

## SEAL suit: Vaccine mandate violates religious freedoms

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

Twenty-six Navy SEALs and nine other special operations sailors asked a federal court to shield them from the Pentagon's coronavirus vaccine mandate, claiming in a lawsuit Tuesday that it unconstitutionally infringes on their religious rights.

The suit from the unnamed sailors filed in the U.S. District Court's Northern Texas division charges the Pentagon does not take seriously their religion-based objections to the coronavirus vaccine, which Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin mandated for troops in August. The plaintiffs — the SEALs, five special warfare combatant craft crewmen, three Navy divers, and one explosive ordnance disposal technician — had each formally sought a religious exemption to the coronavirus vaccine mandate from the Navy, which had either been denied or remained open as of Tuesday, according to the First Liberty Institute, a Christian conservative legal group based in Texas that filed the lawsuit for the sailors.

"[The] plaintiffs' sincerely held religious beliefs forbid each of them from receiving the [coronavirus] vaccine for a variety of reasons based upon their Christian faith as revealed through the Holy Bible and prayerful discernment," the lawsuit reads.

The suit claims the sailors have different reasons for believing the vaccines violate their religious beliefs — among them that they believe taking it would cause them to "participate in the abortion enterprise" or the immune response that the vaccines produce do so in "a manner not designed by God."

The lawsuit also states, "Multiple plaintiffs hold to the sincere religious belief that, upon seeking guidance from God as to whether to receive a [coronavirus] vaccine, God instructed them not to do so."

To date, none of the military services have disclosed granting a waiver to the vaccine mandate for religious reasons. The Navy said Wednesday that it had granted six medical exemptions, though it had not issued a religious exemption.

The service has given active-duty service members until Nov. 28 to be fully vaccinated, which is considered to be two weeks after completing their shot regimen. Navy reservists have until Dec. 28.

"The fact that the government has not granted a single religious exemption from the vaccine mandate shows that [President Joe Biden's] administration does not care about religious freedom," said Mike Berry, First Liberty's lead attorney for the lawsuit. "Instead, this appears to be an attempted ideological purge. Forcing a service member to choose between their faith and serving their country is abhorrent to the Constitution and America's values."

The Navy did not disclose how many requests it has received from sailors seeking exemption for religious reasons, but officials said such requests would be considered on a "case-by-case basis" and "given full consideration." A Navy spokesman declined further comment Wednesday, citing the open lawsuit.

Navy data showed 96% of its active-duty force had been fully vaccinated as of Wednesday. The service said 99.5% of its active-duty force had received at least one dose of the vaccine. Also, as of Wednesday, 88% of Navy Reserve sailors had received at least one shot, and 84% was fully vaccinated, according to the data.

Pentagon officials have said failure to receive vaccinations could lead service members to be punished — including criminal charges for failing to obey an order — or discharged from the service. Last month, Austin called on commanders to show compassion in dealing with troops who do not comply with the mandate.

The lawsuit asks a judge to declare the troops' rights under the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Administrative Procedure Act were violated. It asks the judge to issue a preliminary and permanent injunction stopping the Pentagon from enforcing its vaccine mandate on them. It names Biden, Austin and Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro as defendants.

## Report: Military does not give all victims resources

By ROSE L. THAYER

*Stars and Stripes*

The military is failing to provide all victims of specially defined crimes, including sexual assaults, appropriate criminal investigators and prosecutors as outlined by federal law, according to a report from the Defense Department's inspector general.

The findings call into question whether those victims received thorough investigations and support services, according to a report.

"We found that the [Defense Department] cannot ensure that all victims of sexual assault are receiving support services available to them. We also found that the DoD cannot ensure that all commanders and investigators are making decisions based on the best possible information because of, among other things, inexperienced or untrained prosecutors," Sean O'Donnell, the acting Defense Department Inspector General, said in a statement provided with the report Wednesday.

Federal law requires the Defense Department and the criminal investigative agencies for each military service branch to provide victims with specially trained personnel in cases involving child abuse, serious domestic violence or sexual offenses. The inspector general determined the investigative agencies did not consistently assign certified lead investigators for investigations of those crimes. It also found investigators did not consistently document communications with special victim personnel, and the services did not consistently assign specially trained prosecutors to those cases.

The IG reviewed 447 cases that occurred between June 2018 and May 2020 from across the services in which the nature of the case called for specialized personnel.

The Air Force had the worst record for assigning appropriate lead investigators and prosecutors. It failed to ensure it assigned special-victim prosecutors in 94% of its cases, according to the report. The Army failed half of the time, the Navy failed 59% of the time and the Marine Corps did not do so in 11% of cases.

