

## General testifies he warned of Afghanistan exit dangers

*The Washington Post*

The top U.S. general in Afghanistan during the American military's 2021 withdrawal repeatedly warned Washington that security would get "very bad, very fast" after troops departed, but the Biden administration still failed to grasp the danger in keeping its embassy open with only nominal protection, he told lawmakers investigating the war's deadly endgame.

Retired Gen. Austin Scott Miller said in closed-door testimony last month before the Republican-led House Foreign Affairs Committee that, as his tour was nearing its end in July 2021, he was so troubled by the administration's "lack of understanding of the risk" that he privately warned a Marine Corps commander charged with planning for a possible evacuation to prepare for "really adverse conditions."

"I did not foresee a good future for Afghanistan as I was departing," the general said in his testimony, later adding that he wishes he had done more to ensure his perspective from Kabul was consistently represented as plans took shape in Washington.

The transcript of Miller's interview, obtained by The Washington Post, provides Biden's critics fresh political ammunition ahead of the November election as they seek to discredit his foreign policy with the scenes of chaos and despair in Kabul when the Taliban stormed back to power.

Miller, who has shunned the spotlight in Washington since relinquishing command in Afghanistan in July 2021, is among about 20 witnesses to meet with the

committee to date. Its chairman, Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, is expected to issue a report this summer detailing the investigation's findings.

Reached by phone, Miller said he had nothing to add to his testimony.

One person familiar with his thinking said that the general met with the committee voluntarily believing he would be subpoenaed if he declined, and that he wanted lawmakers to understand the advice he provided and the challenges he faced as he carried out orders to wind down the nation's longest war. This person, like some others contacted for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a subject that remains highly sensitive.

Another person said the general was "not enthusiastic" about testifying because he doesn't want to be used to wage political attacks on any administration.

McCaul said in a statement that Miller's testimony reveals how the Biden administration's "hasty Go-to-Zero order" expedited Afghanistan's fall and the violent tragedy that marred the Pentagon's race to evacuate as many people as possible.

The administration and its allies on Capitol Hill have criticized McCaul's investigation, alleging it has glossed over pivotal decisions made by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, including a deal with the Taliban that set a May 2021 deadline for the full military withdrawal but imposed few conditions and left Biden boxed in with no plan to conduct it.

An official with the White House National Security Council defended Biden's decision-mak-

ing, saying that ending the war was "the right thing to do" and allowed the United States to focus on other challenges, such as the war in Ukraine that erupted six months later. Biden, the NSC official said, "refused to send another generation of Americans to fight a war that should have ended long ago."

A U.S. official, addressing Miller's criticisms, said that as security deteriorated in Kabul, the State Department "pivoted and worked shoulder to shoulder with our military and other government colleagues to conduct the largest airlift in history."

But while the United States extracted nearly 124,000 people from a single airfield in the Afghan capital, the success of that mission came at enormous cost.

Biden declared an evacuation Aug. 14, one day before the Afghan government collapsed and its leaders fled the country. The panic drove massive crowds to Kabul's airport, which was overrun by people desperate to escape the incoming authoritarian regime. Crucially, the Afghan security forces trained, supported and financed by the United States over 20 years wilted and dissolved.

A U.S.-led crisis-response force was flown in to restore order, but two weeks of misery followed. A suicide bombing killed 13 American troops and an estimated 170 Afghans. Days later, a botched U.S. drone strike claimed 10 members of an Afghan family, including seven children.

Tens of thousands of Afghans who had worked for the U.S. and Afghan governments were left behind.

## Biden touts 1M PACT Act claims for veterans

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden, intent on selling his legislative accomplishments this election year, traveled to New Hampshire on Tuesday to detail the impact of a law that helps veterans get key benefits as a result of burn pit or other toxic exposure during their service.

In raw numbers, more than 1 million claims have been granted to veterans since Biden signed the so-called PACT Act into law in August 2022, the administration said Tuesday.

That amounts to about 888,000 veterans and survivors in all 50 states who have been able to receive disability benefits under the law.

That totals about \$5.7 billion in benefits given to veterans and their survivors, according to the administration.

The PACT Act is relatively lower profile compared to the president's other legislative accomplishments — such as a bipartisan infrastructure law and a sweeping tax, climate and health care package — but it is one that is deeply personal for Biden.

He has blamed burn pits for the brain cancer that killed his son Beau, who served in Iraq, and vowed repeatedly that he would get the PACT Act into law.

Burn pits are where chemicals, tires, plastics, medical equipment and human waste were disposed of on military bases and were used in Iraq and Afghanistan.

# Houthis say they downed another US drone

Associated Press

CAIRO — The Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed on Tuesday they shot down an American drone over the country on the Arabian Peninsula. The U.S. military acknowledged reports but didn't comment.

If confirmed, this would be the second MQ-9 Reaper drone downed by the Houthis over the past week as they press their campaign over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

Last Friday, the Houthis

claimed downing an American drone over the province of Marib, hours after footage circulated online of what appeared to be the wreckage of an MQ-9 Reaper. And early Saturday, a vessel also came under attack in the Red Sea.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree said Tuesday the drone was shot down with a locally made surface-to-air missile. He did not say when it took place but alleged the drone "was carrying out hostile missions" over Ye-

men's southern province of Bayda.

