined LeBron James and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the only players 37 years or older to record a 20-point, 15-rebound, five-assist playoff game in NBA history. "It's special. It's something that's hard to do. ... This is another positive step of where we want to get to."

The Celtics will now await the winner of the matchup between the New York Knicks and Indiana Pacers. New York leads that series 3-2.

This will be Jaylen Brown's sixth conference finals appearance and the fifth for Tatum. Tatum said it's proof that the team culture is strong.

"It just shows the character of the team, the organization. People might think it's a given we're supposed to be here," Tatum said. "We're all in this together. ... We're doing something right."

The Cavaliers played extremely short-handed without All-Star Donovan Mitchell, center Jarrett Allen and key reserve

Caris LeVert.

Cleveland stayed close through the first three quarters and pulled within 88-85 early in the fourth. Boston then went on a 13-2 run to take a 101-87 lead with 6:44 to play.

Evan Mobley scored a playoff career-high 33 points and had seven rebounds. Marcus Morris Sr. had five 3-pointers and finished with 25 points.

"I was proud of their effort," Cavaliers coach J.B. Bickerstaff said. "This has been a difficult year for us, for a bunch of different reasons. They never found the time to fold on each other. All they did was find ways to compete."

Cleveland now enters a summer of uncertainty with the futures of Mitchell and Bickerstaff squarely in the spotlight.

Mitchell did everything for the Cavs in his second postseason for Cleveland. He averaged 29.6 points but didn't play in either of the final two games.

Mitchell is eligible to sign a contract extension but has not given any indication he's eager to stay or leave Cleveland.

Much like they did in Game 4 without Mitchell, the Cavs used the 3-point line to keep pace with the Celtics, making eight of 19 in the opening 24 minutes.

Cleveland nudged ahead 46-40 in the second quarter, but Boston rallied and closed with an 18-6 run to take a 58-52 lead into halftime.

"It made us answer the bell," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "Guard your yard. The guys did it. It's a credit to them."

Horford said he's most proud of how Tatum and Brown have grown following last season's conference finals loss to Miami.

"I'm very proud of our guys continue to put work in. JT, JB, how they've continued to get better," Horford said. "Our guys continue to work and they continue to think what's best for our group."

Doncic's triple-double helps Mavs take 3-2 series lead

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Luka Doncic stopped worrying about calls and just played.

It worked. He scored 31 points in a triple-double, and the Dallas Mavericks beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 104-92 on Wednesday night to take a 3-2 lead in the Western Conference semifinal series.

Doncic didn't voice his displeasure with the officials nearly as much as usual, though he had words with fans a few times.

"I'm just trying to play basketball, just focus on basketball," he said. "Sometimes I forget this is the thing I love, the thing I do. My mental focus was just go out there and play basketball with a smile on my face and just go."

Doncic, the league's leading scorer in the regular season, had struggled some in the series against Oklahoma City. Playing through a sprained right knee and a sore left ankle, he had averaged just 22 points on 39% shooting through the first four games. He made 12 of 22 field goals in Game 5 and had

11 assists and 10 rebounds for his sixth career playoff triple-double.

"He was aggressive," Mavericks coach Jason Kidd said. "He was making shots, taking shots. The deep 3, being able to get to the basket, playmaking for his bigs and also for the wings."

Dallas regained the lead in the series after blowing a 14-point advantage and losing 100-96 at home in Game 4.

"We know the last game we played against them at home, we let it go," Doncic said. "It was our mistakes and they hit shots."

Derrick Jones Jr. scored a playoff career-high 19 points and P.J. Washington Jr. added 10 points and 10 rebounds for Dallas, which shot 52.6% from the floor. The No. 5-seeded Mavericks can advance to the Western Conference finals with a win Saturday at home.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 30 points for the top-seeded Thunder, but no other Oklahoma City player scored more than 13.

The Mavericks won Game 5 on the road, just like they did in the first round against the Los Angeles Clippers. Dallas held Oklahoma City to 42.5% shooting.

