

Miller meets with troops in Middle East

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller is serving Thanksgiving meals to troops in the Middle East this week during his first international trip as the Defense Department begins the transition to President-elect Joe Biden's administration.

"I will ensure there is an effective transition process because that is what the American people expect from national security professionals," Miller said Wednesday during a stop in Bahrain.

Miller's trip comes at a busy time for the Defense Department.

With the official switch to a new administration less than two months away and only being on his new job for a couple of weeks, Miller was already part of a major decision last week to reduce the U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some troops will leave Afghanistan and Iraq by Jan. 15, just five days before Biden is sworn into office. The force reduction will leave 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and 2,500 in Iraq as both coun-

tries continue to see violence against government forces and civilians by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and the Taliban.

More so, the Defense Department on Monday was contacted by Biden's transition team after the U.S. General Services Administration authorized resources and services, such as funding and space in government buildings, to the incoming administration.

But as the transition took shape in Washington on Wednesday, Miller toured units on Naval Support Activity Bahrain, including the headquarters for U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, and met with sailors on the waterfront.

Later, Miller went to the dining facility on the base to start off the Thanksgiving holiday by meeting with service members and serving them a traditional meal to show appreciation for their service that has taken them far from home.

"Come out and show them a little love, show them some respect, thank them, because with this [coronavirus pandem-

ic], they're not getting to go home... So it's really important for me in this position to get out and make the rounds," Miller said at the start of the trip.

Sailors and Marines lined up to have Miller, as well as some members of his staff, serve them a plethora of food, including roast beef, turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, green beans and gravy.

Miller grabbed a plate of food for himself and sat at a table with two sailors and a Marine.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, plexiglass has been installed on all the dining tables to allow for people to eat together as safely as possible.

Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Tayler Maddalena, 28, said it was intimidating to see the acting defense secretary serving the Thanksgiving meal because she said she normally does not talk to such high-ranking people.

"But it was really cool that he came out here and did that for us, especially when he could stay home and be with his family for the holiday," she said.

Some sailors offered voluntary early separation

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy will allow some enlisted sailors serving in overstuffed jobs to apply to leave the service before the end of their enlistment contract, the service has announced.

The Navy hopes granting some enlisted sailors an early release from their enlistment commitment will ensure promotion opportunities for sailors who intend to remain in the Navy without forcing people from the service involuntarily, according to a service news release.

Early separations will be considered on a case-by-case basis, the service said.

"As the Navy has grown over recent years, some enlisted ratings at specific pay grades have become overmanned due to high retention in these ratings," Vice Adm.

John B. Nowell, the Navy's chief of personnel, wrote in a Nov. 19 memorandum. "Fleet readiness is our No. 1 priority while also allowing for a flexible marketplace of talent management."

The Navy will publish further information about sailors who might be considered for early separation in the coming weeks. Such information including identification of overstuffed jobs and year groups will be posted on the Navy Personnel Command website, the Navy release said.

Officials said the Navy will offer several paths to early separations, but they expect most to be granted via the recently reestablished Early Enlisted Transition Program, which grants early separations on a first-come, first-served basis based on quotas determined by a sailors' job, rank, year group and skills.

Other pathways would allow enlisted sailors to request early separation to go to college, to pursue a commission or a change to another service. Sailors who intend to commission or transfer military services would have to apply for a "conditional release," which can only be approved by Navy Personnel Command, the service said. Sailors interested in those possibilities should submit requests to that command through their commanding officer, according to the memo.

Sailors facing forced rating changes with less than a year left in the service would also be able to apply for early separation, according to the service. Those sailors would have to request to be separated immediately and would forfeit any bonuses that required them to complete the full terms of their enlistment.

Trump pardons former adviser Flynn

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump pardoned his former national security adviser Michael Flynn on Wednesday, ending a yearslong prosecution in the Russia investigation that saw Flynn twice plead guilty to lying to the FBI and then reverse himself before the Justice Department stepped in to dismiss his case.

“It is my Great Honor to announce that General Michael T. Flynn has been granted a Full Pardon,” Trump tweeted. “Congratulations to @GenFlynn and his wonderful family, I know you will now have a truly fantastic Thanksgiving!”

The pardon, in the waning weeks of Trump’s single term, is part of a broader effort by Trump to undo the results of a Russia investigation that shadowed his administration and yielded criminal charges against a half-dozen associates. It comes just months after the president commuted the sentence of another associate, Roger Stone.

A Justice Department official said the department was not consulted on the pardon and learned Wednesday of the plan. But the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, noted that the president has the legal power to pardon Flynn.

The move is likely to energize supporters who have taken up Flynn as a cause celebre and rallied around the retired Army lieutenant general as the victim of what they assert is an unfair prosecution, even though Flynn twice admitted guilt. Trump has repeatedly spoken warmly about Flynn and, in an indication of his personal interest in his fate, asked then-FBI Director James Comey in February 2017 to end a criminal investigation into the national security adviser.

In a statement, Flynn’s family thanked Trump “for answering our prayers and the prayers of a nation” by issuing the pardon.