Responding to an Associated Press inquiry, U.S. Central Command acknowledged reports about the downing but declined to comment.

Since Yemen's civil war started in 2014, when the Houthis seized most of the country's north and its capital of Sanaa, the U.S. military has lost at least five drones to the rebels.

Reapers, which cost around \$30 million apiece, can fly at altitudes up to 50,000 feet and

have an endurance of up to 24 hours before needing to land.

The Houthis have also stepped up attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, demanding Israel ends the war in Gaza.

The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sunk another since November, according to the U.S. Maritime Administration.

Shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat.

## Carney crew kept 'battle mindset' during Red Sea mission

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

The USS Carney guided-missile destroyer had just transited the Suez Canal from the Mediterranean Sea into the Red Sea when Houthi militants in Yemen launched a surprise attack Oct. 19, sending missiles and drones flying toward Israel.

The sudden barrage was launched in the wake of Israel's war on Hamas in Palestinian-controlled Gaza in retaliation for the group's Oct. 7 terrorist attack on Israeli civilians. The Carney, sailing alone in the northern Red Sea, sprang to action, shooting down at least four cruise missiles and more than a dozen drones in an engagement that foreshadowed the remainder of the destroyer's deployment. The ship would spend months countering drone and missile attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by the Iran-backed Houthis.

"None of us could have prepared for this. None of us could have known what was going to happen," Cmdr. Jeremy Robertson, the Carney's commanding officer, said Monday, one day after the ship's return to its homeport at Naval Station Mayport near Jacksonville, Fla. "We never

had anyone who shied away from the moment. ... They were just in the moment, and it was amazing to see how quickly they transition into a battle mindset."

Carney deployed from Mayport on Sept. 27, joining the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group in the Eastern Mediterranean briefly before it moved into the Red Sea on Oct. 18. After the Houthis launched the attack on Israel one day later, the Carney would spend the rest of its seven-month deployment on a war footing, constantly prepared to shoot down enemy munitions.

Robertson said there was "no typical day" for the ship's 350-some crew members once they entered the Red Sea. On most ship deployments, he said, crews tend to establish normal rhythms as they go about operating the ship, training and carrying out their duties. But the Houthis kept the Carney's crew on its toes, he said.

"Every day was completely different from one another," the commander said. "Some days you got no activity, some days you had activity where there would be a [Houthi] launch and nothing would actually make it into the Red Sea. And then some days there [was a lot of] of activity —

like Oct. 19, when we had 19 threats."

By the end of the Carney's deployment, the ship had conducted some 51 engagements against Houthi weapons, shooting down land-attack cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles and drones, according to the Navy. It also conducted two defensive strikes that destroyed 20 Houthi targets in Yemen. The service said Carney was also involved in shooting down Iranian ballistic missiles fired at Israel on April 13, when Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel in retaliation for an attack that killed senior commanders of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The ship on Sunday was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation — the service's second-highest unit award — for distinguishing "itself by outstanding heroism in action against enemy forces," the Navy said.

Robertson said he was routinely awed by his sailors' work aboard the destroyer in an operating environment that has been described by several top Navy officials as the most volatile for Navy ships since World War II.

After the initial Houthi attack, Robertson said he could sense

some "nervousness and anxiety" aboard the ship. But with every engagement with Houthi rebels, his sailors became more confident in their abilities and the capabilities of their weapons.

"We were doing everything we could to make sure that we didn't make a mistake," Robertson said of the first few engagements. "But they were very excited to be doing their job, and it was really fun to watch the team do their jobs. I was very proud of them, and I could not have asked for a better response, could not have asked for a better situation for them to prove to themselves that they could handle this and rise to the occasion."

At times, the Carney's crew had only seconds to respond to a Houthi attack. Anti-ship ballistic missiles, he said, must be shot down within nine to 20 seconds of their launch, proving "very challenging."

"It's very dynamic, and it's very fast," Robertson said. "I have to have 100% confidence in my [tactical action officers], and all of the watch teams, and all of the systems that we have that are designed to detect" anti-ship ballistic missiles.

Those systems and sailors performed as they should, he said.

# Ship focuses on diplomatic mission in Africa

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

**ABOARD THE USS HER-SHEL “WOODY” WILLIAMS** — Shortly after docking in the west African country of Gabon earlier this month, sailors aboard this ship learned that no one would be allowed to disembark.

It would be the next day before the necessary Gabonese approvals would allow shore leave, including to attend the opening ceremony of the 13th iteration of the U.S.-led Obangame Express exercise hosted this year by Gabon.

It didn’t get easier for the ship in the days ahead.

The crew’s experiences during a recent exercise underscored the challenges the Woody Williams faces as one of the few U.S. military vessels to almost continually transit African waters, as part of collective U.S. government efforts to build and sustain partnerships in a region America considers vital to its national security interests.

International terrorism, drug smuggling, Chinese interest in building an Atlantic naval port and a growing Russian military presence all come into play in this region.

The sailors aboard the only Navy ship assigned to the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility know that their role is unlike many others in the service.

“We’re pretty much a floating embassy,” said Petty Officer 3rd Class Gabriel Gajda, a yeoman assigned to the ship. “We go to countries almost no one goes to.”