# Sunk WWII ships rising from Japanese sea

By JONATHAN SNYDER  
AND HANA KUSUMOTO

*Stars and Stripes*

Volcanic activity beneath Iwo Jima, site of a defining World War II battle between American and Japanese forces, is pushing sunken naval vessels to the surface.

Two dozen World War II-era ships in the water just off the island's black-sand beaches were photographed from above and reported Oct. 18 by the All-Nippon News Network. Although the ships have resurfaced previously, according to reports, a video posted online by the network brought fresh attention to the ghost fleet.

The network also reported that an undersea eruption near Iwo Jima — known as Iwo To in Japan — created a new island a half-square mile nearby. It's the third small island to appear there since 1900. They eventually wash away.

Reports differ as to who owned the ships. The U.S. Navy sank them to create a breakwater to shield an artificial harbor where other vessels unloaded troops and supplies, according to an Oct. 23 report by the Weather Channel.

Other reports indicate Imperial Japan sank the vessels for the same purpose prior to the cataclysmic battle in February and

March 1945. "The ships were used by Japan to prepare for an invasion of U.S. troops," the newspaper USA Today reported Oct. 22.

"Iwo Jima has been rising steadily over the years and is now over 50 feet above sea level," the report said.

A spokesman for the Naval History and Heritage Command in Washington, D.C., said its underwater archeology team has little information on the ships, even after contacting their Japanese counterparts.

Iwo Jima has been rising for years due to volcanic activity beneath it, an official with the vol-

canological department of the Japan Meteorological Agency told Stars and Stripes by phone on Oct. 27. The island has risen about three feet a year since 2014, the official said.

He said the agency started collecting data that year, and the island likely rose at the same pace in previous years.

The meteorological agency tracks volcanic activity around the island, including reports of water columns along its coast, the official said.

How the island rises is unclear but it may be due to magma accumulating beneath the island and forcing it to rise, the official said.

## Biden orders VA to review burn pits, rare cancer link

By NIKKI WENTLING

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday ordered the Department of Veterans Affairs to review research into several rare cancers to determine whether they could be caused by exposure to toxins during military service.

If the VA determines there's enough evidence to support a connection, the department could create a fast track to health care and disability compensation for veterans suffering from the cancers. Biden gave the agency 90 days to provide its recommendations.

The conditions include rare respiratory cancers, such as squamous cell carcinoma of the larynx and salivary gland tumors, as well as lung cancers and constrictive bronchiolitis.

"We know there can be too long of a delay in scientific evidence that demonstrates conclusive links between exposures and their health impacts," said a se-

nior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "This can leave many veterans without access to VA benefits and high-quality treatment. The administration is moving forward with several steps to provide more timely answers."

Throughout the 1990s and the post-9/11 wars, the military used open-air pits to burn materials such as garbage, jet fuel, paint, medical waste and plastics. Veterans diagnosed with cancer, respiratory issues and lung disease at young ages have blamed exposure to the toxic fumes. They have sought VA benefits and health care, but the department contended for years that there wasn't sufficient evidence to support their claims.

Biden's administration said the 90-day review is part of its new approach to consider conditions for inclusion on the department's presumptive list, which lowers the amount of evidence that veterans must provide to receive benefits.

## Thousands come to lay flowers on Tomb of Unknown Soldier

By NIKKI WENTLING

*Stars and Stripes*

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY — Thousands of people with flowers in hand approached the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Wednesday, walking closer to the tomb than members of the public have been able to at any point in recent history.

"It's wonderful to see everybody out here," said Pam Morris, 71. "I think there are not enough remembrances given on a regular basis to people who offered up their lives for service of the country."

Morris traveled from Yardley, Pa., to lay a flower at the tomb. Her parents and grandparents were all interred at Arlington National Cemetery. Her grandfather, a World War I veteran, and her father, a World War II veteran, were both buried with full military honors.

Many visitors placed their flowers at the base of tomb. While most continued across the plaza, some people hesitated

long enough to salute or give the sign of the cross. Within an hour, the flowers were stacked so deep that a half-dozen soldiers had to gather them by the armful and move them closer to the tomb to make room for more.

The crowds at Arlington on Tuesday and Wednesday were there to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the tomb. On Nov. 11, 1921, the unidentified remains of a World War I soldier were entombed at Arlington, creating the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The tomb now includes the remains of soldiers from World War II and the Korean War, and it's become a symbol of American service and sacrifice.

More than 13,000 people registered to attend both days of the flower-laying ceremony, but the true number of visitors is expected to be much higher, said Amber Vincent, a public affairs specialist with Arlington. The cemetery didn't turn away anyone who wanted to participate.

# Biden: Infrastructure bill will fix economy

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — President Joe Biden touted his \$1 trillion infrastructure plan Wednesday as an eventual fix for the nation's inflation and supply chain woes — if Americans just have the patience to wait for the construction to begin.

