

## Pilots get innovative gear to ‘go’ in flight

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

During more than a century of manned flight, a nagging problem has been how to answer nature’s call when up in the wild blue yonder.

Modern fighter jets such as the F-15 Eagle top out at more than 1,900 miles per hour, though the technology for bladder relief for single and dual-seat aircraft pilots strapped into an ejector seat has lagged.

The problem is a bigger challenge for a growing segment of Air Force flight crews — the 118 female fighter pilots in jets such as the F-15 Eagle, F-16 Fighting Falcon, F-22 Raptor, F-35 Lightning II and A-10 Thunderbolt II, as well as female weapons systems operators flying in two-seat variants.

“I’ve flown sorties where I end up covered in my own urine,” said Capt. Madeleine Poisson, a F-15 weapons system officer with the 48th Wing based in England.

Prior to January, options for female pilots and weapons sys-

tem operators for bladder relief in aircraft included adult diapers and a “piddle pack” sleeve that required unstrapping from the seat, unzipping the lower part of their uniform and applying a synthetic sock-like funnel to their body.

There was also a pump system that was not suited to women compared to the men, for whom it was designed.

Along with the discomfort of “flying wet,” at least two crashes — both involving male pilots — in the past three decades have been linked to faulty systems or pilot error while attempting in-flight relief, according to the Air Force.

But male and female pilots have some relief arriving with a new system developed under the “Sky High Relief Challenge” issued by AFWERX, the service’s idea incubator program based at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

The program tries to solve key issues at an accelerated timetable compared to the sometimes glacial pace of normal

military procurement. Instead of years, ideas can get approved in as little as six months.

For the challenge, the directive was to come up with something better suited for female flight crews than the diapers, piddle pack or pump.

From more than 50 submissions in 2020, the Air Force narrowed the field of solutions to 24, then chose 11 companies to receive \$1.5 million in design prizes to advance their ideas.

“It’s energizing and inspiring to see how government, industry, and academia come together to roll up their sleeves and dive deep into problem solving,” said Cayley Dymond, the AFWERX challenge program leader.

The Air Force settled in 2021 on the idea from Airion Health, a Los Angeles start-up company, to prototype its solution to the challenge.

The winning idea essentially reverse-engineered the bladder relief problem, coming up with what the Air Force termed a “biocompatible” system that

could be used by female flight crews, then adapting it to male pilots as well.

Airion’s final product was named the Advanced Inflight Relief Universal System, or AIRUS.

It’s a form-fitting, self-cleaning underwear system using a small pump with soft tubing that directs waste to a custom-made “biofluid” bag.

The AIRUS system is available for purchase by squadrons via the General Services Administration website. The base price is about \$4,000 per kit, which are requisitioned by squadrons for the pilots and flight officers.

The primary challenge centered on a system that could be used by women, and there are multiple-sized cup attachments for different female body types. But the system also offers two variants built for the male anatomy as well.

The Pentagon also plans to adapt the system for use by Navy and Marine jet pilots, along with Army helicopter crews.

## American-born Pope Leo XIV chosen as new pope

*Associated Press*

VATICAN CITY — Robert Prevost, a missionary who spent his career ministering in Peru and leads the Vatican’s powerful office of bishops, was elected the first American pope in the 2,000-year history of the Catholic Church.

Prevost, a 69-year-old member of the Augustinian religious order, took the name Leo XIV. He appeared on the loggia of St. Peter’s Square wearing the traditional red cape of the papacy — a cape that Pope Francis had

eschewed on his election in 2013.

Prevost had been a leading candidate except for his nationality. There had long been a taboo against a U.S. pope, given the geopolitical power already wielded by the United States in the secular sphere. But Prevost, a Chicago native, was seemingly eligible also because he’s a Peruvian citizen and lived for years in Peru, first as a missionary and then as an archbishop.

Francis clearly had his eye on Prevost and in many ways saw

him as his heir apparent. He brought Prevost to the Vatican in 2023 to serve as the powerful head of the office that vets bishop nominations from around the world, one of the most important jobs in the Catholic Church. As a result, Prevost had a prominence going into the conclave that few other cardinals have.

The crowd in St. Peter’s Square erupted in cheers, priests made the sign of the cross and nuns wept as the crowd shouted “Viva il papa!” after the white smoke wafted in-

to the late afternoon sky at 6:07 p.m. Waving flags from around the world, thousands of people waited to learn who had won.

The last pope to take the name Leo was Leo XIII, an Italian who led the church from 1878 to 1903. That Leo softened the church’s confrontational stance toward modernity, especially science and politics and laid the foundation for modern Catholic social thought, most famously with his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed workers’ rights and capitalism.

# Analysts: Houthis set to rearm despite deal

BY LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Houthis are rearming for future fights and will continue to attack Israel, analysts say following a deal the Iran-backed militants struck with the White House to stop attacking Red Sea shipping in exchange for an end to crippling American airstrikes.

The agreement, which the Houthis characterized as an initial understanding, came after nearly seven weeks of U.S. bombing of more than 1,000 Houthi targets.