Democrats lambasted the pardon as undeserved and unprincipled. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called it “an act of grave corruption and a brazen abuse of power,” while Rep. Adam Schiff, the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, said a “pardon by Trump does not erase” the truth of Flynn’s guilty plea, “no matter how Trump and his allies try to suggest otherwise.”

“The president’s enablers have constructed an elaborate narrative in which Trump and Flynn are victims and the Constitution is subject to the whims of the president,” House Judiciary Committee Chair Jerry Nadler said in a statement. “Americans soundly rejected this nonsense when

they voted out President Trump.”

The pardon is the final step in a case defined by twists and turns. The most dramatic came in May when the Justice Department abruptly moved to dismiss the case, insisting that Flynn should not have been interviewed by the FBI in the first place, only to have U.S. District Justice Emmet Sullivan resist the request and appoint a former judge to argue against the federal government’s position and to evaluate whether Flynn should be held in criminal contempt for perjury.

That former judge, John Gleeson, called the Justice Department’s dismissal request an abuse of power and said its grounds for dropping the case were ever-evolving and “patently pretextual.”

As Sullivan declined to immediately dismiss the prosecution, Flynn lawyer Sidney Powell sought to bypass the judge by asking a federal appeals court to direct him to drop the matter. A three-judge panel did exactly that, but the full court overturned that decision and sent the case back to Sullivan.

At a hearing in September, Powell told Sullivan that she had discussed Flynn’s case with Trump but also said she did not want a pardon — presumably because she wanted him to be vindicated in the courts.

President-elect Biden offers holiday message of unity

Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. — On a day of grace and grievance, President-elect Joe Biden summoned Americans to join in common purpose against the coronavirus pandemic and their political divisions while the man he will replace stoked the fading embers of his campaign to “turn the election over.”

Biden, in a Thanksgiving-eve address to the nation, put the surging pandemic front and center, pledging to tap the “vast powers” of the federal government and to “change the course of the disease” once in office. But for that to work, he said, Americans must step up for their own safety and that of their fellow citizens.

“I know the country has grown weary of the fight,” Biden said Wednesday. “We need to remember we’re at war with the virus, not with one another. Not with each other.”

President Donald Trump, who has scarcely mentioned the pandemic in recent days even as it has achieved record heights, remained fixated on his election defeat.

He sent his lawyer Rudy Giuliani and other members of his legal team to meet Pennsylvania Republican state senators in Gettysburg. Inside a hotel near the hallowed battlefields of civil war, they again aired complaints about the election and repeated allegations of Democratic malfeasance that have already disintegrated under examination by courts.

“We have to turn the election over,” Trump said from the Oval Office, where he joined the meeting by speakerphone.

“This was an election that we won easily,” he said. “We won it by a lot.” In fact, the election gave Biden a clear mandate, and no systemic fraud has been uncovered. Judge after judge has dismissed the Trump campaign’s accusations as baseless, and the transition to Biden’s presidency is fully underway.

Nevertheless, Trump repeated: “This election has to be turned around.”

Trump had been expected to appear in person in Gettysburg, but did not after an-

other member of his legal team tested positive for the coronavirus. Few at the meeting wore masks.

Altogether, the forum heard — and cheered — yet another declaration from a U.S. president seeking to reverse a democratic election and the voters’ will because he wants to stay in power. The setting was about a mile from the scene of Pickett’s Charge, where Union troops repelled a desperate Confederate attack in July 1863 and helped turn the tide of the Civil War.

For his part, Biden has largely projected serenity as the necessary elements of a presidential transition — money, access to office space and more — were held at bay for nearly three weeks by Trump’s machinations and a delayed ascertainment by the General Services Administration that he had won the election. On Wednesday, he addressed Trump’s raw tactics only in passing. “Our democracy was tested this year,” Biden said, “but the people of this nation are up to the task.”

Court blocks NY limits on houses of worship

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As coronavirus cases surge again nationwide, the Supreme Court late Wednesday barred New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues in areas designated as hard hit by the virus.

The justices split 5-4 with new Justice Amy Coney Barrett in the majority. It was the conservative's first publicly discernible vote as a justice. The court's three liberal justices and Chief Justice John Roberts dissented.

The move was a shift for the court. Earlier this year, when Barrett's liberal predecessor, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, was still on the court, the justices divided 5-4 to leave in place pandemic-related capacity restrictions affecting churches in California and Nevada.

The court's action could push New York to reevaluate its restrictions on houses of worship in areas designated virus hot spots. But the impact of the court's action is also muted because the Catholic and Orthodox Jewish groups that sued to challenge the restrictions are no longer subject to them.

The Diocese of Brooklyn and Agudath Israel of America have churches and synagogues in areas of Brooklyn and Queens previously designated red and orange zones. In those red and orange zones, the state had capped attendance at houses of

worship at 10 and 25 people, respectively. But those particular areas are now designated as yellow zones with less restrictive rules neither group challenged.