The president toured the Port of Baltimore at the start of what is likely to be a national tour to showcase his signature legislation that cleared Congress last week and that he intends to sign on Monday. He declared that the spending would improve transportation of products and supplies from overseas and within the U.S. to help lower prices, reduce shortages and add union jobs.

That message is becoming more critical as the government reported Wednesday that consumer prices in October climbed 6.2%

from a year ago. Inflation has intensified instead of fading as the economy reopened after the coronavirus pandemic, creating a major challenge for Biden whose administration repeatedly said that the price increases were temporary. During remarks at the port, he acknowledged that consumer prices remained “too high.”

“Everything from a gallon of gas to a loaf of bread costs more,” he said. “We still face challenges and we have to tackle them ... we have to tackle them head on.”

Higher prices have eaten into wages and turned public sentiment on the economy against Biden in polls. One of the obstacles for reducing inflation has been backlogged ports with ships waiting to dock at major transit hubs, causing shortages and leaving some store shelves depleted ahead of the ho-

liday shopping season.

“Many people remain unsettled about the economy and we all know why,” Biden said.

He offered his infrastructure plan as the solution, albeit one that will take time to manifest. Better infrastructure — whether roads, bridges, ports or whatever — would give more capacity and resiliency for the supply chain. There would be more capacity to unload ships and move goods, which in turn would reduce price pressures and shortages.

Biden said the infrastructure spending would create jobs paying \$45 an hour, nearly 50% above the current national average. It would create a wealth of jobs to fix aging pipes, bridges and roads, and boost clean energy and cybersecurity. And most wouldn't require college degrees.

## ‘Strong’ start to kids’ vaccines, but challenges loom

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The campaign to vaccinate elementary school age children in the United States is off to a strong start, health officials said Wednesday, but experts have said there are signs it will be difficult to sustain the initial momentum.

About 900,000 kids aged 5 to 11 will have received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in their first week of eligibility, the White House said, providing the first glimpse at the pace of the school-aged vaccination campaign.

“We're off to a very strong start,” said White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients, during a briefing with reporters.

Final clearance for the shots was granted by federal regulators on Nov. 2, with the

first doses to kids beginning in some locations the following day.

The estimated increase in vaccinations in elementary school age children appears similar to a jump seen in May, when adolescents ages 12 to 15 became eligible for shots.

Now nearly 20,000 pharmacies, clinics and physicians' offices are offering the doses to younger kids, and the Biden administration estimates that by the end of Wednesday, more than 900,000 of the kid doses will have been given. On top of that, about 700,000 first-shot appointments are scheduled for the coming days.

About 28 million 5- to 11-year-olds are now eligible for the low-dose Pfizer vaccine. Kids who get their first of two shots by the end of next week will be fully vaccinated by

Christmas.

The administration is encouraging schools to host vaccine clinics on site to make it even easier for kids to get shots. The White House is also asking schools to share information from “trusted messengers” like doctors and public health officials to combat misinformation around the vaccines.

A initial surge in demand for vaccinations was expected from parents who have been waiting for the chance to protect their younger kids, especially before the holidays.

About 3% of newly eligible children in the U.S. got first shots in the first week, but the rate of vaccinations varied widely around the country, as it has for adult vaccines.

## Jan. 6 rioter who hit officer gets over 3 years in prison

Associated Press

A New Jersey gym owner who punched a police officer during the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol was sentenced Wednesday to more than three years in prison, a likely benchmark for dozens of other rioters who engaged in violence that day.

Scott Fairlamb, 44, was the first person to be sentenced for assaulting a law enforcement officer during the Capitol riot. His 41-month prison term is the longest among 32 riot-related sentences handed down so far.

Fairlamb's punishment likely will guide

other judges who sentence rioters who clashed with police at the Capitol. U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth said it was significant that his sentencing of Fairlamb was the first for assaulting an officer, with more guilty pleas likely in the coming months.

Lamberth said Fairlamb's actions struck at “the heart of our democracy.” He had pleaded guilty, avoiding a trial.

“Had you gone to trial, I don't think there's any jury that could have acquitted you or would have acquitted you,” the

judge said.

Fairlamb, a boxing coach and former mixed martial arts fighter, apologized and expressed remorse for actions that he described as irresponsible and reckless.

“I take full responsibility for what I did that day,” Fairlamb said. “That's not who I am. That's not who I was raised to be.”

Justice Department prosecutors recommended a prison sentence of three years and eight months for Fairlamb, saying he was among the first rioters to breach the Capitol and incited others to be violent.



# China's leader warns of 'Cold War' in Asia-Pacific

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Chinese President Xi Jinping warned Thursday against letting tensions in the Asia-Pacific region cause a relapse into a Cold War mentality.