Those strikes killed top Houthi leaders, destroyed command-and-control sites and took out air defense systems, missile storage sites and drone stashes, the Pentagon said. But a recent attack on Israel's Ben Gurion Airport shows that the militants are still capable of firing long-range ballistic missiles. With their smuggling networks intact, the Houthis will use the pause to replenish their supplies, Yemen analyst Nadwa Al-Dawsari said, adding that local monitors detected a major weapons shipment to

the Houthis just last week.

"For the Houthis, the ceasefire is not a concession but a calculated tactical pause, an opportunity to regroup, adapt and rearm," said Al-Dawsari, a fellow at the Geneva-based Center on Armed Groups, in an email.

The Houthis, who control Yemen's capital of Sanaa, have survived 11 years of war with the country's internationally recognized government and a supporting coalition led by Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, the recent U.S. attacks represented an escalation beyond the previous administration.

But a full military defeat of the Houthis would require a ground operation, said Wolf-Christian Paes, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Such a move likely would be politically unpopular in the U.S. and costly, said Paes, a former member of the U.N. Security Council's expert panel for Yemen.

The Navy could have continued its air-strike campaign, which by some estimates

has already cost more than \$750 million. But it's possible that the U.S. simply was running out of military targets, Paes said.

The Pentagon also has faced scrutiny over the loss of expensive military equipment, including at least seven \$30 million MQ-9 Reaper drones destroyed by the Houthis and two F/A-18 Super Hornet jets due to mishaps aboard the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman in recent weeks.

A recent analysis from the Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project suggested that the Houthis have learned they can disrupt international shipping with minimal consequences.

"They can basically restart this for any reason at any time they want," said Brian Carter, the Middle East portfolio manager for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

The recent U.S. strikes on the Houthis did generate short-term effects, especially by killing top leadership, said Carter, who nevertheless expects the Houthis to reconstitute.

## Rate of AFRICOM strikes in Somalia higher in 2025

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command is launching airstrikes in Somalia at a record-setting pace as the military seeks to counter an influx of Islamic State fighters, military figures show.

Since January, AFRICOM has conducted 25 strikes in Somalia, many of which were directed at ISIS militants, according to command strike reports.

If the intensity of the bombing campaign continues, AFRICOM will exceed the 63 strikes it launched in Somalia in 2019, the highest tally for the country in the command's history.

"Yes — we've seen an increase in airstrikes," AFRICOM spokeswoman Kelly Callahan said in a statement Thursday.

The uptick coincides with a January directive by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to grant more decision-making authority on airstrikes to AFRICOM commanders.

AFRICOM's Gen. Michael Langley said during Senate testimony in April that those expanded authorities have given the command "the capability to hit (terrorists) harder."

The most recent strike, which happened Sunday, targeted ISIS-Somalia fighters in the Gollis Mountains in the northeastern part of the country. The flurry of strikes comes as foreign fighters try to gain a larger foothold in Somalia.

ISIS's Somalia cell has grown from about 500 fighters to 1,500 over the past 18 months, with roughly 60% being foreign, Callahan said.

## Probe: Helo crash that killed 5 Marines caused by pilot error

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A fatal Marine Corps helicopter crash last year was caused by pilot error, but deteriorating weather conditions and the use of night-vision goggles might have been contributing factors, according to an investigation released Wednesday.

Three pilots and two crew chiefs were aboard the CH-53 Super Stallion that crashed Feb. 6, 2024, during a late-night flight when the aircraft hit a mountain near Pine Valley, Calif., on its way back to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif. The helicopter was discovered the next morning. All five Marines aboard were killed in the crash.

The helicopter, "TIGER 43," was assigned to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361, Ma-

rine Aircraft Group 16 of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. The crew was returning to the base from Creech Air Force Base, Nev., when the helicopter crashed.

The investigating officer ultimately found the pilot failed to avoid the mountainous terrain likely due to poor visibility.

During the nighttime flight, there was moderate icing and cloud layers along the helicopter's route that might have prevented a safe flight. The crew was also using night-vision goggles, which likely did not give them the clear view needed to avoid crashing into the terrain, investigators found.

While not a contributing or causal factor, the investigation also found the commanding officer of the Miramar-based squadron should not have approved the crew to fly.

# US, UK announce plans for a trade deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States and Britain announced plans for a symbolically important trade deal on Thursday, likely lowering the financial burden from President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs while creating greater access abroad for American goods.

The announcement provided a political victory for U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and provided a degree of validation for Trump's claims that his turbulent approach on trade may be able to rebalance the global economy on his preferred terms.

Yet the terms of the deal have yet to be completed so that it can be signed, a reminder that a process Trump has promised

would be quick could take weeks as other nations with which the U.S. runs a trade deficit worry that the Republican president's import taxes will drag down economic growth across the world.

"The final details are being written up," Trump told reporters. "In the coming weeks, we'll have it all very conclusive."

The president said that the agreement would lead to more beef and ethanol exports to the U.K., which would also streamline the processing of U.S. goods through customs.

Starmer, speaking over the phone to Trump, stressed the importance of the relationship between the two countries as the anniversary of the World War II victory in Europe was being commemorated.

"To be able to announce this great deal on the same deal 80 years forward, almost at the same hour and as we were 80 years ago with the U.K. and the U.S. standing side by side, I think is incredibly important," Starmer said.