The countries that most Navy ships regularly visit are well-practiced at hosting them. It’s a different story in Africa.

The ports don’t have much capacity to handle a vessel like Woody Williams, which is a little smaller than an aircraft carrier. And the immature supply chain needed to restock and maintain the ship often requires

MacGyver-like ingenuity and problem-solving, officials say.

For example, an Expeditionary Resuscitative Surgical System team is aboard to offer life-saving care if needed to U.S. forces operating in the region. The team also demonstrates the ship’s capabilities to African countries.

But there isn’t a way to sterilize the surgical equipment the team uses while at sea. Officials are considering alternatives, such as purchasing a sterilizer for the ship and training sailors in its use.

The team also is working out the process of getting blood and other medical supplies regularly replenished.

“Our biggest hurdle is logistics in nature,” said Cmdr. Ben Coyle, gold crew executive officer of Woody Williams.

He noted that the lack of ports able to accommodate the ship limits engagement opportunities with government and military officials as well as citizens.

“Our greatest successes are in presence and interactions,” Coyle said.

To sustain its presence, the ship is manned by two separate crews, dubbed blue and gold, which rotate five-month deployments.

The crews also must negotiate the dynamics of instability and military coups, such as that of Gabon in August 2023, which can hamstring diplomatic efforts and limit training opportunities with African navies.

Last year, conflict and government upheaval in Africa, particularly within the Gulf of Guinea region, kept Woody Williams sidelined for part of its deployment, said Capt. Lenard Mitchell, gold crew commanding officer of Woody Williams.

“We were not able to engage with local countries as much as we planned to and then we ended up being pulled for additional tasking later in the deployment,” he said.

Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to gain influence in Africa through military relationships also are being tested by China’s attempts to wield soft power, such as financing a fishing harbor in Accra, Ghana, set to open in August.

And Russia’s work to create instability in countries, such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, played parts in coups and opportunities for their forces, including the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, to fill the void, U.S. officials said.

Those challenges don’t deter Woody Williams’ leadership or its crew.

The ship can embark U.S. helicopter crews or Marine Corps units, or participate in a variety of military operations. But Woody Williams’ primary mission isn’t warfare, Coyle said.

“The focus is on building relationships, with the desire to increase stability and create opportunities in a largely overlooked, underserved (area of responsibility),” Coyle said.

As one sailor said: “We are in it for the long game, not the short wins.”

The Navy is seeing success in that regard with Gulf of Guinea countries, said Rear Adm. Michael Mattis, director of strategic effects for U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa.

“Our challenge is to meet our partners where they are at and not push our own agenda on them,” Mattis said. “This isn’t about the (U.S.) military doing something. This is about our partners, and building capacity with them and building trust with them, because without trust no capacity is possible.”

That effort has included building operations centers, coastal radar systems and other infrastructure, and donating retired vessels and equipment to help African navies grow.

The service also leads and participates in exercises, such as Obangame Express, often

used to help train African forces in the fight against illegal fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking, piracy and other illicit activities.

Those and other efforts appear to be gaining ground, although U.S. presence and influence in west Africa is being challenged.

Earlier this month, 1,000 U.S. troops were ordered to leave Niger and abandon a \$110 million drone base opened just five years ago. That breakdown in relations followed a military coup in the central African country in July 2023.

Last month, the U.S. temporarily pulled most of its roughly 100 special operations troops out of Chad in advance of a presidential election there, following three years of military rule. Junta leader Mahamat Deby Itno subsequently was declared winner of the May 6 election.

“We’ll come back for discussions within a month to see what ways and what they need to be able to build further in their security construct and also against terrorism, especially in the Lake Chad region,” Gen. Michael Langley, commander of AFRICOM, told reporters in Accra on May 1.

There are bright spots, however.

African countries accounted for about 75% of 15,550 logins in March this year into a Navy-introduced software program that, among other capabilities, allows tracking of vessels at sea and unclassified communications between nations.

West African countries accounted for 53% of that number, according to Navy data. The worldwide system also is used by the U.S. and some European and Black Sea countries.

During Obangame, the Navy introduced new technology: a drone with surface and underwater capabilities that was eagerly anticipated by Gabon and other countries.



# Trump team rests in hush money trial

Reuters

NEW YORK — Donald Trump's defense team rested its case in the criminal hush money trial on Tuesday without calling the former president to testify.

Trump's lawyers called two witnesses in his defense. Judge Juan M. Merchan said jurors would return next Tuesday to hear closing arguments, with deliberations likely beginning the following day.

Trump's lawyers had asked Merchan to dismiss the case before it reaches the jury, arguing that it rests on the testimony of a witness, the estranged former Trump fixer Michael Cohen, who has a well-documented history of lying.

Such dismissal motions are rarely successful, and Merchan

indicated on Monday that he was inclined to let jurors assess Cohen's credibility for themselves. Prosecutors have said his testimony is buttressed by other evidence.

Cohen, the prosecution's final witness, wrapped up his testimony Monday, clearing the way for Trump's lawyers to present witnesses and their own evidence.

Lawyer Robert Costello, the second witness called by Trump's defense, testified Monday that Cohen told him he did not have any incriminating information on Trump.