His remarks on the sidelines of the annual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum came weeks after the United States, Britain and Australia announced a new security alliance in the region that would see Australia build nuclear submarines. China has harshly criticized the deal.

And in a separate illustration of strains within APEC, one Southeast Asian delegate told The Associated Press that the group had so far failed to reach agreement on a U.S. bid to host the 2023 summit due to unmet demands from Russia.

Xi spoke in a pre-recorded video to a CEO Summit at APEC, which is being hosted by New Zealand in a virtual format. He is scheduled to participate in an online meeting with other Pacific Rim leaders including U.S. President Joe Biden on Saturday.

In his speech, Xi said attempts to draw boundaries in the region along ideological or geopolitical lines would fail. His reference to the Cold War echoes Beijing's oft-stated position that the U.S. should abandon that way of thinking in dealing with China.

"The Asia-Pacific region cannot and should not relapse into the confrontation and division of the Cold War era," Xi said.

Xi also said the region should make sure to keep supply lines functioning and to continue liberalizing trade and investment.

"China will remain firm in advancing reform and opening up so as to add impetus to economic development," he said.

The most pressing task in the region is to make an all-out effort to fight the pandemic and to emerge from its shadow as soon as possible, he said.

Meanwhile, the Southeast Asian delegate, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to publicly discuss the issue, said Russia had refused to support the U.S. bid unless some of its diplomats were removed from a U.S. blacklist or allowed to enter the U.S. to participate in the APEC meetings.

The delegate said the U.S. is unlikely to agree to Russia's demands because issues involving America's security are considered "non-negotiable." The delegate added that China had stayed silent on the U.S. offer.

If the 21 APEC leaders fail to reach a consensus on the U.S. bid by Friday, the delegate said, a paragraph in a draft of the summit communique welcoming the U.S. offer would have to be deleted.

# Measure targets historic GI Bill racial inequities

Associated Press

For Veterans Day, a group of Democratic lawmakers is reviving an effort to pay the families of Black service members who fought on behalf of the nation during World War II for benefits they were denied or prevented from taking full advantage of when they returned home from war.

The new legislative effort would benefit surviving spouses and all living descendants of Black WWII veterans whose families were denied the opportunity to build wealth with housing and educational benefits through the GI Bill.

Since 1944, those benefits have been offered to millions of veterans transitioning to civilian life. But due to racism and discrimination in how they were granted through local Veterans Affairs offices, many Black WWII veterans received substantially less money toward purchasing a home or continuing their education.

The Senate bill was to be introduced Thursday by Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock of Georgia, the son of a WWII veteran.

"We've all seen how these inequities have trickled down over time," Warnock said, adding that the bill "represents a major step toward righting this injustice."

A House version was introduced last week by Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, the Democratic majority whip, and Rep. Seth Moulton of Massachusetts.

"This is an opportunity for America to repair an egregious fault," said Clyburn. "Hopefully it can also begin to lay a foundation that will help break the cycle of poverty among those people who are the descendants of those who made sacrifices to preserve this democracy."

Moulton, a Marine veteran who served four tours during the Iraq War, said: "There are a lot of Black Americans who are feeling the effects of this injustice today, even though it was originally perpetrated 70 years ago."

The legislation would extend the VA Loan Guaranty Program and GI Bill educational assistance to Black WWII veterans and their descendants who are alive at the time of the bill's enactment. It would also create a panel of independent experts to study inequities in how benefits are administered to women and people of color.

# SpaceX crew launch celebrates 600 space travelers in 60 years

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A SpaceX rocket carried four astronauts into orbit Wednesday night, including the 600th person to reach space in 60 years.

The repeatedly delayed flight occurred just two days after SpaceX brought four other astronauts home from the International Space Station. They should have been up there to welcome the newcomers, but NASA and SpaceX decided to switch the order based on Monday's ideal recovery weather in the Gulf of Mexico and pulled it off.

"It was a great ride, better than we imagined," mission commander Raja Chari said shortly after the spacecraft reached orbit.

The launch was just as riveting for specta-

tors at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, as well as along the East Coast, as the Falcon rocket thundered through clouds on its way to space, turning night into day.

Germany's Matthias Maurer claimed the No. 600 position, according to NASA, based on his mission assignment. He and his three NASA crewmates should arrive at the space station in under 24 hours, well over a week late.

The list of 600 travelers ranges from those who have barely scratched space — like actor William Shatner last month — to U.S. and Russian astronauts who have spent a year or more in orbit. This year's surge in space tourists helped push the tally over the 600 mark.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Profanity at finish line disqualifies runner

**MI** PARCHMENT — A Michigan high school runner who finished second in a state championship race was disqualified for expressing four-letter words of joy as he crossed the finish line.