The justices acted on an emergency basis, temporarily barring New York from enforcing the restrictions against the groups while their lawsuits continue. In an unsigned opinion the court said the restrictions "single out houses of worship for especially harsh treatment."

"Members of this Court are not public health experts, and we should respect the judgment of those with special expertise and responsibility in this area. But even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten. The restrictions at issue here, by effectively barring many from attending religious services, strike at the very heart of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty," the opinion said.

Roberts, in dissent, wrote that there was "simply no need" for the court's action. "None of the houses of worship identified in the applications is now subject to any fixed numerical restrictions," he said, adding that New York's 10 and 25 person caps "do seem unduly restrictive."

The court's action was a victory for the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Jewish synagogues that had sued to challenge state restrictions announced by Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Oct. 6.

Troops, civilians sentenced in Turkish coup

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — A Turkish court sentenced hundreds of military and civilian personnel at an air base to life prison sentences Thursday, proclaiming them guilty of involvement in the 2016 failed coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government.

A total of 475 defendants, including some generals and fighter jet pilots at the Akinci air base, on the outskirts of the capital, Ankara, had been on trial for the past three years, accused of directing the coup and bombing key government buildings, including a section of Turkey's parliament.

The massive trial was one of two main trials against suspected members of a network led by U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara accuses of orchestrating the failed attempt.

Gulen, who was also named among the defendants, has denied involvement in the coup that resulted in around 250 deaths and injured thousands. About 30 coup-plotters were also killed.

The court convicted four men of crimes against the state, attempts to kill the president as well as 77 counts of murder, and sentenced them to 79 separate "aggravated" life sentences without the possibility of parole.

Fifteen officers, including one-star generals, were also sentenced to the same term.

Calif. counties winding down hotels for homeless

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Some California counties are pushing ahead with plans to wind down a program that's moved homeless people into hotel rooms amid the coronavirus pandemic, despite an emergency cash infusion from the state aimed at preventing people from returning to the streets in colder weather as the virus surges.

Gov. Gavin Newsom recently announced \$62 million for counties to move hotel guests into permanent housing or to extend hotel leases that were part of "Project Roomkey," which he rolled out this spring as a way to protect some people experiencing homelessness from the virus. The Federal Emer-

gency Management Agency agreed to pick up 75% of the cost.

But counties say that with some federal relief funding expiring soon or its status uncertain, it's time to transition residents from expensive hotel rooms to cheaper, more stable housing.

Officials hope to offer a place to every resident leaving a hotel, though they acknowledge not everyone will accept it and affordable housing is difficult to find.

California is one of several states, including Washington, that turned to hotels to shelter homeless people as the virus took hold. Homelessness has soared nationwide during the pandemic, and it was already at a

crisis level in California because of an expensive housing market and a shortage of affordable options.

The nation's most populated state has by far the highest number of people on the streets, though other places have a higher per capita rate.

In San Francisco, advocacy groups and some officials are outraged by the mayor's plan to start moving hundreds of people out of hotels around the holidays. They say it's ridiculous when thousands of people are still sleeping on sidewalks and in cars, and they don't believe the city can find enough virus-safe housing for 2,300 people living in more than two dozen hotels.

Congress prepares for Biden's virus strategy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress is bracing for President-elect Joe Biden to move beyond the Trump administration's state-by-state approach to the COVID-19 crisis and build out a national strategy to fight the pandemic and distribute the eventual vaccine.

The incoming administration's approach reflects Democrats' belief that a more comprehensive plan, some of it outlined in the House's \$2 trillion coronavirus aid bill, is needed to get the pandemic under control. Republicans have resisted big spending but agree additional funding is needed. With the nation on edge but a vaccine in sight, the complicated logistics of vaccinating hundreds of millions of Americans raise the stakes on the major undertaking.

As Congress weighs a new round of COVID-19 relief, federal officials say doses of the vaccine could begin shipping within a day of Food and Drug Administration approval. Three pharmaceutical manufacturers — Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca — have announced early results. But the rollout faces a patchwork of state plans, a transitioning White House and potential backlash from vaccine skeptics, despite the rising U.S. death toll of nearly 260,000 people.

Alaska

ANCHORAGE — Bars and restaurants in Anchorage will be closed for indoor service, employers must allow people to work from home if possible and many businesses will be limited to 25% capacity for the month of December as Alaska's largest city tries to stem the increase in coronavirus cases, Acting Mayor Austin Quinn-Davidson said Wednesday.

The new rules go into effect Tuesday and won't end until Jan. 1, she said during a teleconference.

As of Wednesday, a total of 15,100 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Anchorage since the pandemic began; of those, 2,115 were reported in the last week.

California

LOS ANGELES — Firefighters in Silicon Valley were sent out to enforce statewide business restrictions as the state faced a Thanksgiving shadowed by an out-of-control coronavirus surge and health officials begged people to avoid large family gatherings that could become "superspreader" events.