Britain said its deal with the United States will cut tariffs on U.K. cars from 27.5% to 10% and eliminate tariffs on steel and aluminum.

The British government said the deal sets a quota of 100,000 U.K. vehicles that can be imported to the U.S. at a 10% tariff. It said the Trump-imposed 25% tariff on British steel will fall to nothing.

The U.K. said the agreement includes new reciprocal market access on beef and removes the tariff on ethanol, which is used

to produce beer, going into the U.K. from the U.S., down to zero.

The planned deal was the first outlined since Trump began his stutter-step efforts to rewire the global economy by dramatically increasing import taxes in an attempt to increase domestic manufacturing.

The president quickly rolled out tariffs after returning to the White House, targeting traditional allies such as the U.K. with import taxes on steel, aluminum and autos.

Trump announced near universal tariffs on April 2, then partially retreated a week later and announced that his administration would instead seek individual agreements with various countries over the next few months.

## Attorneys: Migrants told they would be sent to Libya

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. authorities informed some migrants of plans to deport them to Libya, a country they are not from and that has a history of human rights violations, attorneys said Wednesday. A judge said they can't be deported without a chance to challenge such a move in court.

The legal scramble comes as the Trump administration is pushing forward with plans to

carry out mass deportations, including efforts to send migrants to a country where they are not a citizen. The most controversial example of so-called third-country removals has been sending Venezuelans to a notorious El Salvador prison.

Sending deportees to Libya, a country with a documented history of migrant abuse, would mark a major escalation of the administration's push for third countries to take in people being

removed from the United States.

A U.S. official said earlier Wednesday there were plans to fly migrants to Libya on a military plane but did not have details on the timing of the C-17 flight. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss military operations.

Immigration attorneys say some clients, including people from Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines, were told by immi-

gration enforcement agents that they were going to be deported to Libya. Some were told they were going to Saudi Arabia, they said.

The Tripoli-based government of Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah said in a statement Wednesday that there was "no deal or coordination" with the U.S. to receive migrants. However, it said "some parallel parties" could have agreed to receive them.

## Applications for jobless benefits in US fell last week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell last week despite heightened uncertainty about how President Donald Trump's tariffs will impact the U.S. and global economies.

Jobless claim applications fell by 13,000 to 228,000 for the week ending May 3, the Labor Department said Thursday.

That's in line with the 229,000 applications analysts forecast.

Weekly applications for jobless benefits are considered a proxy for layoffs and have mostly bounced around a healthy range between 200,000 and 250,000 since COVID-19 decimated the economy.

Even though Trump has paused or pulled back on many of his tariff threats, concerns re-

main about a global economic slowdown that could upend the U.S. labor market, which has been a pillar of the American economy for years.

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve held its benchmark lending rate at 4.3% for the third straight meeting, after cutting it three times in a row at the end of last year.

Fed chair Jerome Powell said

the risks of both higher unemployment and inflation have risen, an unusual combination that complicates the central bank's dual mandate of controlling prices and keeping unemployment low.

Powell said that tariffs have dampened consumer and business sentiment, but that data has not yet shown significant harm to the economy.



# N. Korea fires short-range ballistic missiles

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

North Korea fired an unspecified number of short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast Thursday morning, possibly to test their capabilities ahead of potential exports, according to the South's military.

The missiles were launched from Wonsan, a city about 90 miles east of Pyongyang, between 8:10 a.m. and 9:20 a.m., the Ministry of National Defense told reporters via text message. They flew roughly 500 miles before splashing into the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

U.S., South Korean and Japanese intelligence agencies are analyzing the launches and have shared data on the missiles' specifications, the ministry said. North Korea's launch

preparations had been detected in advance, it added.

"We strongly condemn North Korea's missile launch as a clear provocation that seriously threatens the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula," the ministry said.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the weapons posed no threat to the United States or its allies.

Washington's "commitments to the defense of [South Korea] and Japan remain ironclad," a command statement said. "The United States condemns these actions and calls on [North Korea] to refrain from further unlawful and destabilizing acts."

The episode marks North Korea's first ballistic missile testing since March 10, when it fired several missiles off its western coast during the start of Free-

dom Shield, an annual joint military exercise involving the U.S. and South Korea.

The launches may have been conducted to verify missile performance before possible overseas exports, South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Lee Sung Joon said at a news conference in Seoul. He did not say where the missiles might be sent.

The United States and South Korean intelligence agencies accuse the North of supplying lethal aid to Russia during its three-year invasion of Ukraine. This includes troops, long-range artillery systems, artillery shells and short-range ballistic missiles.

Washington and Seoul also suspect Pyongyang of exporting ballistic missile components and technology to other coun-

tries, including Pakistan, Syria and Iran, in the 1980s and 1990s.

North Korea made several displays of military prowess in the weeks leading up to its latest missile barrage.

On Wednesday, the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported that the country's leader, Kim Jong Un, had ordered munitions factories to boost artillery shell production and that the regime was producing them four times its annual rate.

Kim also showcased a new, 5,000-ton destroyer during an April 25 launch ceremony at the Nampo shipping port on the country's western coast, KCNA reported at the time.