Garrett Winter, a senior at Parchment High School, ran the 3.1-mile course in 15 minutes, 27 seconds, a personal best. But officials said his profanities at the end of the Division 2 race violated a national rule that governs conduct in high school running.

Cody Inglis, assistant director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, said Winter's words could be heard 50 yards away. Winter said

he regretted putting race officials "in the position to make this call."

### Police urge drivers: 'No drive like one clown'

**HI** KAHULUI — A police department is using Hawaii's creole language and some humor to get motorists to slow down, with signs like, "Eh slow down. No drive like one clown."

The Maui Police Department's anti-speeding campaign using Hawaii Pidgin hopes to ease a serious problem. So far this year, Maui police have pulled over nearly 5,000 people for speeding — a 40% increase from the year before, Hawaii News Now reported. Pidgin is a mix of the grammar and words from languages spoken by Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Puerto Rican and other workers who toiled in Hawaii's sugar plantations.

### Driver wearing body armor prompts chase

**IN** LAPORTE COUNTY — A 47-year-old Illinois man wearing body armor was arrested after leading state police on a high-speed chase in northwestern Indiana.

The chase started when a trooper attempted to stop an SUV that was traveling east on Interstate 94 at 93 mph, police said. State police were able to puncture the SUV's tires and forced it to stop in LaPorte County.

The driver from Harvey, Ill., faces charges including resisting law enforcement with a vehicle, wearing body armor while committing a felony and reckless driving. His passenger, a 26-year-old Dolton, Ill., resident was found with a loaded .40-caliber handgun.

### Federal agents seize 220 pounds of cocaine

**IL** CHICAGO — Federal agents last week seized 220 pounds of cocaine in Chicago.

Three people were arrested, and a private plane was seized as part of the operation, the U.S. Attorney's office for the Northern District of Illinois said in a release.

The cocaine was part of a suspected Mexico-to-Chicago drug pipeline.

Agents found 176 pounds of the drug in a vehicle in the city's River North neighborhood, while another 44 pounds was taken from a hotel room along Chicago's Gold Coast, according to criminal complaints filed in federal court.

The drugs allegedly had been

flown into an airport in Gary, Ind., from Houston. The flight originated southwest of Mexico City in Toluca, Mexico.

A 30-year-old man from Toluca and a 25-year-old man from Columbus, Ind., were arrested Wednesday in downtown Chicago. A 39-year-old Indianapolis man was arrested Thursday.

### Cubs of food-raising grizzly trapped, collared

**WY** JACKSON — Wildlife managers in northwestern Wyoming have put tracking collars on two of four cubs belonging to a well-known grizzly bear that has been raiding human sources of food.

Wildlife watchers have been familiar with Grizzly No. 399 for years, following her movements and offspring closely. Lately the grizzly and her current litter of cubs have run into trouble getting into garbage, apiaries and animal feed in the Jackson area.

The collaring is a "preventive step" meant to help the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service address future problems involving grizzly No. 399 and her cubs, the agency's acting regional director, Matt Hogan, said in a statement.

Grizzlies in the Yellowstone region of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho are protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

### 13-year-old carjacking suspect shot by woman

**MO** ST. LOUIS — A 13-year-old boy carjacking suspect is hospitalized in stable condition after being shot by the alleged victim of the

crime.

A 37-year-old woman was getting out of her car near her home when two males approached on Monday night. The woman told police the 13-year-old pulled a gun and demanded her car keys and her money.

As the second suspect was trying to start the car, the woman told police the 13-year-old was still pointing the gun at her but became distracted, so she pulled out her own gun and shot him.

Police later found the boy with a gunshot wound to the leg. The second suspect remains on the loose.

### Threatened status sought for turtle

**LA** NEW ORLEANS — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Monday that it is proposing threatened status for alligator snapping turtles — huge, spike-shelled reptiles that lurk at the bottom of lakes and slow waterways, luring prey to their mouths by sticking out a wormlike lure.

Every state in their range now protects them, but the long-lasting effects of catching the reptiles for turtle soup are among reasons their numbers are now so low, the agency said.

The turtles are suffering the effects of "decades and decades of exploitation," said Elise Bennett, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, whose organization sued for protection for the species.

Alligator snapping turtles can live 80 years, with males known to weigh up to 249 pounds. Their jaws are strong enough to snap bone.

— From Associated Press

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# 17 games: A long season

*Associated Press*

Dak Prescott won't suit up every week in the NFL's first 17-game regular season because he's already had to sit once with a strained right calf.

The star Dallas quarterback can still see the big picture of the added game.