Coach Mark Daigneault said the Thunder simply didn't shoot well, but they found some cracks in Dallas' defense late in the game.

"I thought we were kind of there tonight and maybe missed a couple plays," Daigneault said.

Oklahoma City tried to jump-start its struggling offense by replacing Josh Giddey with Isaiah Joe in the starting lineup.

Dallas led by 15 in the second quarter and took a 54-44 edge into halftime. Jones scored 15 points before the break.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 14 points in the third quarter, but Dallas still led 79-67.

Dallas pushed its lead out to 18 early in the fourth quarter before the Thunder surged. A 3-pointer by Gilgeous-Alexander cut the deficit to 89-79 with just under seven minutes remaining, but the Thunder never got closer than seven points.

Makar's 2 goals help Avs down Stars

Associated Press

DALLAS — Colorado finally got to play with the lead against the Dallas Stars, though the Avalanche are still behind in the series.

Avalanche defenseman Cale Makar scored two goals, the second after Casey Mittelstadt's go-ahead tally in the third period, and they beat top-seeded Dallas 5-3 in Game 5 on Wednesday night. The Avs snapped their three-game losing streak and extended the second-round Western Conference series.

"Obviously a do-or-die game from here on out in the series," Makar said. "Each of us, we feed off each other. ... And I felt like we were back to kind of like forcing their hand tonight."

When Mittelstadt scored just 1:12 into the third period to make it 3-2, it was the first time Colorado had led in the series except for when Miles Wood scored 11 minutes into overtime to win the series opener.

"It was great," league MVP finalist Nathan MacKinnon said about playing with a lead. "They didn't do that much, but anytime we can get a lead it's important so we're not chasing all series."

Makar made it 4-2 with an unassisted goal just over three minutes later. His shot from the middle of the right circle went through the legs of goalie Jake Oettinger and proved to be the deciding goal, and MacKinnon scored on a lone assist from Artturi Lehkonen with 3:10 left.

MacKinnon also had the only assist on Lehkonen's power-play goal in the very last second of the first period.

"We knew we were going to get their best game in the series, and they did," Stars coach Pete DeBoer said. "Their big guys all are on the scoresheet tonight, which we've probably anticipated would happen."

Avalanche goalie Alexandar Georgiev had 23 saves. Oettinger stopped 22 shots.

Joe Pavelski had his first goal of these playoffs for the Stars, and his second assist this postseason. Miro Heiskanen and rookie Logan Stankoven also scored for Dallas, and Jason Robertson had two assists.

Game 6 is Friday night in Colorado, where the Stars outscored the Avs 9-2 while winning Games 3 and 4. Dallas is 4-1 on the road this postseason — and 3-4 at home.

This was the sixth time in franchise history that the Avs won Game 5 after falling behind 3-1 in a best-of-seven series. They have never come back to win the series.

After going 0-for-8 on power plays while losing the previous three games, Colorado scored tying goals on both of its opportunities with a man advantage in the first two periods.

"I felt like once we were getting pucks, it was right on and off the stick, and trying to avoid a little bit of the pressure," Makar said, when asked what changed in Game 5. "Having that different mentality, an attack mentality, and not trying to back down or trying to look for the perfect play."

Makar got his power-play goal on a 50-foot wrister through a bunch of traffic in front of the net with 3½ minutes left in the second period to tie the game at 2-2.

"Tough-go for a handful of games ... it's a huge response after goal one, after goal two," Colorado coach Jared Bednar said.

Mittelstadt's go-ahead goal came after Zach Parise hit the puck across the crease and Mittelstadt knocked it in, a ricochet off the right post that hit the back of Oettinger's leg and went in.

Debate lingers over restoring prestige of Preakness

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — D. Wayne Lukas sat in his corner of the stakes barn at Pimlico Race Course earlier this week and pointed several stalls down.

"Thank God the Derby horse came," Lukas said, referring to Kentucky Derby winner Mystik Dan running in the Preakness. "It isn't always a cinch."