The destroyer is the largest warship produced by the North and could be armed with cruise and ballistic missiles, KCNA added.

## India, Pakistan trade fire as tensions soar

*Associated Press*

LAHORE, Pakistan — India fired attack drones into Pakistan on Thursday, killing at least two civilians, the Pakistani military said. India, meanwhile, accused its neighbor of attempting its own attack, as tensions soared between the nuclear-armed rivals.

India acknowledged that it targeted Pakistan's air defense system, and Islamabad said it shot down several of the drones. India said it "neutralized" Pakistan's attempts to hit military targets. It was not possible to verify all of the claims.

The exchanges came a day after Indian missiles struck several locations in Pakistan, killing 31 civilians, according to Pakistani officials. New Delhi said it was retaliating after gunmen killed more than two dozen people, mostly Hindu tourists, in India-controlled Kashmir

last month. India accused Pakistan of being behind the assault. Islamabad denies that.

Both sides have also traded fire across their frontier in disputed Kashmir; Pakistan claimed it killed scores of Indian soldiers. There was no confirmation from India.

Late Thursday in Indian-controlled Kashmir, residents of the city of Jammu reported hearing explosions and sirens.

Shesh Paul Vaid, the region's former director of police, said there was a complete blackout in Jammu following loud blasts. Vaid told The Associated Press that the Jammu Airport likely was under attack and some of the 50 loud explosions he heard likely were because "our defense system is at work."

Jammu is close to the Line of Control, the de facto border that divides the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan.

## Russia, Ukraine report attacks despite truce

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia and Ukraine both reported attacks on their forces on the first day of a 72-hour ceasefire called by Russian President Vladimir Putin, while Ukraine's parliament unanimously approved a landmark minerals deal with the U.S.

The ratification is a key step in setting the deal in motion. It would allow Washington access to Ukraine's largely untapped minerals, deepen strategic ties and create a joint investment fund with the U.S. for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Parliament approved the agreement with 338 members voting in favor out of the required 226 votes, Ukrainian lawmaker Yaroslav Zheleznyak wrote on his Telegram account.

No lawmaker voted against it or abstained.

"This document is not merely a legal construct, it is the foun-

dation of a new model of interaction with a key strategic partner," Ukrainian Economy Minister Yuliia Svyrydenko wrote on X.

Russian bombs meanwhile struck northeast Ukraine in the opening hours of Moscow's unilateral ceasefire, killing at least one civilian, Ukrainian officials said. Artillery assaults took place across the 620-mile front line, although with less intensity than in the previous 24 hours, officials said.

The ceasefire coincides with Russia's biggest secular holiday, the 80th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany. Kyiv has pressed for a longer-term ceasefire.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha accused Russia of violating its own ceasefire 734 times between midnight and midday Thursday. He called the ceasefire a "farce" on the social media platform X.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Suspect's girlfriend to pal: 'We started the fire'**

**NJ** BARNEGAT TOWNSHIP — The girlfriend of a 17-year-old arrested in connection with a massive wildfire in New Jersey last month allegedly admitted to a friend that her group started the blaze, court documents show.

"We started the fire," she wrote to a classmate in a Snapchat message, according to an affidavit of probable cause obtained by NJ Advance Media.

The unnamed girlfriend, who has not been charged, was reportedly in the area where the fire is believed to have started.

Investigators say she voluntarily sent her classmate a message on April 22, the day officials first spotted the blaze. The classmate then went to police.

The Jones Road wildfire started in the Greenwood Forest Wildlife Management Area in Barnegat Township, some 90 miles south of Midtown Manhattan.

Over the past two weeks, the still-going wildfire has burned through more than 15,300 acres. It also forced thousands of evacuations, led the state to declare a state of emergency and triggered an air quality health advisory for the New York City area.

On Tuesday, officials confirmed the blaze was about 90% contained.

**Woman who disappeared 62 years ago found safe**

**WI** REEDSBURG — Sixty-two years ago, Audrey Backeberg disappeared from a small city in south-central Wisconsin after reportedly hitchhiking with her family's babysitter and catching a bus to

Indianapolis.

Nobody ever knew where she went or what happened to her.

All that changed last week when she was found alive and safe in another state.

Detective Isaac Hanson discovered an out-of-state arrest record that matched Backeberg, which triggered a series of investigative moves. Turns out Backeberg chose to leave the town of Reedsburg on her own accord — likely due to an abusive husband, Hanson said.

"She's happy, safe and secure; And just kind of lived under the radar for that long," he said.

Hanson and other officials met with Backeberg's family to see if they had a connection with that region. They also started digging through Backeberg's sister's Ancestry.com account, pulling census records, obituaries and marriage licenses from that region.

Within about two months, they found an address where a woman was living that Hanson said shared a lot of similarities with Backeberg, including date of birth and Social Security number. Hanson was able to get a deputy from that jurisdiction to go to the address. Ten minutes later, Backeberg, now in her 80s, called Hanson.

"It happened so fast," he said.