"Just making sure that we stay locked in and focused," Prescott said before the Cowboys' six-game winning streak ended with a thud in a 30-16 loss to Denver. "I think when you're having the success we're having, guys are excited for that extra game just to get out there, continue to build on what we have going right now and propel us into the tournament."

Coaches and players still say "long season" a lot on a variety of topics. It's just harder to tell if they're using the same old cliché or thinking about adding a week to get within a few days of four full months of football before the playoffs even start.

The consensus: It's probably too early to tell, but it's not something they're completely ignoring.

"I cut some things back in training camp," Dallas coach Mike McCarthy said. "The initial plan that I put together, we probably hit about 90% of that as far as workload capacity."

Several years before the 17th game was added, McCarthy was still in Green Bay when he changed the weekly routine to make Friday more about rest and recovery before a final practice Saturday. The 17th game is a perfect fit for that.

Tennessee coach Mike Vrabel lightened the load for the Titans last week before the latest in a series of impressive wins, 28-16 at the Los Angeles Rams. The closest thing to a practice came Friday after lighter workouts the previous two days.

"There are so many ... guys that are working their way through things and battling through just the wear and tear of the regular season," Vrabel said. "I think that is the biggest thing is trying to be creative and trying to find ways to improve but also ways to take care of guys and also get some other guys some work."

The Titans also have one of the latest byes, in Week 13 (and remember there are 18 weeks this season), which raises the question of whether those teams (Week 14 is the latest) will have an edge in the latest regular-season finish (Jan. 9) in league history.

The Super Bowl also is later than ever — Feb. 13, or 207 days (29 weeks and change) after the first day that the first teams, Dallas

and Pittsburgh, could officially report for training camp. The preseason was shortened by one game.

"You definitely got to focus on recovery," said Tennessee right tackle David Quessenberry, who has yet to play a full season but is still on track for it this year. "That's a big part of being able to play week in, week out in this league. But for me, it's always just focus about the next game. Be completely 100% in to play your best ball just the next week."

Asked if he remembered a year where he felt particularly run down after 16 games, Dallas running back Ezekiel Elliott said, "That's every year. I think by Week 16, everyone's worn out, even you guys. It's a physical game we play. We plan on playing deeper than 17 weeks anyway."

That's probably a better way to frame it for players, since they all want the season to end not far from where the Cowboys reported for camp in Oxnard, Calif., on July 21. The Super Bowl is at year-old SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif.

With only the top seed in each conference getting a first-round bye, most of the teams are now targeting a 21-game season. The Super Bowl champion will play at least 20 games for the first time.

"When you step out of it and look at it in the offseason, you plan on playing more than 16 games anyway, so playing 17 or playing 18, 19 or 20, whatever it is, whatever the task that is required, we're going to be up to the challenge," Minnesota right tackle Brian O'Neill said.

"In terms of routine, I think you're always trying to make it better, always looking at ways to make your body feel fresher and do things a little bit differently to gain an edge, especially as the season goes on," O'Neill said. "In late October, November, December, those little things can mean a lot more."

Elliott, who is in his sixth season, is likely to be battling a right knee issue the rest of the season. It affected him the most so far this year in the loss to the Broncos, but he played through it even with the outcome no longer in doubt.

"The older guys might feel it a little more, but to be honest, I don't know," Cowboys tight end Dalton Schultz said. "It's the longest season we've had, so it will be an interesting thing to monitor going forward. Younger players probably won't feel it a whole lot because they won't know any different."

## Revised injured reserve rules give flexibility to stay competitive

*Associated Press*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The day after making final roster cuts, the Tennessee Titans put three players on injured reserve.

And they haven't stopped.

Derrick Henry is just the biggest name in a revolving door that has seen the Titans make 19 moves putting players on injured reserve and play a NFL-high 80 different players — 11 more than the next closest teams, Indianapolis and Carolina (69 apiece).

With Tennessee currently atop the AFC with a 7-2 record halfway through the season, general manager Jon Robinson doesn't even want to imagine how he would have managed his roster without the NFL's current injured reserve and expanded practice squad rules.

"I don't even want to go there mentally, I don't know if my brain could take it," Robinson said. "But I mean, it would be challenging, it would be tough."

The Titans have plenty of company using the NFL rules first changed in 2020 for the coronavirus pandemic and retained for this season. According to Sportradar, 23 NFL teams have put at least 10 players on injured reserve at some point since the preseason, and every team has used at least 55 different players already.

Going on injured reserve in the NFL used to mean a player's season was over.

In 2012, the NFL allowed teams to designate one player to return, then doubled that in 2017. The coronavirus pandemic led to the biggest change yet: Allowing NFL teams to bring back an unlimited number of players from injured reserve, which was extended for this season.