Costello's demeanor on the witness stand apparently angered Merchan on Monday, who cleared the courtroom to tell him, "Don't roll your eyes." Costello resumed testifying on Tues-

day before the defense rested its case.

Trump is accused of covering up a \$130,000 payment that bought the silence of porn star Stormy Daniels, who in the final weeks of the 2016 presidential election was peddling her story of a sexual encounter with Trump.

Though the hush-money payment itself is not illegal, Trump faces 34 counts of falsifying business records to hide his reimbursement to Cohen, who initially paid for the transaction.

Trump, 77, has pleaded not guilty and has denied wrongdoing. He says he never had sex with Daniels and has cast the trial as a politically motivated attempt to hurt his effort to win back the White House as a Repu-

blican from Democratic President Joe Biden in the Nov. 5 election.

Cohen testified that he spoke repeatedly with Trump about the payment to Daniels in the final stretch of the 2016 presidential campaign when Trump was facing multiple accusations of sexual misconduct.

Cohen said Trump worried that Daniels would hurt his appeal to women voters if she went public with her story. Trump's legal team has said he made the payment to protect his family from embarrassment.

Cohen admitted on the witness stand Monday that he had stolen money from Trump's business, saying he was angry his bonus was cut after he handled the Daniels payment.

## Top general: No plans for US trainers in Ukraine

Reuters

WASHINGTON — The United States is not planning to send military trainers into Ukraine and would likely do so only when the war there with Russia is over, the top U.S. general said Monday, after France opened the door to sending troops to train Kyiv's forces.

More than two years into the war, Russian are slowly advancing in eastern Ukraine, exploiting Ukrainian shortages of manpower and months of delays in arms supplies from the West.

That has raised questions about what more the U.S. and its allies can do, beyond funneling billions of dollars in weaponry and providing intelligence and training to Ukrainian military forces from outside of the country.

"Right now, there are no plans to bring U.S. trainers into Ukraine," Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

"Once this conflict is over and we're in a better place, then I would suspect we would be able to bring trainers back in," Brown added.

The U.S. had about 150 military trainers inside Ukraine until Russia invaded the country in February 2022.

French President Emmanuel Macron in February opened the door to European nations sending troops to Ukraine.

Since then, other European leaders have publicly opposed the idea and Macron's foreign minister sought to clarify the comments, saying that Paris could send troops to Ukraine for specific needs, but not to fight.

French diplomats said Macron's idea was to stoke debate on the issue, but there were no concrete plans in that direction.

Brown spoke alongside U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin after a meeting of Ukraine's military backers.

Both he and Austin stressed the need to support Kyiv.

## Police break up Michigan university encampment

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Police broke up a pro-Palestinian encampment Tuesday at the University of Michigan, less than a week after demonstrators showed up at the home of a school official and placed fake body bags on her lawn.

Officers wearing helmets with face shields moved in before sunrise to clear the Diag, known for decades as a site for campus protests. Video posted online showed police at times using what appeared to be an irritant to spray people, who were forced to retreat.

The encampment had been set up in late April near the end of the school year and as families arrived for spring commencement. Posters taunting President Santa Ono and other officials were also displayed.

After the camp was cleared, nearby buildings, including the undergraduate and graduate libraries, were closed.

Ono said in a statement that

the encampment had become a threat to safety, with overloaded power sources and open flames. Organizers, he added, had refused to comply with requests to make changes following an inspection by a fire marshal.

"The disregard for safety directives was only the latest in a series of troubling events centered on an encampment that has always violated the rules that govern the Diag — especially the rules that ensure the space is available to everyone," Ono said.

Protesters have demanded that the school's endowment stop investing in companies with ties to Israel. But the university has insisted it has no direct investments and less than \$15 million placed with funds that might include companies in Israel. That's less than 0.1% of the total endowment.

"There's nothing to talk about. That issue is settled," Sarah Hubbard, chair of the Board of Regents, said last week.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Police officer ejected from stolen patrol vehicle**

**CA** LOS ANGELES — A Los Angeles police officer was injured early Sunday when she was ejected from her patrol vehicle after it was stolen by a man who then crashed it, officials said.

The officer had been working a security detail near downtown around 3:30 a.m. when a man approached her SUV and managed to get inside, according to the police department.

The man drove several blocks before crashing, police said.

The suspect was caught as he tried to run away from the scene. The officer was hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries and listed in stable condition.

**Tax credit sought for new hydrogen fuels plant**

**PA** HARRISBURG — Natural gas producer CNX Resources said it plans to build a \$1.5 billion facility at Pittsburgh's airport to make hydrogen-based fuels, but only if President Joe Biden's administration allows coal mine methane to qualify for tax credits that are central to the Democrat's plan to fight climate change.

The proposed facility has the backing of Pittsburgh-area labor unions, which hope to fill thousands of construction jobs, and top Pennsylvania officials, including U.S. Sen. Bob Casey. But it is likely to face scrutiny from clean energy and climate change activists.

The announcement comes as Biden's administration decides how to tailor billions of dollars in tax credits in a massive effort

to build out a hydrogen industry to be a cleaner alternative to fossil fueled energy and slash planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

CNX said the facility would remove a potent greenhouse gas from the atmosphere — methane vented from coal mines — and blend it with natural gas to produce enough hydrogen-based airline fuel to supplant almost all of the jet fuel consumption at Pittsburgh International Airport.