"You have a 15-person gathering at a dinner table, then 1 in 10 of those tables could have ... a person that is unknowingly infecting others," said Dr. Christina Ghaly, health services director in Los Angeles County, which has seen about a third of all COVID-19 cases in California and 40% of the deaths.

As with many other states, cases of COVID-19 have been skyrocketing for weeks in California. A record 18,350 were reported Tuesday, surpassing the previous daily high of more than 15,000 cases announced Saturday.

Colorado

DENVER — Denver Mayor Michael Hancock flew to Mississippi to visit family despite sending messages on social media and to city staff asking them to avoid traveling for the Thanksgiving holiday.

The mayor's spokesperson Mike Strott told The Denver Post that Hancock flew out of Denver on Wednesday to spend Thanksgiving with his wife and youngest daughter, who are already in Mississippi.

"That is incredibly disappointing," Dr. Sandy Johnson, head of the University of Denver's school of global health affairs, said of Hancock's actions. "So many folks in the city of Denver have been doing the right thing. Unless there is some

family emergency compelling the travel this just seems hypocritical at a time when we need leaders to lead by example."

On Wednesday evening, Hancock released a public apology admitting that he went against his own public guidance.

Oregon

SALEM — Bars and restaurants can reopen for limited outdoor service next week but many restrictions will remain in place until a vaccine against the coronavirus is widely available, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said on Wednesday.

She pleaded with Oregonians to stay safe during the Thanksgiving holidays, and protect others, by not ignoring safety protocols, like wearing masks and limiting personal contacts.

"Please, please make smart choices this holiday weekend that will protect you, your family and your neighbors," she told a Zoom news conference. "Irresponsible behavior over Thanksgiving, at best, will only make the pandemic last longer. At worst, it will send one of your loved ones to the ICU."

New York

NEW YORK — At one New York eatery, your table is ready — along with your coronavirus test results.

City Winery, an upscale chain, is trying a novel approach to indoor dining during a pandemic: Two nights a week, all patrons and staffers at its Manhattan location have to take a rapid virus test on-site and get an all-clear before coming in. (Other nights unfold without testing but with precautions including temperature checks and spaced-out tables.)

Costing diners \$50 per person on top of their tabs, it's an elite experiment — complete with a free glass of sparkling wine — and health experts caution that a test isn't a failsafe. So does City Winery CEO Michael Dorf, but he thinks the idea is worth

trying as restaurants try to get through a year of shutdowns and social distancing.

Washington

SEATTLE — A new report shows people infected with the coronavirus in Washington state's most populous county in recent weeks have been mostly exposed in homes, during social activities and gatherings, and in workplaces.

Instead of a few "hotspots," the report shows the risk of exposure is now widespread throughout King County as cases have increased in the past two months.

Public Health — Seattle & King County released the report on outbreaks and exposure settings Wednesday showing where people most frequently reported being exposed.

County health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin said case numbers in King County are now triple what they were in October and it's fair to assume exposure can happen anywhere people are around other people, especially indoors.

Wisconsin

MADISON — The number of confirmed COVID-19 infections in Wisconsin continued to tick downward Wednesday, a rare bit of good news for health officials as they struggle to contain the deadly disease.

The state Department of Health Services reported 5,469 confirmed cases Wednesday. The number of confirmed cases has now declined for five days, an encouraging sign after the state saw a record-high 7,989 cases on Nov. 18.

According to DHS, the total number of confirmed infections stood at 369,442 as of Wednesday. The disease was a factor in 63 more deaths, bringing the death toll to 3,178, according to the department. Wisconsin remains sixth in the nation in per capita infections, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Lawyer accused of stealing from veterans charity

CT NEW BRITAIN — A former Connecticut lawyer was charged by state authorities with embezzling nearly \$1 million from a charity for military veterans and their families, just two weeks after he was sentenced to more than three years in prison on a federal charge for the same crimes.

On Nov. 9, Kevin Creed, 69, of Litchfield, was sentenced on a federal fraud charge to the prison time and ordered to pay \$1.4 million restitution to Fisher House Foundation in Connecticut, a chapter of a national charity that builds homes near veterans medical centers where families can stay for free while their loved ones undergo treatment.

State prosecutors said Creed stole \$985,000 from the charity and used the money for his own purposes.

Creed, an Army veteran and former state trooper, gave up his right to practice law in Connecticut last year.

Judge: Offensive vanity plates can't be banned

CA SAN FRANCISCO — California can't enforce a ban on vanity license plates it considers "offensive to good taste and decency" because that violates freedom of speech, a federal judge ruled.

U.S. District Judge Jon Tigar ruled in a case against Department of Motor Vehicles Director Steve Gordon on behalf of five Californians who were denied permission to put their messages on personalized license plates.

They included an Army veteran who wanted to note his nickname and love of wolves with "OGWOOLF" but was refused because the DMV said the OG might be construed as a reference to "original gangster."

The judge said the personalized messages were types of personal expression, not "government speech," and therefore regulations governing them "must be both viewpoint-neutral and reasonable."