Players must spend at least three games on injured reserve. That plus the expanded practice squad and the ability to promote a couple of practice squad players for games has essentially expanded the roster well beyond 53.

Whether the unlimited return rule, or the expanded practice squad, are kept will be decided in the next offseason.

"We will discuss future options for the rule with the relevant committees and the NFLPA after the season," NFL senior vice president of football and international communications Michael Signora said.



# SEC leaders gear up for final challenges

Associated Press

Top-ranked Georgia and No. 3 Alabama appear headed for a showdown in the Southeastern Conference title game.

That scenario follows the preseason script. But before the powerhouse programs clash on Dec. 4 in Atlanta, they must clear a few remaining hurdles in the season's final weeks for the showdown to have national championship implications.

Alabama (8-1, 5-1), which holds a one-game edge over No. 11 Texas A&M (7-2, 4-2), in the West Division, was pushed to the brink by last-place LSU before the Crimson Tide escaped with a 20-14 win. They get a break from the league grind on Saturday against New Mexico State before resuming SEC play against improved Arkansas and at archrival and No. 16 Auburn in the Iron Bowl.

Alabama coach Nick Saban hopes to fix "a lot of things" against the Aggies after a subpar performance against the Tigers.

"It didn't look like an Alabama team out there in some phases of our team," said Saban, whose squad rushed for just 6 yards against LSU. "We struggled to run the ball. We didn't

pass protect very well. We didn't protect on third down. We didn't do as well on third down, which is something that has been really good for us all year long.

"And I think we're all responsible for that. It starts with me. We need to get those things fixed."

Georgia (9-0, 7-0) secured its berth in the SEC title game a couple of weeks ago. The Bulldogs now seek their first 8-0 SEC finish on Saturday at Tennessee (5-4, 3-3) before closing against Charleston Southern and in-state rival Georgia Tech.

They've beaten the Volunteers four consecutive times but face a squad rejuvenated under first-year coach Josh Heupel and his fast-paced offensive scheme. Tennessee used just 37 seconds to score its first two touchdowns at then-No. 18 Kentucky and left Lexington with a thrilling 45-42 win, though the Vols had the ball just under 14 minutes in the game.

Georgia's stingy defense leads the FBS, allowing just 6.6 points per game and is second in yardage allowed (231.8). The Vols, who appear to have found their quarterback in mobile Hendon Hooker, enter the game posing per-

haps the biggest offensive threat to the 'Dawgs this season.

"We are going to have to play well on all parts of the defense," Georgia coach Kirby Smart said this week. "It's a great challenge for this group because no matter how good you are up front, guys in the back end are going to have to make plays, and no matter how good you are on the back end, the front guys are going to have to control the quarterback and run game.

"They'll test you; they'll test you everywhere."

Texas A&M also remains in the chase for the West Division crown. The Aggies, who handed the Tide their lone loss (41-38) a month ago, are on a four-game roll and visit No. 12 Mississippi (7-2, 3-2) on Saturday night. Texas A&M finishes the season at LSU on Nov. 27 after a non-league meeting against Prairie View A&M.

"When you get to November and you're relevant, it's a playoff," Aggies coach Jimbo Fisher said this week. "So you forget about everything else. One week at a time, one day at a time, one practice at a time, one play at a time. And it's that simple."

## ACC divisional, title races still wide open

Associated Press

The Atlantic Coast Conference divisional races are far from decided and several schools still have a shot at winning the league crown.

Virginia defensive lineman Mandy Alonso is enjoying the journey.

"This is like what you train for and all season, you want to be in these positions," Alonso said. "We put our team in a good enough position to have our goals in reach."

The Cavs are not alone.

Wake Forest remains the only unbeaten team in the Atlantic Division, but after allowing 330 rushing yards in its 58-55 loss to North Carolina, a Coastal Division team, the No. 13 Demon Deacons may have exposed the blueprint to beat them.

Coach Dave Clawson's team (8-1, 5-0) still has to play North Carolina State (7-2, 4-1) and at Clemson (6-3, 5-2) — both still in the race for the division crown.

"Big game ahead of us — I think everyone knows that," Wake Forest offensive lineman Sean Maginn said this week.

The No. 21 Wolfpack, 27-21 winners in double-overtime against Clemson earlier in the season, play in Winston-Salem on Saturday and could gain a tie-breaker advantage over Wake Forest and the Tigers with a win. N.C. State closes against vastly improved Syracuse, which has won two in a row, and rival North Carolina.

"We need to focus on just getting better and staying in the moment as a team and not allowing what we want at the end of the season ... to get in the way of how we get to that place," Wolfpack coach Dave Doeren said.

Clemson, a member of the last six four-team playoffs, likely won't make it seven straight but hasn't written off another trip to the ACC title game.