**SpaceX sends up latest Starlink launch**

**FL** ORLANDO — SpaceX knocked off its latest Cape Canaveral, Fla., mission on Tuesday night.

A Falcon 9 carrying 28 Starlink satellites lifted off at 9:17 p.m. from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station's Space

Launch Complex 40.

The first-stage booster for the mission flew for the seventh time with a recovery landing downrange in the Atlantic Ocean on the dronship Just Read the Instructions.

This was the 38th orbital launch from the Space Coast so far in 2025 with all but two coming from SpaceX. The others were Blue Origin's debut New Glenn launch in January and a United Launch Alliance Atlas V that flew that company's first mission of the year last week.

**Lawmakers OK expanding state auditor's powers**

**NC** RALEIGH — The North Carolina House on Tuesday passed a bill expanding the powers of the state auditor, a typically low-profile office that Republican lawmakers have repeatedly sought to embolden since November, when it was won by a Republican for the first time in 16 years.

"It ensures the state auditor can do the job the voters elected him to do: protecting taxpayers, detecting fraud and holding public spending to account," House Majority Leader Brenden Jones, the bill's sponsor, said.

House Bill 549, which passed along party lines, would empower Auditor Dave Boliek to investigate any non-governmental organization that receives public funds, and would greatly expand his office's access to state databases.

The bill would also give him more flexibility over hiring and firing staff in his office — a move critics warned could turn merit-based state jobs into political appointments.

Starting July 1, the bill would exempt new hires in the auditor's office from the State Human Resources Act — a broad law that establishes protections for state employees. It would give current employees the choice to exempt themselves from the act.

"What you're saying, if you are seeking to make these positions exempt, is that political preferences should take precedent over merit — but for the employees in this office only," Rep. Tim Longest, a Wake County Democrat, said.

**Student partially paralyzed after a fall at frat party**

**CA** BERKELEY — A University of California, Berkeley student just weeks away from graduating became paralyzed from the waist down after a recent fall at a university fraternity event.

Bandna Bhatti's family told KTVU that on April 19, Bhatti fell from a stairway at Phi Kappa Tau on Piedmont Avenue. She was found 15 minutes later but didn't know how bad her injuries were; 911 was called seven hours later.

Bhatti, 21, is paralyzed from the waist down and has a spinal fracture and brain hematoma, according to a GoFundMe created to cover her medical costs.

"Bandna is a brilliant, compassionate, and resilient young woman who has worked tirelessly toward her dreams. Now, she faces a long and difficult road ahead," the fundraiser said.

A university spokesperson told KRON4 that the Berkeley Police Department is investigating the incident.

— From wire reports

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# SGA, Thunder roll early, tie Nuggets

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 34 points in three quarters, and the Oklahoma City Thunder set league and team records in a 149-106 victory over the Denver Nuggets on Wednesday night that tied the Western Conference semifinal series at one game apiece.

Oklahoma City set an NBA playoff record for first-half points with 87, surpassing the 86 scored by the Cleveland Cavaliers against the Golden State Warriors in Game 4 of the NBA Finals on June 9, 2017. Chet Holmgren, who missed two critical free throws late in Game 1, made a pair with one second remaining in the second quarter to set the record and give the Thunder an 87-56 lead.

The Thunder tied the record for points in any half of a playoff game. Milwaukee had 87 in the

second half against Denver on April 23, 1978.

“Basically it was one team playing tonight,” Denver center Nikola Jokic said.

The top-seeded Thunder wanted to avoid taking a 2-0 deficit on the road. Oklahoma City became the first home team to win a game in the second round. Game 3 is Friday in Denver.

“We knew what was at stake tonight,” Gilgeous-Alexander said. “We came out desperate. We wanted to just take care and control the things that we knew we could. And we did a pretty good job of that, specifically to start the game. The start carried us through the rest of the night.”

Gilgeous-Alexander made 11 of 13 field goals, all 11 of his free throws and had eight assists. He led eight players who scored in double figures.

Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said Gilgeous-Alexander

did much more than score.

“He made them pay when they overhelped on him,” Daigneault said. “He had the ball ahead of them all night, so he got his teammates shots, too. It wasn’t just a one-man show. He was super efficient. I mean, he had an unbelievable blend to-night.”

Jokic, who had 42 points and 22 rebounds in a Game 1 victory, had just 17 points and eight rebounds on Wednesday before fouling out late in the third quarter.

Russell Westbrook led the Nuggets with 19 points. Oklahoma City’s crowd cheered for the ex-Thunder star when he entered Game 1 as a reserve, but the fans changed their approach and booed him shortly after he entered Game 2.

The Thunder led 45-21 at the end of the first quarter after shooting 71.4% from the field.

“We got punked, and we didn’t play well enough and they came out with the right intensity,” Denver interim coach David Adelman said. “We didn’t.”

Oklahoma City continued its dominance in the second quarter. A lob from Gilgeous-Alexander to Jalen Williams for a two-handed jam gave the Thunder a 78-43 lead.

Oklahoma City led 124-76 after three quarters. The largest lead was 49 points.

Adelman said he wouldn’t minimize the loss, even though the Nuggets head back to Denver with home-court advantage.