**GOP governor running for reelection to 5th term**

**VT** MONTPELIER — Republican Gov. Phil Scott is running for reelection to a fifth two-year term in the largely blue state of Vermont.

Scott announced his reelection bid on Saturday, saying there's more work to do.

"During my four terms as Governor, my team and I have worked to grow the economy, make Vermont more affordable, and protect the most vulnerable," he said in a statement.

While progress has been made, he said he cannot step away when the Democrat-controlled Legislature is "so far out of balance."

Scott and the legislature have clashed over spending and taxes and he's vetoed a number of its bills in recent years and is expected to veto more. The Legislature has pushed back and overturned some of the vetoes.

**Publisher to step down after 4 decades in charge**

**WA** SEATTLE — Seattle Times publisher and CEO Frank Blethen has announced he will step down at the end of next year after four dec-

ades leading the newspaper his family has owned since 1896.

Blethen, 79, confirmed his plans in a recent Seattle Times interview. He said he expects to retain his position as board chair of The Seattle Times Co.

Blethen led The Times as it won nine Pulitzer Prizes, including one awarded in 2020 for the paper's coverage of mistakes by Boeing leading to two 737 MAX crashes. He has also seen it through difficult lows, including the Great Recession, an industrywide contraction and a seven-week strike by Seattle Times workers that began in 2000.

**Man sentenced to prison for firebombing clinic**

**CA** SANTA ANA — A 21-year-old Florida man was sentenced Monday to three and a half years in prison for firebombing a Southern California Planned Parenthood clinic in 2022, federal prosecutors said.

Xavier Batten pleaded guilty in January to one felony count of possessing an unregistered destructive device and one misdemeanor count of intentionally damaging a reproductive health services facility.

U.S. District Judge Cormac J. Carney also sentenced Batten, of Brooksville, Fla., to three years of probation and ordered him to pay \$1,000 in restitution, the U.S. Attorney's Office said in a statement.

**Park-like space opens to honor shooting victims**

**NY** BUFFALO — The city of Buffalo marked the second anniversary of a racist mass shooting that killed 10 Black people with the

dedication of a memorial space honoring the victims.

Anchoring the space outside the Tops supermarket targeted in the attack is a sculpture titled "Unity," which features purple metal pillars representing each person killed. Three gold pillars represent those who were wounded.

The sculpture by Buffalo artist Valeria Cray and her son, Hiram Cray, is part of the newly constructed 5/14 Tops Honor Space, a small park-like area with benches, pillars and gardens.

**Work on power line crossing in refuge begins**

**WI** MADISON — Utility companies have started construction on a contentious power line crossing in a Mississippi River wildlife refuge.

ITC Midwest and Dairyland Power Cooperative are looking to string the final mile of the Cardinal-Hickory Creek transmission line across the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge near Cassville, Wis. When finished, the 102-mile line will link Iowa's Dubuque County and Wisconsin's Dane County.

A coalition of conservation groups sued in March to block the refuge crossing and won a preliminary injunction from U.S. District Judge William Conley. The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the injunction on May 7, however, clearing the way for construction to begin. The utilities said in a joint statement that preliminary construction work began Monday with tower footings slated to be poured next week.

— From wire reports

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# Celtics-Pacers promises plenty of points

Associated Press

BOSTON — So much about the journey the Boston Celtics and Indiana Pacers have taken to the Eastern Conference finals has been about what — or specifically who — they haven't had to face to get to here.

Top-seeded Boston mostly coasted to a 4-1 first-round series win over a Miami Heat team that played without Jimmy Butler, the player who'd tormented and broken the heart of the Celtics in Game 7 of last season's conference finals. They then posted another 4-1 series victory in the second round over an injury-ravaged Cleveland Cavaliers team that didn't have All-Star Donovan Mitchell for the final two games.

The route for sixth-seeded Indiana has also had some notable hurdles removed.

The Pacers needed six games to earn a first-round win over a Milwaukee team missing Giannis Antetokounmpo. They then outlasted a New York Knicks

team that was leading the series 3-2 before tripping over a rash of injuries that included star Jalen Brunson breaking his hand in the Pacers' lopsided Game 7 victory.

But neither Boston nor Indiana is focused on the narratives surrounding the paths they took to get to this point. They're here. And beginning with Game 1 on Tuesday night in Boston, it's now NBA Finals or bust for both.

For the Celtics, that means blocking out reminders of the championship expectations that have hovered over them throughout the season.

"You just got to focus on what matters most," Celtics forward Jaylen Brown said. "That's your team. That's each possession in front of you. That's whatever your job is. ... Just be able to focus the mind on what matters because it's easy to get distracted or eluded from what the overall goal and what the target is when you start to entertain kind of everything that's going

around you."

Indiana guard Tyrese Haliburton said the expectations they've had internally were always high.

"We had preseason camp in Nashville — just players, no coaches. That's what we communicated from the jump. That we expected to be here. This ain't a surprise to us," he said. "It's not a fluke. We expect this from our group. Once we added (Pascal Siakam) we knew we could really take off."

## Offensive showdown

The Pacers reached their first conference finals since 2014 with an offense that has continued to put up historic numbers by pushing the pace.