Church organization pays over \$5.2 million in medical debts

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — Medical debts totaling more than \$5.2 million owed by more than 3,200 families in Kansas and Oklahoma were paid through a project of the United Church of Christ Kansas-Oklahoma Conference, church officials said.

The money was sent to New York-based RIP Medical Debt, a nonprofit organization that purchased the debt at a discount and

forgave the amount owed.

The average amount forgiven per household was \$1,612.54, according to the church. The church does not know who the recipients are, said spokesperson Connie Larkman.

Inmate captured more than a week after escape

MI EATON RAPIDS — A Lansing-area jail inmate who had escaped was captured after leading officers on two separate vehicle chases, police said.

Michael McKerchie, 32, was captured after he was first spotted at a convenience store before he fled, crashed his truck in a cemetery, fled on foot and stole another vehicle.

Officers who received a report that someone had stolen a truck in the area then located that vehicle, stopped it and arrested McKerchie, the Eaton County Sheriff's Department said.

McKerchie had escaped from the Ingham County jail Nov. 12, when he dismantled his cell window, sneaked out of the jail, stole a truck and fled the area, police said.

Vandals try to pull down former president statue

IL CHICAGO — Vandals tried to topple a Chicago park's statue of President William McKinley using a rope tethered to a car, police said.

The attempt to pull down the statue at McKinley Park failed, but police said the statue was spray-painted with graffiti that WGN-TV reported included the words "Land Back."

McKinley was president from 1897 to 1901 and his push for westward expansion is now widely criticized as racist, for pushing Indigenous people off their land, WBBM-TV reported.

Chicago police did not have a description of whomever targeted the McKinley statue.

Animal shelter rescues 11 dogs from field

IN MUNCIE — Nearly a dozen dogs were rounded up and rescued from a field in eastern Indiana.

Some of the dogs had to be pulled from a Delaware County drainage pile, the Star Press of Muncie reported.

The Muncie Animal Shelter was called by someone who saw the dogs running in the field. Animal shelter director Ethan Browning said the dogs possibly were abandoned, appeared terrified and were behaving defensively.

Ten of the dogs were chihuahua-type mix breeds. One was a mixed-breed terrier. The dogs were receiving full medical checkups.

Man convicted of pulling down religious monument

MT KALISPELL — A Montana man was convicted of using a chain and a pickup truck to topple a monument commemorating the Ten Commandments.

Anthony Craig Weimer, 30, was found guilty of felony criminal mischief in Flathead County District Court, The Flathead Beacon reported. His sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 21.

Weimer admitted to chaining the granite monument to his truck and pulling it into Main Street in Kalispell on June 27. He dragged the monument several feet before leaving it in the street in front of the Flathead County Justice Center in the northwest Montana city.

Weather brings increase of cold-stunned turtles

MA QUINCY — The onset of cold weather in New England led to a surge of cold-stunned turtles becoming stranded on Cape Cod beaches, marine scientists said.

The turtles — Kemp's ridleys, loggerheads, and leatherbacks — are treated at the New England Aquarium's sea turtle hospital for life-threatening medical conditions that are a result of weeks of hypothermia and the inability to feed. Once they're well enough, they are released back into the ocean.

Cemetery, church among sites named to historic register

TN NASHVILLE — A cemetery, a church and an old post office were among six properties in Tennessee named to the National Register of Historic Places.

The six locations were placed on the national list of cultural resources worthy of preservation, The Tennessee Historical Commission said in a news release.

Three named to the register were Millennium Manor, a granite, concrete and marble home built between 1938 and 1946 in Alcoa; Mt. Olive Cemetery, a historic African American burial site dating back to 1817 in Clarksville; and First Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, a Gothic Revival-style church built in 1887 in Dayton.

From The Associated Press

Howell, Heels pose challenge for Irish

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Brian Kelly has postponed No. 2 Notre Dame's Thanksgiving dinner for two days — perhaps for good reason.

His Fighting Irish (8-0, 7-0 Atlantic Coast Conference) need to be light on their feet when they take on the explosive offense of Mack Brown's 19th-ranked North Carolina Tar Heels (6-2, 6-2) on Friday afternoon.

"They're an extremely talented team," Kelly said. "We've played similar teams — Clemson comes to mind. (The Tar Heels) don't go away — they have come back in fourth quarters and won football games. They keep playing."

Led by 6-foot-1, 220-pound quarterback Sam Howell, the Tar Heels are averaging 563.4 yards (fourth among FBS schools) and 43.1 points (10th) per game. Their abundance of returning offensive talent includes running backs Javonte Williams and Michael Carter, wide receivers Dyami Brown and Dazz Newsome and tight end Garrett Walston.

Howell, who threw for 3,641 yards and 38 touchdowns to lead the Tar Heels to a 7-6 finish in 2019, is on pace to shatter those marks. He has already thrown for 2,631 yards and 23 touchdowns, averages 15.7 yard per completion and ranks ninth in

passing efficiency (182.6).