“I’m not sitting here tonight talking about the 1-1 thing tonight,” he said. “Not tonight. We’re not going to flush that. We’ve got to be better. We know that. That being said, it’s nice to know that you got a win underneath your belt.”

## Bridges helps Knicks steal another game from Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — For the second straight game, the New York Knicks found themselves in a hole the Boston Celtics have rarely let teams out of this season.

The Knicks again found a way — almost the same way, in fact — to pull off the improbable. And now they are two wins away from knocking the defending champions out of the playoffs.

Mikal Bridges sealed another 20-point comeback with his second straight game-ending steal and the Knicks stunned the Celtics again Wednesday night, winning 91-90 for a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

“Just finding ways to win,” Bridges said.

Jalen Brunson scored 17 points for New York and made two free throws with 12.7 sec-

onds left for a 91-90 lead. Jayson Tatum then couldn’t get to the rim and Bridges moved in to bat the ball away and recover it.

Bridges also scored all of his 14 points in the fourth quarter. Josh Hart had 23 points and Karl-Anthony Towns finished with 21 points and 17 rebounds for the Knicks, who will host Game 3 on Saturday.

“Going home we realize the opportunity we have. We just have to stay locked in,” Brunson said.

Jaylen Brown and Derrick White scored 20 points apiece for the Celtics, who were 10 for 40 from 3-point range after going 15 for 60 in Game 1.

Tatum was limited to 13 points on 5-for-19 shooting for the Celtics, who went more than eight minutes without a field goal in the fourth quarter. They missed 13 consecutive shots during the stretch.

Teams that win the first two games of a best-of-seven series on the road win the series 85.7% of the time. The Knicks took the opener when Bridges stole the ball away from Brown with a second left in overtime.

“Opportunity to show what we’re made of,” Brown said of a Boston team that swept New York 4-0 in the regular season.

“We’ve got to respond.”

Kristaps Porzingis didn’t start after sitting out the second half of Game 1 with an illness. He came off the bench and finished with eight points and four rebounds in 14 minutes.

All eyes were on the Celtics’ offense after they missed an NBA playoff-record 45 3-pointers in their Game 1 loss. They went 24-for-54 from 2-point range Wednesday.

Despite their shooting struggles, the Celtics found some traction late in the third quarter,

using a 16-6 run — keyed by their effort on the defensive end — to turn a 10-point lead into a 73-53 advantage late in the period.

It was 84-68 after Payton Pritchard’s 3-pointer with 8:40 to play but the Celtics wouldn’t make another basket until Tatum’s driving dunk with 18.5 seconds remaining.

New York cut it to 86-82 on a floater by Hart before Towns’ three-point play cut it to 86-85. Tatum missed a jumper, and Brunson made an 18-footer to put New York in front.

A jumper by Brown rolled off the rim on Boston’s next trip up the floor. Brunson then found a lane to the basket and dropped in a layup to make it 89-86.

Hart said they are going home knowing they can still play better.

“I don’t even think we know what we’re capable of,” he said.



# Marner breaks tie; Leafs top Panthers

Associated Press

TORONTO — Mitch Marner has experienced a whirlwind stretch — both at home and at the rink. Joseph Woll waited patiently and prepared for a chance he wasn't sure he'd get.

They both came through for the Toronto Maple Leafs in Game 2 of their second-round playoff series.

Marner scored the tiebreaking goal in the third period and Woll made 25 saves in place of the injured Anthony Stolarz as the Maple Leafs beat the Florida Panthers 4-3 on Wednesday night to take a 2-0 series lead.

"A really exciting time in my house," said Marner, who became a father for the first time during the weekend. "(And) pretty special feeling tonight."

Woll was pressed into service after Stolarz exited midway through Monday's opener — a 5-4 Toronto victory — following an elbow to the head from Panthers center Sam Bennett, Woll started for the first time since April 17.

"It's been something I've had to focus on and come up with a plan to stay ready," Woll said. "It's a different challenge than playing every night, but a challenge nonetheless."

Woll, who entered with a .950 save percentage in his four previous playoff starts, also performed well when called upon in both the 2023 and 2024 post-seasons because of injury.

"Calm and cool," Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube said. "On his toes and fighting through traffic. Very impressed."

Max Pacioretty and Max Domi each had a goal and an assist, William Nylander also scored and Morgan Rielly added two assists for Toronto.

Anton Lundell had a goal and an assist, and Aleksander Barkov and Brad Marchand also scored for defending Stanley Cup champion Florida. Sergei Bobrovsky finished with 16 saves.

"Lots of stuff that we like about our game that we think we can improve," Panthers coach

Paul Maurice said. "We'll take a look at it and get better."

The best-of-seven matchup between Atlantic Division heavyweights now shifts to South Florida.

Trailing 3-2 after two periods, the Panthers got even at 5:33 in the third when Lundell shoveled his third goal of the playoffs past Woll.

Toronto regained the lead just 17 seconds later when Marner fired a shot from the boards that found its way through traffic past a surprised Bobrovsky.

Marner, who turned 28 on Monday, has added an "M" to his equipment since he and wife Stephanie welcomed their son Miles on Sunday morning.

"Just calmness," he said of what looking down and seeing that initial does for him. "I try to stay calm as much as I can throughout games. It's always a roller-coaster ride. There's always stuff going on, stuff you can't predict happening. I'm trying to play for him."