Indiana topped the NBA with 123.3 points per game during the regular season, the sixth-highest average in league history. That was on top of it scoring 140 points a record 11 times.

The Pacers' regular-season offensive rating of 120.5 was sec-

ond only to the Celtics (122.5). That flipped during the playoffs, with Indiana's ranking improving to No. 1 at 121.7, followed by Boston at 118.9.

Haliburton and Siakam drove the Pacers' attack against the Knicks. Haliburton averaged 21.3 points, shot 53.8% from the field and 43.9% from 3 in the series. Siakam averaged 20 points, was 52.8% from the field and 40% from 3. It made them the first duo to average 20-plus points, shoot above 50% from the field and above 40% from the 3-point line in a conference finals.

While Celtics All-Star Jayson Tatum has shown bouts of inconsistency this postseason, he's still averaging 24.3 points and 10.4 rebounds. He's also getting plenty of support from fellow All-Star Brown (23.1 points, 6.9 rebounds per game) and Derrick White, who's seen both his scoring (18.2 points) and 3-point percentage (43.5%) jump this postseason.

# NASCAR driver Stenhouse could face suspension

Associated Press

NORTH WILKESBORO, N.C. — Ricky Stenhouse Jr. threw a right hook at Kyle Busch, and suddenly, an otherwise boring All-Star Race at North Wilkesboro Speedway had NASCAR fans buzzing heading into next weekend's marquee Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte.

Busch had wrecked Stenhouse on the second lap of the \$1 million race Sunday night in a move that looked like retaliation for how Stenhouse had raced him earlier. Stenhouse drove his damaged Chevrolet to Busch's pit stall and parked it, and with no way to get out of the track while the race was going on, stewed in street clothes for hours until Busch arrived at his hauler.

That's when Stenhouse, after a brief conversation, threw a right hook at the driver of the No. 8 Chevrolet, setting off a brief melee that involved members of each driver's crew — and Stenhouse's father. The brawl was eventually broken up, but not before more words were exchanged from both sides and Stenhouse vowed, "I'm going to

wreck you at Charlotte."

"Bring it," Busch replied. "I suck as bad as you," implying that both drivers are not having great seasons.

The antics could result in a suspension for Stenhouse, the 2023 Daytona 500 champion, other crew members and possibly his father. Busch also could face a penalty if NASCAR determines that he deliberately caused the wreck.

Stenhouse's fury was evident the moment he parked in Busch's pit stall, then climbed the pit stand ladder and had words with members of his crew. As Stenhouse climbed down and walked away, his car had to be towed from pit road.

"I parked it there because I figured Kyle would do something similar," Stenhouse said.

Later, during an interview with Fox Sports, Stenhouse indicated he would confront Busch after the race.

And then he did.

Stenhouse, dressed in yellow shorts and a gray T-shirt, waited for Busch in the infield

and confronted him face-to-face before unleashing a punch. Security jumped in and pulled Stenhouse away, falling backward over a tire, while Busch likewise wound up on the ground. Stenhouse's father, Ricky Sr., got into the fracas and appeared to take at least one of Busch's punches.

Stenhouse could be heard yelling "Dad!" numerous times, but he couldn't get to his father.

"First lap of the race, we don't even have water temp in the car yet and we're wrecking each other," Busch said. "I am tired of getting run over by everybody. But that's what everybody does: everybody runs over everybody to pass everybody."

Stenhouse clapped back at Busch: "Go back and watch the replay. I didn't touch you. Not once."

Stenhouse took another shot at Busch after the fight, saying he had bad-mouthed him ever since Stenhouse once wrecked him at Daytona, and then went on to say that Busch is just frustrated because "he doesn't run as well as he used to."



# Oilers win Game 7 to reach West finals

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — The Edmonton Oilers are showing they have more scoring options than just Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had a goal and an assist as Edmonton scored three times in the second period and held on to beat the Vancouver Canucks 3-2 in Game 7 on Monday night to advance to the Western Conference finals.

Zach Hyman and Cody Ceci also scored, and Evan Bouchard had two assists for the Oilers. Stuart Skinner finished with 15 saves.

“It takes every single guy in here,” Nugent-Hopkins said. “Definitely proud to get the job done with this group.”

Draisaitl leads the playoffs with 24 points, McDavid has 21 and Bouchard leads all defensemen with 20 points. The Canucks held McDavid off the scoresheet for the third time in seven games, and limited Draisaitl to just one assist.

Edmonton, back in the conference finals for the second time in three years, will next face Dallas with Game 1 of that series on Thursday night.

Conor Garland and Filip Hronek scored in the third period for Vancouver, and Arturs Silovs had 26 saves.

After learning leading goal-scorer Brock Boeser was sidelined due to a reported blood-clotting issue, the Canucks were forced to juggle their forward lines on Monday. Sam Lafferty and Ilya Mikheyev drew in for Game 7 after a two-game absence, while Vasily Podkolzin was scratched.

Coaching in his first Stanley Cup playoffs, the Oilers’ Kris Knoblauch singled out Nugent-Hopkins and the bottom six forwards for successfully killing off a four-minute penalty called on Ryan McLeod late in the first period.