Brown is seventh in receiving yards (829) and eighth in TD receptions (8) while Williams leads the nation in touchdowns (18) and is seventh nationally with 868 rushing yards. "They have two great backs, so we have to be tied into the running game," Notre Dame strong safety Shaun Crawford said. "We have to wrap up and bring them down because they are great after contact. They have great receivers on the outside — a lot of speed, a lot of skill." After reaching No. 5 in mid-October, the Tar Heels suffered a pair of three-point road losses at Florida State (31-28) and Virginia (44-41) when they couldn't overcome double-digit deficits and fell out of the Top 25. But even there, the penchant for comebacks was plain.

Earlier this month, they trailed Wake Forest by 21 points, 45-24, with 6:56 left in the third quarter before Howell engineered a remarkable turnaround, throwing three touchdown passes and running for another score as North Carolina scored 35 unanswered points on the way to a 59-53 victory. Howell's 550 yards and six touchdown passes and the team's 21-point comeback and 742 total yards from the game are all program records.

The Irish defense, which limited All-America running back Travis Etienne to 28 yards in a 47-40 double-overtime victory over Clemson and held Boston College to 85 yards rushing in a 45-31 victory the following week, is fourth nationally against the run and (85.1 yards per game), ninth in total defense. (304.1 yards) and 11th in scoring defense (16.6 points).

The Irish have 21 quarterback sacks and 36 QB hurries this season and have forced nine turnovers in their last four victories.

"This will be the most physical unit we've seen," Tar Heels offensive coordinator Phil Longo said. of Notre Dame's deep and veteran defense led by ends Daelin Hayes and Adetokunbo Ogundeji, tackle Myron Tagovailoa-Amosa, linebacker Drew White and rover Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah.

"In a year where we're saying a lot of people miss defense," Brown said, "well, Notre Dame didn't get the memo."

The Irish know what they need to do against the prolific Tar Heels.

"From our perspective, we want to be who we are — we want to be physical," Kelly said. "We have to do a great job of minimizing big chunk plays. You start by minimizing those and controlling the line of scrimmage. This will be a great challenge for us."

For a change, defenses stealing the show in Big 12

Associated Press

Defenses are helping carve a path toward the Big 12 championship game.

The two current frontrunners, No. 15 Iowa State and No. 14 Oklahoma, have stood out recently by what they've done to limit opposing offenses.

The first-place Cyclones held Kansas State to nine pass completions and 149 total yards in a 45-0 victory over the Wildcats last week. Second-place Oklahoma has allowed a total of two touchdowns and registered 13 sacks in its last two games.

And it's not just them. While the Big 12 historically is known for its high-scoring offenses, there is evidence that top to bottom the defenses are starting to

push back.

Big 12 defenses are holding opposing offenses to 377 yards per game this season, the lowest among the Power 5 conferences, according to the league. And the Big 12's combined average of 28.3 points allowed is the second lowest.

In Big 12 games only, scoring has dropped from about 32 points on average in 2016 to 29.2 points both in 2019 and this season, while offensive production has dipped from 473 yards per game in 2016 to about 384 so far in 2020. Oklahoma led the league in each season. The Sooners peaked at 612.8 yards of offense in 2018. That's down to 498.4 yards in 2020.

"No doubt, it's been an impres-

sive year for the league defensively," Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley said. "There's a lot of really quality defenses, and I wouldn't disagree if you said maybe more than in some years past."

TCU coach Gary Patterson said nowadays what works well on defense for one team tends to get copied by others.

"Everybody mimics," he said. "If something's being successful, then they clone it, and there's a lot of people that have gotten where they're cloning things that are being successful."

At Iowa State, success starts in the middle. Linebacker Mike Rose is second in the Big 12 in total tackles with 63 and he leads the conference with four inter-

ceptions. Greg Eisworth, a two-time all-Big 12 first team selection, anchors the secondary.

Iowa State defensive end Will McDonald is tied with Oklahoma linebacker Nik Bonitto for the league lead with 6.5 sacks, while Cyclones defensive end JaQuan Bailey has six sacks and is second in the league with 12 tackles for loss.

Texas coach Tom Herman, who was Iowa State's offensive coordinator from 2009-11, said overall this is the best Cyclones team he's seen "in a long, long time."

"They've got great players up front on defense," Herman said. "That side of the ball is so talented and very cohesive, well coached."

Top 25 basketball roundup

San Diego State stuns No. 22 UCLA

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Matt Mitchell and Jordan Schakel scored 15 points apiece and San Diego State used its disruptive defense and three-point shots to beat No. 22 UCLA 73-58 in the opener for both teams on Wednesday in San Diego.

Mitchell and Schakel hit threes early in the second half to open a 40-28 lead and the Aztecs dominated the rest of the way at empty Viejas Arena. Aguek Arop and Terrell Gomez scored 10 points each for SDSU, which was 30-2 last season and expecting its highest seed ever in the NCAA Tournament before it was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Villanova 76, Boston College 67: Jeremiah Robinson-Earl had 18 points and 10 rebounds as the Wildcats overcame a nine-point second-half deficit to beat the Eagles in the first round of the Empire Classic in Uncasville, Conn.