Woll made a huge stop on

Mackie Samoskevich with 9:59 left in regulation, and Maple Leafs defenseman Jake McCabe swatted a loose puck out of the crease with under six minutes to go. Florida continued to press and Sam Reinhart hit the post with just over three minutes left.

Florida, which beat the Maple Leafs in five games two years ago at the same stage of the playoffs, went ahead 2-1 just 15 seconds into the middle period when Marchand took a pass from Lundell down low off a turnover by Rielly and roofed his first of the playoffs.

Toronto tied it at 4:18 when Pacioretty chipped a puck past Panthers defenseman Seth Jones before finding Nylander in front for him to bury his sixth, and the forward's seventh point in three games.

"They're very good on the rush," Marchand said. "It seemed like every time we gave them the opportunity to get above us, they created something or capitalized on it."

## Stars top Jets behind Rantanen's 2nd straight hat trick

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Mikko Rantanen had a natural hat trick in the second period, Jake Oettinger made 30 saves and the Dallas Stars beat the Winnipeg Jets 3-2 on Wednesday night in Game 1 of their second-round series.

Rantanen, who had a hat trick in the third period of Dallas' Game 7 win over his former Colorado teammates, is the third player in NHL history — and the first in nearly 40 years — with hat tricks in consecutive playoff games.

Edmonton's Jari Kurri accomplished the feat in Games 5 and 6 of the 1985 Campbell Conference final, and Chicago's Doug Bentley did the same in Games 4 and 5 of the 1944 Stan-

ley Cup Final.

"Sometimes it goes that way," said Rantanen, acquired from Carolina at the trade deadline. "The third goal goes off them and goes five-hole. Or when you're going through a tough stretch, you feel like you could only pray for those and those never come."

Game 2 of the best-of-seven series is Friday night in Winnipeg.

Nino Niederreiter and Mark Scheifele scored for the Jets, who had won four in a row at Canada Life Centre. Connor Hellebuyck made 21 saves.

Scheifele returned after sustaining an upper-body injury in Game 5 in the first round against St. Louis. Stars forward Jason Robertson was back after

injurying a knee in the final game of the regular season.

Winnipeg led the NHL with 116 points to earn home-ice advantage through the playoffs, while Dallas was second in the Central Division and third in the Western Conference with 106.

"We know we just gave up home-ice advantage," Jets coach Scott Arniel said. "And that wasn't a game where they rolled over top of us for three periods. That was a game where we weren't at our best."

Niederreiter got the sold-out crowd cheering when his sharp-angled backhand beat Oettinger at 3:30 of the second period. He became the NHL's first Swiss-born player to skate in 100 postseason games.

Rantanen tied it at 8:43 with

his sixth goal of the playoffs. His second goal was a tip of Thomas Harley's point shot with 5:39 left, and he made it 3-1 on the power play 2:17 later when his shot went in off Jets defenseman Dylan Samberg.

"Sometimes it's ups and downs in hockey and now it's going well individually and as a team," Rantanen said.

Rantanen extended his points streak to four games with eight goals and six assists across the stretch. He has 15 points this postseason so far.

"He's one of the best players in the world and he's just on fire right now, so we're just trying to get him the puck," said center Sam Steele, who assisted on Rantanen's first goal of the night.

# Valdez, Peña help Astros avoid Brewers sweep

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Framber Valdez pitched seven strong innings and Jeremy Peña homered and drove in four runs as the Houston Astros defeated the Milwaukee Brewers 9-1 on Wednesday.

Houston earned just its second victory in seven games to snap Milwaukee's three-game winning streak and leave both teams with .500 records. The Brewers were attempting to sweep a series from the Astros for the first time since 2012.

Houston led 3-1 before Peña broke the game open by delivering a three-run homer to left off reliever Elvin Rodriguez with two outs in the sixth inning.

Valdez (2-4) struck out seven while allowing three hits, two walks and one run to earn his first win since the Astros' March 27 season opener. He threw a season-high 101 pitches.

Milwaukee's only run off Valdez came on Eric Haase's fifth-inning homer, a 425-foot drive to center.

**Tigers 8, Rockies 6 (10):** Spencer Torkelson hit a go-ahead double in the 10th inning and visiting Detroit beat Colorado to give A.J. Hinch his 900th win as a big league manager.

Torkelson hit a liner to right-center off Zach Agnos (0-1) that brought in automatic runner Riley Greene. Trey Sweeney added another run when left fielder Jordan Beck couldn't snare his two-out blooper that was changed from a double to an error on Beck.

Javier Báez hit a pair of two-run singles to help make it a milestone night for Hinch, who became the 75th major league manager to reach 900 wins.

**Angels 5, Blue Jays 4:** Jorge Soler lined a double into the left-field corner with the bases loaded to drive in three runs in the ninth inning and lift host Los Angeles to a victory over Toronto.

Trailing 4-2, the Angels loaded the bases with no outs against Blue Jays closer Jeff Hoffman

(3-1) when Kyren Paris drew a four-pitch walk and Zach Neto and Nolan Schanuel singled.