“We played, I thought, really well,” Knoblauch said of his team’s first-period effort, when Edmonton outshot Vancouver 13-2. “That could be a turning point in the game, but our penalty kill, like it has been for almost all the playoffs, has been really solid.”

Silovs was the story of the first period, stopping all 13 shots he faced.

Ceci opened the scoring on his team’s first shot of the second period, with a slap shot

from the right point that beat Silovs high to the glove side at 1:16. The Oilers then went on their first power play, and Hyman scored his playoff-leading 11th goal by tipping Bouchard’s point shot to Silovs’ stick side at 5:20.

Nugent-Hopkins extended the lead to 3-0 with a sharp-angle shot with 4:38 left. It was Edmonton’s first power-play goal in three games.

The Canucks looked hard-pressed to create any dangerous scoring chances for the first 52 minutes, before an unassisted slot shot by Garland with 8:23 left in the third gave life to the team and its fans. Hronek got Vancouver to within one with 4:36 left to play, and the Canucks kept the pressure dialed up until the final buzzer.

“For the most part, I thought we played really well,” said Draisaitl, who famously declared 2023-24 to be a ‘Cup or Bust’ season after the Oilers were eliminated from the second round of the 2023 playoffs. “Would we like to keep it a little less stressful? Yes, probably.”

Vancouver was 0-for-3 on the power play, while Edmonton was 1-for-2. The Oilers went 20-for-23 overall on the penalty kill

in the series.

After giving up one goal on 15 shots in his return to the net for Edmonton’s Game 6 win, Skinner faced just 17 shots in Game 7, and only five in the third period.

But that didn’t make it an easy night.

“They were able to make plays, but just weren’t able to get shots on net,” Skinner said. “I was working really hard, believe it or not. But I just didn’t get a ton of shots, which is a credit to the guys in front.”

The Oilers improved to 8-4 all time in Game 7s, while the Canucks fell to 6-7.

The Canucks were making their first playoff appearance in front of fans since 2015. Despite losing Vezina Trophy nominee Thatcher Demko to injury after the first game of the first round, the Canucks advanced for the first time since the 2020 playoff bubble.

After the game, Canucks coach Rick Tocchet emphasized the strides that his group has taken since he stepped behind the bench in January 2023.

“They put respect back to that jersey and into this city,” he said. “Fans have got something to be proud of.”

# Nadal practices at Roland Garros to assess fitness

Associated Press

PARIS — Rafael Nadal returned to Roland Garros on Monday to practice and try to figure out whether to compete at the French Open, a tournament he has won a record 14 times.

The 37-year-old Spaniard showed up late in the afternoon with his coach, Carlos Moya, and a couple of sparring partners at Court Philippe Chatrier, which was open to the public.

About 6,000 fans were there at the French Open’s main stadium, cheering loudly as Nadal stepped onto the court. After the

practice, which lasted about an hour and a half, Nadal signed several autographs before disappearing through a doorway and into a tunnel that leads toward the locker rooms.

The training session gave Nadal a chance to reacquaint himself with the red clay at Roland Garros — he hasn’t played a match there in two years — and test his fitness.

The tournament begins Sunday and it remains uncertain if Nadal will enter.

He is still regaining his match readiness after missing nearly all of 2023 with a hip injury that

needed surgery, and much of this season because of problems with a hip muscle and an abdominal muscle.

His recent loss in his second match at the Italian Open — 6-1, 6-3 against Hubert Hurkacz — left Nadal unsure about whether he would consider himself ready for the French Open.

“Let’s see what’s going on, how I feel myself mentally tomorrow, after tomorrow, and in one week,” Nadal said in Rome. “If I feel ready, I (am) going to try to be there and fight for the things that I have been fighting (for for) the last 15 years, (even)

if now (that) seems impossible.”

As of Monday, Nadal still had not announced whether he would play in Paris. This is expected to be his final season on tour — and so this would be his final appearance at a tournament he has won more times than any other tennis player has won any Grand Slam title.

He won the French Open in 2022 for his 22nd major championship overall, which ranks second among men to Novak Djokovic’s 24.

Nadal missed the French Open last year because of the hip injury.

# Bichette's 4 hits lead Blue Jays to win

Associated Press

TORONTO — Bo Bichette had three doubles among his four hits, José Berríos pitched six solid innings to snap a four-start winless streak, and the Toronto Blue Jays won consecutive games for the first time in more than three weeks by beating the struggling Chicago White Sox 9-3 on Monday.

Daulton Varsho and Danny Jansen each hit a two-run home run and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. reached base three times and drove in a run as Toronto won back-to-back games for the first time since home wins over the Dodgers and Royals on April 28 and 29.

"We're going out there and we're fighting and competing every day, trying to win," Jansen said. "I like the way we've been playing."

The Blue Jays have won eight straight over the White Sox, a streak that dates back to 2022.

Bichette began the day in an 0-for-12 slump but broke out in style. He doubled and scored in the second inning, singled in the third, drove in Guerrero with a double in the sixth, then added another double in the seventh.

Berríos (5-3) allowed three runs and eight hits to win for the first time since a road victory over San Diego on April 20. He struck out six and walked two.

"He's always a tough task and no different today," White Sox manager Pedro Grifol said.

Varsho gave the Blue Jays a 2-1 lead with a two-out homer off White Sox right-hander Erick Fedde in the second, his team-leading eighth.