Collin Gillespie added 15 points and Justin Moore and Caleb Daniels each had 14 for Villanova, which will play No. 18 Arizona State in the tournament championship game Thursday.

No. 4 Virginia 89, Towson 54: Trey Murphy III scored 21 points a day after learning he was cleared to play, and fellow transfer Sam Hauser added 19 as the Cavaliers opened the season with a rout in Uncasville, Conn.

Jay Huff added 14 points for Virginia, which never trailed and led by 23 points at halftime.

No. 5 Iowa 97, North Carolina Central 67: Luka Garza had 26 points and 10 rebounds and the host Hawkeyes beat the Eagles.

Garza, the Big Ten player of the year last season and the lone unanimous selection on the preseason AP All-America team, had his 17th consecutive game of 20 points or more.

No. 7 Wisconsin 77, Eastern Illinois 67: Nate Reuvers had 18 points and nine rebounds to lead the host Badgers.

Ben Carlson came off the bench to score 13 points for Wisconsin, and D'Mitrik Trice added 11. Josiah Wallace led the Panthers with 16 points.

No. 8 Illinois 122, North Carolina AT&T 60: Ayo Dosunmu scored a career-high 28 points, freshman Adam Miller also scored 28 and the host Illini rolled to an easy win.

No. 10 Kentucky 81, Morehead State 45: Brandon Boston Jr. had 15 points and seven rebounds, Devin Askew and Terrence Clarke each added 12 points and the host Wildcats cruised past the Eagles.

No. 13 Michigan State 83, Eastern Michigan 67: Foster Loyer made a career-high six three-pointers and scored a career-high 20 points to lead the host Spartans past the Eagles.

No. 14 Texas Tech 101, Northwestern State 58: Mac McClung scored 20 points in his debut, fellow transfer Marcus Santos-Silva had 10 points and 12 rebounds, and the host Red Raiders opened the season with a lopsided win.

No. 15 West Virginia 79, South Dakota State 71: Miles McBride scored a career-high 23 points and the Mountaineers held off the Jackrabbits in the Bad Boys Mowers Crossover Classic in Sioux Falls, S.D.

No. 16 North Carolina 79, College Of Charleston 60: Freshman Caleb Love scored 17 points and the host Tar Heels ran off 17 straight second-half points to beat the Cougars.

No. 17 Houston 89, Lamar 45: Marcus Sasser scored 25 points, Tramon Mark added 22 points and eight rebounds and the host Cougars beat the Cardinals.

No. 18 Arizona State 94, Rhode Island 88: Remy Martin scored 26 points and freshman Marcus Bagley made three key free throws in the final minute to lead the Sun Devils to a win in the Empire Classic.

No. 19 Texas 91, Texas-Rio Grande Valley 55: Courtney Ramey had 20 points and six assists, and the host Longhorns opened the season with a victory over the Vaqueros.

No. 23 Ohio State 94, Illinois State 67: Justice Sueing scored 19 points and the host Buckeyes scored the first 22 points en route to a win over the Redbirds.

No. 24 Rutgers 86, Sacred Heart 63: Freshman center Cliff Omouryi had 14 points on 6-for-6 shooting and added 11 rebounds to help the host Scarlet Knights win their season opener.

No. 25 Michigan 96, Bowling Green 82: Chaundee Brown scored 18 of his 19 points in the second half of his debut, and the host Wolverines beat the Hilltoppers.

First day of season: Cancellations, protests, quarantines

Associated Press

The strangest anticipated season in college basketball history kicked off Wednesday with dozens of games at arenas across the country.

Like everything else in this pandemic world, it was odd and disjointed.

Cancellations, protests, quarantined players, piped-in crowd noise, masked cheerleaders, socially distanced bench seating — the start of the season matched the chaotic build up to it.

One day down, who knows how many more left.

"I'd like normalcy, I'd like a routine, but that's not what we have right now," North

Carolina coach Roy Williams said. "You can do everything you can possibly do and still have a slipup. But the process, you need to do everything you can possibly do and be prepared to handle everything as well."

The first big event in Connecticut dubbed Bubbleville became more like Juggleville as teams dropped out, replacements moved in and crafting a schedule became like sorting through AAU brackets.

While gamblers socially distanced inside the Mohegan Sun casino, no fans were allowed in the 10,000-seat arena for the opening game between Virginia and Towson, a late replacement for coronavirus-affected Maine.

Ten members of the top-ranked South Carolina women's team followed the social justice lead of the NBA and WNBA by remaining seated for the national anthem before their 119-38 win over Charleston.

"We just wanted everyone to know we haven't forgotten about what's going on," guard Zia Cooke said. "Of course, this is a basketball game, but we wanted to use our platform."

Georgia's opener against Columbus State was canceled just hours before tipoff due to positive COVID-19 tests within the Division II team. Lipscomb's game against Campbellsville Harrodsburg also was canceled due to coronavirus issues.

Saints' Hill takes his audition seriously

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Taysom Hill intends to treat the next couple of games on the New Orleans Saints' schedule as if the trajectory of his career as an NFL quarterback is in the balance.