Hoffman struck out Taylor Ward for the first out, but Soler drove a ball that rolled into the corner and past left fielder Jonathan Clase for the comeback win.

**Reds 4, Braves 3:** TJ Friedl hit two home runs and visiting Cincinnati beat Atlanta to snap a four-game losing streak despite losing right-hander Hunter Greene to a right groin injury after only three innings.

Greene struck out six batters and allowed only two hits in three scoreless innings. He was unable to complete his warmup before the fourth inning. He threw only two warmup pitches, including a pitch that hit the dirt, before stopping his routine.

Left-hander Brent Suter (1-0) replaced Greene on the mound and gave up a fifth-inning homer to Braves rookie catcher Drake Baldwin, the only run he gave up in two innings of work.

**Royals 2, White Sox 1:** Bobby Witt Jr. hit a two-run homer to give Michael Wacha all the support he needed as host Kansas City defeated Chicago.

It was the third straight quality start for Wacha (2-4), who allowed just three hits in seven innings, walked one and struck out five.

The Royals, who won for the 14th time in their last 16 games, lead the majors with 18 quality starts.

**Twins 5, Orioles 2:** Byron Buxton homered for a third straight game and Harrison Bader had a pinch-hit homer to lift host Minnesota to a win over Baltimore for its fourth consecutive victory.

Buxton hit a three-run shot to the second deck in left field off Orioles starter Charlie Morton (0-7) in the bottom of the third inning to put the Twins up 3-1.

Danny Coulombe (1-0) pitched a scoreless inning of relief to earn the win. Jhoan Durán earned his fifth save with a clean ninth inning for Minnesota,

which matched its longest winning streak of the season.

**Yankees 4, Padres 3 (10):** Pinch-hitter J.C. Escarra came through with a sacrifice fly in the 10th inning and host New York, held hitless into the seventh, rallied past San Diego.

Cody Bellinger homered with one out in the seventh for New York's first hit off Padres starter Dylan Cease, who exited moments later with a cramp in his right forearm.

**Dodgers 10, Marlins 1:** Freddie Freeman singled twice and hit a bases-loaded triple and visiting Los Angeles beat Miami.

Freeman drove in four runs and extended his hitting streak to 12 games as the MLB-leading Dodgers (25-12) took two of three against the Marlins and won their fourth straight series. Freeman went 8 for 13 in the series with six RBIs and two home runs.

**Mariners 6, Athletics 5:** Leody Taveras hit a game-tying two-out single in the eighth inning of his debut with Seattle before scoring the go-ahead run on Dylan Moore's base hit and the visiting Mariners rallied from a five-run deficit to beat the Athletics and win their ninth straight series.

Andrés Muñoz gave up a lead-off single to Luis Urías in the ninth, before striking out Jacob Wilson looking to earn his 13th save. Muñoz hasn't allowed an earned run in 18 innings.

**Phillies 7, Rays 0:** Cristopher Sánchez allowed one hit over six innings, Trea Turner, Bryson Stott and Bryce Harper each drove in two runs, and visiting Philadelphia beat Tampa Bay.

Sánchez (4-1) allowed a single by Junior Caminero in the first and walked Danny Jansen but didn't allow a player past first base the rest of the night, finishing with three walks and five strikeouts. He lowered his ERA from 3.45 to 2.89.

**Cardinals 5, Pirates 0:** Sonny Gray pitched seven innings of two-hit ball, and host St. Louis

beat slumping Pittsburgh for its fifth straight victory.

Gray (4-1) struck out eight and walked one in his first win since April 14. The right-hander went 0-1 with a 5.51 ERA in his previous three starts.

**Giants 3, Cubs 1:** Robbie Ray pitched six sparkling innings, Wilmer Flores had three hits and visiting San Francisco beat Chicago.

Ray (5-0) allowed one run and three hits in his second straight win. Camilo Doval and Tyler Rogers each got three outs before Ryan Walker handled the ninth for his seventh save.

**Guardians 8, Nationals 6:** Carlos Santana kick-started an eight-run sixth inning with a bases-clearing double, and visiting Cleveland beat Washington to win two of three in a 24-hour span.

The Guardians sent 13 men to the plate in the sixth against Michael Soroka (0-2) and relievers Jorge Lopez and Andrew Chafin. The first seven reached, and all of them scored. Leadoff man Steven Kwan scored twice in Cleveland's biggest inning of the season.

**Mets 7, Diamondbacks 1:** Juan Soto homered in consecutive at-bats, Kodai Senga overcame early control problems to pitch six scoreless innings and visiting New York beat Arizona.

Soto hit a solo homer off Merrill Kelly (3-2) in the seventh inning and added another off Jalen Beeks in the eighth, his seventh of the season. Soto also followed Francisco Lindor's two-run double in the ninth with a sacrifice fly to put the Mets up 7-1.

**Red Sox 6, Rangers 4:** Alex Bregman hit a tiebreaking two-run single and had a solo homer, Wilyer Abreu added two solo shots and host Boston beat Texas to snap a three-game losing streak.

Bregman and Abreu each drove in three runs for the Red Sox, who were 1-4 against the Rangers this season before pulling out the victory.