"Getting the lead right back is big, especially when you've got José on the mound," Blue Jays manager John Schneider said.

**Padres 6-0, Braves 5-3:** Chris Sale allowed only five hits in seven innings to continue his strong run as host Atlanta snapped its season-worst, four-game losing streak by splitting a doubleheader with San Diego.

The Padres won the first three games of the series. In the first game Monday, Manny Machado's two-run double in the eighth gave San Diego the lead and the Padres rallied from a five-run deficit to win.

In the nightcap, Sale (7-1) recorded nine strikeouts without a walk while winning his sixth straight start. He has allowed no runs in three consecutive starts, a streak covering 20 innings. He has 28 strikeouts and one walk in the dominant stretch.

Raisel Iglesias pitched a perfect ninth for his 11th save.

**Guardians 3, Mets 1:** Ben Lively had another solid start, David Fry drove in two early runs and host Cleveland won its fourth straight over New York to ruin Francisco Lindor's homecoming.

Lindor, who spent six seasons with Cleveland, went 0-for-4 in his first game at Progressive Field since being traded to New York in 2021.

Lively (3-2) allowed just one run and six hits in 5½ innings before four relievers closed out the win without allowing a hit.

**Red Sox 5, Rays 0:** Rafael Devers set a team record by homering in his sixth consecutive game, Tanner Houck allowed two hits in seven innings and visiting Boston beat Tampa Bay.

Devers had shared the Boston mark of a five-game streak with six others, including Hall of Famers Ted Williams and Jimmie Foxx.

Houck (4-5) allowed a third-inning single to Yandy Díaz and an infield hit to Josh Lowe in the seventh. He struck out five and was charged with one walk — which occurred when Devers was ruled to have violated defensive shift rules for an automatic ball on Jonathan Aranda's groundout in the second on a 3-2 pitch.

**Mariners 5, Yankees 4:** Ty France hit a go-ahead RBI single in visiting Seattle's four-run ninth inning against reliever

Clay Holmes, and the Mariners rallied to beat New York.

Seattle ended the Yankees' seven-game winning streak with the big inning against Holmes (1-1), who blew his second save in 15 chances.

Luke Raley, who had two of Seattle's three hits off starter Marcus Stroman, hit an infield single to Gleyber Torres, and Julio Rodriguez scored on the second baseman's error. Mitch Haniger followed with an RBI single and Dominic Canzone lifted a tying sacrifice fly. France followed by grounding a 2-0 sinker to right field for a 5-4 lead.

**Royals 8, Tigers 3:** Michael Massey and Salvador Perez homered as host Kansas City beat Detroit for its fourth straight win.

Massey opened the scoring in the second inning with a leadoff homer, the first long ball given up this season by Tigers starter Reese Olson in 48½ innings.

Perez led off the sixth with his ninth homer as the Royals greeted reliever Joey Wentz with five consecutive hits. Seven straight batters reached safely while Kansas City built an 8-1 lead.

**Cardinals 6, Orioles 3:** Michael Siani hit his first career home run and drove in four runs, and host St. Louis beat Baltimore.

Siani's three-run homer into the right field bullpen capped a four-run fourth inning that gave the Cardinals a 5-0 lead. It was the first homer in 91 career plate appearances for Siani, who spent parts of the 2022 and 2023 seasons with the Cincinnati Reds before being selected off waivers by the Cardinals last September.

Sonny Gray gave up three runs, just one earned, in 5½ innings as the Cardinals won for the sixth time in their last eight games. Gray (6-2) allowed three hits, walked two and struck out six.

**Dodgers 6, Diamondbacks 4:**

Freddie Freeman's grand slam keyed a six-run third inning, Yoshinobu Yamamoto had a strong start and host Los Angeles extended its winning streak to four with a victory over Arizona.

Freeman's blast off Slade Cecconi (1-4) was part of an onslaught where the first six Dodgers got aboard and scored in the third.

Kiké Hernández and Will Smith also went deep in the inning as Los Angeles improved to 33-17.

**Nationals 12, Twins 3:** Luis García Jr. homered and drove in three runs, Eddie Rosario also had three RBIs and host Washington snapped a five-game slide with a victory over Minnesota.

Jesse Winker hit a solo shot and Jacob Young delivered a two-run single during a four-run fifth inning off Twins starter Pablo López (4-4) to help Washington pound out 14 hits and hand Minnesota its seventh straight defeat.

**Marlins 3, Brewers 2 (10):** Josh Bell singled with the bases loaded in the 10th inning to give host Miami a victory over Milwaukee.

Christian Bethancourt's sacrifice bunt against reliever Mitch White (1-1) advanced automatic runner Vidal Brujan to third. Jazz Chisholm Jr. was intentionally walked and stole second. Bryan De La Cruz drew an intentional walk before Bell hit a grounder to right field that scored Brujan.

**Angels 9, Astros 7:** Nolan Schanuel and Logan O'Hoppe both hit three-run homers and Jo Adell added a solo shot as visiting Los Angeles jumped on Framber Valdez for seven runs in the fifth inning to power a win over Houston.

Zach Neto homered in the sixth inning to give the Angels a season-high four home runs as they won for the fourth time in five games.