It used to be automatic, something that until recent years made the Preakness a must-see event with a Triple Crown chance nearly always on the line. That was not the case from 2019-22 for various reasons, and the mere possibility of Mystik Dan skipping the Preakness has led to debate over whether the race should be moved back a week or more and what can be done to restore the prestige it has had for the better part of 150 years.

Lukas, the 88-year-old Hall of Fame trainer whose next two Preakness runners will be his record-extending 47th and 48th over more than four decades coming to Baltimore, said the thought of it becoming the "stepchild" of the Triple Crown doesn't sit well with horsemen who love showing up.

But he does worry about younger colleagues being reluctant to send their top 3-year-olds back from the Derby on the first Saturday in May to the Preakness on the third Saturday in May, comparing the loss of big-name horses to having an NFL game without Patrick Mahomes.

"With the mindset of the younger trainers, that the two weeks, I don't know where they got that, but a lot of the younger trainers don't want to come back in two weeks," Lukas said.

"If they extend that, I've been preaching this for 25 years though, you would get a bigger field. Most of the Derby horses would come."

Three Derby horses are set to take part in the Preakness on Saturday, up from one last year, two in 2022 and one in 2019. Except for 2020, when the Triple Crown was run out of order because of the pandemic, the traditional spacing has been two weeks between the Kentucky Derby and Preakness and then another three to the Belmont since 1969.

Top thoroughbreds nowadays rarely run every 14 days or so, a development two-time Triple Crown-winning trainer Bob Baffert compared to pitch counts in baseball and analytics alterations in other sports.

Last summer, 1/ST Racing, which operates the Preakness,

floated the concept of moving it back — possibly as far as four weeks after the Derby. The New York Racing Association said at the time it had no plans to change the date of the Belmont from its spot in early June, with the idea of it pushing back to potentially conflict with Fourth of July celebrations a nonstarter.

Trainers often name the Belmont as a target destination for horses who run in but don't win the Derby. The third jewel of the Triple Crown also has no concerns about prestige each of the next two years because of the novelty of the Belmont being run at historic Saratoga Race Course, already a sellout and a festivity many in the industry and area have been salivating over since reconstruction plans for the track on Long Island first emerged.

Playoff rematches throughout NFL season

Associated Press

Even though the Super Bowl rematch between the Kansas City Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers will not occur until almost the midpoint of the season, NFL fans will be treated to a pair of playoff rematches on the opening weekend.

Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs begin their quest for an unprecedented third straight Super Bowl title when they host the Baltimore Ravens on Sept. 5 in the Kickoff Game while the Los Angeles Rams are at the Detroit Lions in the Sunday night game on Sept. 8.

The two playoff rematches on Week 1 are among nine on this year's regular schedule, which was released by the league Wednesday night.

The Ravens-Chiefs matchup is a rematch of last season's AFC championship game, won by Kansas City 17-10. Kansas City heads to San Francisco on Oct. 20, after it defeated the 49ers 25-22 in the second overtime game in Super Bowl history. It also marks the second straight season the Chiefs will

have a Super Bowl rematch after they lost to the Philadelphia Eagles in a Monday night game last season.

Kansas City will then travel to Buffalo on Nov. 17 in what is becoming a yearly matchup. This will be the fifth straight year the two teams have faced off in the regular season. The Bills have won three straight in the regular season but the Chiefs have won all three in the playoffs.

The Rams' Matthew Stafford and Detroit's Jared Goff will face their former teams for the third time, including the playoffs. The Lions won their first playoff game in 32 years when they defeated the Rams 24-23 in an NFC wild-card round game.

Goff recently signed a four-year, \$212 million extension.

The rematch of the NFC championship game between the 49ers and Lions won't happen until Dec. 30 in San Francisco, which is the last Monday night game of the season.

After the Rams game, the Lions host Tampa Bay on Sept. 15 in a rematch of a divisional

round game won by Detroit.