"There are a lot of really great players that didn't get an opportunity in the NFL and these opportunities are few and far between," said Hill, who knows better after not getting his first NFL start at QB until last weekend — at age 30.

"So my mindset is to do everything I can to take advantage of every single opportunity," Hill continued. "I'm preparing as hard as I can ... and each game is a big game for me."

If this is indeed Hill's audition to succeed 41-year-old starter Drew Brees long term, then it's off to a promising start.

In a 24-9 victory over Atlanta last weekend, Hill completed 78.3% of his passes for 233 yards without an interception and ran for two touchdowns.

But one good game does not a career make, and Hill will have to show he can reliably and consistently keep the Saints' offense moving, with the next test coming at Denver this Sunday.

The fact that Hill last week became the primary quarterback during Brees' absence because of rib injuries caught many NFL observers off guard for a few reasons.

For one, the Saints also have former Tampa Bay starting quarterback, Heisman Tro-

phy winner and 2015 first overall draft choice Jameis Winston on their roster. And before last weekend, Hill had never started and had thrown a grand total of 20 passes since his NFL career began in 2017. And Hill is still looking for his first career touchdown pass.

In addition, the 6-foot-2, 220-pound, fleet-footed Hill has emerged as one of the NFL's most versatile and effective utility players. He's done everything from blocking punts to converting fake punts as an upback, covering and returning kicks, playing tight end and of course, substituting for Brees intermittently to give New Orleans' offense a change-of-pace option threat.

But Saints coach Sean Payton reiterated this week that Hill's evolution in New Orleans never eclipsed the original vision the Saints had for the former BYU quarterback when they claimed him off waivers from Green Bay.

"Make no mistake, when we claimed him off the film, it was as a quarterback," Payton said. "Our vision was not as those other things. Those are end results after he was here."

"Here's what no one else is privy to, and it's hard," Payton said. "What the fans and other people are privy to are the special teams snaps, the wildcat snaps, the tight end (and) receiver snaps. They don't get a chance to see the same snaps that (coaches) might see throughout the course of a year that take place that aren't necessarily game

snaps.

Starting Hill over Winston "wasn't by any means an easy decision," Payton added, "because I feel like we have two capable and really good quarterbacks that are in the building already."

The Saints are eager for Brees, who'll miss at least two more games, to return. But they also have sounded gratified to see Hill finally get his chance after persevering through an injury-filled college career and spending his first three full seasons as a pro graciously accepting — and executing — unconventional assignments.

"Everybody knows how talented Taysom is," Saints running back Alvin Kamara said. "He deserves it."

Hill had major injuries in four of his five seasons at BYU: a knee injury, a bone fracture in his leg, a foot fracture and a hyper-extended elbow.

"My wife and I dealt with a lot of disappointment through college where pretty much every one of my offseasons but one were spent rehabbing from an injury," Hill said.

Since arriving in New Orleans, Hill said he has intently studied and sought to emulate the way the record-setting Brees prepares mentally and on the field. In the process, Hill said, he has gained in Brees a close friend.

"He's an incredible mentor," Hill said. "So I've tried to adopt everything that that guy has done."

Raiders' performance improves, even if record hasn't

Associated Press

Ten games into the 2020 season, the Raiders are in the same position they were a year ago.

The manner in which they got to 6-4 this year compared to last year provides them confidence that they won't falter down the stretch again and miss the playoffs for the 17th time in 18 seasons.

Derek Carr has the offense performing at an extremely high level so the Raiders believe they can compete with anyone as evidenced by going toe to toe with in splitting two games with the defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs.

"There's just something about this team; the teams we've lost to, how we've lost and things like that," Carr said Wednesday. "The teams that we've played with and beat

and things like that. We're definitely a better team this year, but we right now have to, and I mean have to, finish this season better than we did last year. And I believe that we will. I'm hopeful and I believe that we will and I think that it's different, I feel it's different, but time will tell if it's different."

The Raiders got to 6-4 a year ago thanks to a three-game home winning streak against Detroit, the Chargers and Cincinnati. But even the final game of that run showed some flaws as the Raiders only beat the lowly Bengals 17-10 in a sign that the offense might begin slipping.

That started to happen the following week as they lost 34-3 on the road against the struggling New York Jets, followed by a 40-9 loss at Kansas City. The skid extended to four games with back-to-back losses to

close out the Oakland Coliseum to Tennessee and Jacksonville before a Week 16 win at the Chargers provided a sliver of hope.

The Raiders went into the finale needing a win and help, but got neither and wrapped up the season with a 1-5 stretch following a 16-15 loss at Denver.

The Raiders ranked last in the NFL in scoring over the final six weeks with just 14.7 points per game.

Las Vegas is a completely different team offensively this season as Carr has taken his game to another level with a willingness to throw deep more often and a better ability to turn bad plays into good ones by scrambling.

He's performing even better than he did in 2016, when the Raiders went 12-4 and he earned MVP votes.