The other playoff rematches are Baltimore at Houston on Christmas Day, Philadelphia at Tampa Bay on Sept. 29 and San Francisco at Green Bay on Nov. 24.

The schedule has been released the past couple of years on the second Thursday in May, but was delayed this year.

Even though a memo was sent to teams late last week saying the schedule would be released Wednesday night, it wasn't until Monday morning that it was finalized.

Hans Schroeder, the executive vice president of NFL Media, said there were meetings over the weekend to tweak things.

Five quarterbacks going in the first round of the draft impacted some of the final decisions.

Notable debuts

Kirk Cousins' first game with the Atlanta Falcons will be at home on Sept. 8 when they host Russell Wilson and the Pitts-

burgh Steelers. Cousins signed a four-year, \$180 million deal with the Falcons during the off-season.

Wilson is making his Steelers' debut after being released by Denver. It will also mark the return of Arthur Smith, who is the Steelers offensive coordinator after being fired as Falcons coach.

Caleb Williams, the top overall pick by Chicago in last month's draft, will make his Bears debut against Tennessee. Chicago then goes to Houston for a Sunday night game on Sept. 15 against the Texans and reigning AP Offensive Rookie of the Year C.J. Stroud.

"That's the beauty of where this league is right now. Here they are. That's the way this league turns quickly if you get the right pieces in place," NBC's Mike Tirico said on the NFL Network schedule release show about Houston.

The top two picks in the draft could meet on Oct. 27 in Washington when the Bears face the Commanders and Jayden Daniels.

Sooners chase 4th straight NCAA softball championship

Associated Press

Oklahoma begins its quest for an unprecedented fourth consecutive national softball title on Friday.

Coach Patty Gasso's Sooners appear to have a shot. They have claimed the No. 2 overall seed and beat No. 1 seed Texas for the Big 12 Tournament title. The Sooners (49-6) open regional play Friday night against Cleveland State at Love's Field in Norman, Okla. All regionals are double elimination.

Last season, the Sooners became the first team since UCLA from 1988 to 1990 to win three straight national championships. Shortly after winning their most recent championship, ace pitcher Jordy Bahl

transferred back home to Nebraska. Bahl was Most Outstanding Player of last year's World Series after not allowing a run.

Oklahoma picked up Oklahoma State's Kelly Maxwell, and she has come through. The All-Big 12 selection has an 18-2 record with a 1.96 earned run average.

She has plenty of support. Tiare Jennings, a Top 10 finalist for USA Softball Collegiate Player of the Year, leads the Sooners with 19 home runs, 57 RBIs and 13 doubles. Jayda Coleman, Alyssa Brito and Kinzie Hansen are All-Big 12 picks. Hansen, a catcher, is the conference's Defensive Player of the Year.

The regional winners advance to the best-of-three Super Regionals. Those winners advance to the Women's College World Series, which starts May 30 in Oklahoma City.

Here are a few things to know heading into regional play:

Hook 'em?

Texas (47-7) won the Big 12 regular-season title and claimed the No. 1 seed for the first time.

Reese Atwood was Big 12 Player of the Year after racking up a nation's best 83 RBIs. The Top 10 player of the year finalist headlines a Texas squad that leads the nation with a .379 batting average.

Other Texas players on the All-Big 12 first team are pitchers Citlaly Gutierrez and Teagan Kavan, outfielder

Ashton Maloney and utility player Mia Scott.

The Longhorns open regional play Friday at home against Siena.

Kilfoyl shines

Once Maxwell left for Oklahoma, Lexi Kilfoyl became Oklahoma State's undisputed ace, and she delivered. She was named Big 12 Pitcher of the Year and is a Top 10 player of the year finalist. She led the Big 12 in ERA (1.13), wins (21) and shutouts (six). She has two complete-game shutouts against Texas.

Kilfoyl showed she was capable last season. She threw a three-hitter in an elimination game against Utah at last year's World Series.

The fifth-seeded Cowgirls open at home Friday against Northern Colorado.