"We want to finish strong, be-

cause that's all we can do. Can't worry about dead yesterdays or unborn tomorrows. You can only worry about right now," Clemson tight end Davis Allen said.

In the Coastal Division, No. 25 Pittsburgh (7-2, 4-1) can win it simply by winning out, but the Panthers' path isn't easy. They hosted North Carolina (5-4, 3-3) on Thursday night before facing Virginia, also at home, then visiting Syracuse.

Pitt leads the nation with an average of 45 points, but the Tar Heels' 58-55 victory caught coach Pat Narduzzi's eye. North Carolina has been up and down all season but has scored 58 or more three times.

"Whatever happened to 14-3?" he said. "Are those days gone? They're gone."

Virginia (6-3, 4-2) will play another nonconference game when it hosts No. 7 Notre Dame on Saturday night, then has its fate in its hands at Pittsburgh

and at home against Virginia Tech (4-5, 2-3), which has struggled this year but has also beaten the Cavaliers in 16 of the past 17 meetings.

Miami (5-4, 3-2), meanwhile, has won three straight, including a 38-34 victory at Pittsburgh, and finishes at Florida State, at home against fading Virginia Tech and at Duke.

Syracuse also could figure prominently in the mix, despite not being in contention. The Orange (5-4, 2-3), winners of two straight, go on the road to face N.C. State on Nov. 20 and close at home against Pitt on Nov. 27.

The emergence of dual-threat quarterback Garrett Shrader (20 touchdowns, including 13 rushing) combined with ACC rushing leader Sean Tucker (140.8 yards per game, 13 TDs) have made the Orange a dangerous late-season foe.

It all adds up to a seemingly fitting way to cap off this unpredictable ACC season.

# Wiggins scores 35 points in win over his old team

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Andrew Wiggins drove the baseline for an emphatic one-handed slam right over old teammate Karl-Anthony Towns, and it sure felt sweet.

"That's my guy," Wiggins said, noting it was better coming against Towns. "Oh, for sure. He got me last year, so I got him back."

Wiggins had two dunks over Towns and dominated his former teammates with a season-high 35 points, leading the Golden State Warriors to a 123-110 victory over Minnesota on Wednesday night.

"No, not a revenge game, a well-played game against a former team," Wiggins said. "A fun game. The game of basketball's fun. ... Facing your former team is always one you wake up excited for."

Anthony Edwards scored a career-high 48 points for the Timberwolves, hitting seven three-pointers in the team's sixth straight loss.

Wiggins, traded by Minnesota to Golden State in February 2020, made his initial 10 shots and scored 22 of his points on 9-for-9 shooting in the first half.

"Andrew was just fantastic, the aggression from the beginning of the game, loved his energy," coach Steve Kerr said. "Obviously he was pretty excited to play against his old team. We needed everything he brought us tonight."

Stephen Curry scored 25 points to go with six assists coming off a 50-point masterpiece Monday night against Atlanta. Jordan Poole had 14 points and five rebounds to help Golden State push its NBA-leading record to 10-1.

Kevon Looney added season-bests of 11 points and 17 rebounds, delivering on both ends on a night Draymond Green exited with a bruised right thigh. Green is listed as questionable for Friday's game with the Bulls.

**Nets 123, Magic 90:** Kevin Durant scored 30 points and James Harden had his 59th career triple-double in Brooklyn's win at Orlando.

Durant, the NBA's leading scorer at 29.5 points per game, made 11 of 12 shots, including both of his three-point attempts, to help the Nets win for the sixth time in seven games. Harden had 17 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists to help. The two stars sat out the fourth quarter, with the team up 94-75 after three.

**Lakers 120, Heat 117 (OT):** Malik Monk scored five of his season-high 27 points in

overtime, and host Los Angeles rallied from a big deficit in the final minutes of regulation before surging past Miami in overtime.

Russell Westbrook had 25 points, 14 assists and 12 rebounds for the Lakers, who improved to 2-2 while LeBron James is sidelined by a strained abdominal muscle.

**Bucks 112, Knicks 100:** Pat Connaughton scored a season-high 23 points, making three late three-pointers, to swing a wild second half back in visiting Milwaukee's favor.

Less than a week after New York came from 21 down to win 113-98 at Milwaukee, the Bucks opened a 70-46 cushion midway through the third quarter. But the Knicks' reserves wiped that away and the game was tied with five minutes to play.

**Suns 119, Trail Blazers 109:** Frank Kaminsky scored a career-high 31 points, Chris Paul added 21 and host Phoenix beat Portland for its sixth straight victory.

Kaminsky has at least 10 points in four of the past five games and was at his best Wednesday, making 12 of 18 shots and grabbing seven rebounds.

**Hornets 118, Grizzlies 108:** Kelly Oubre Jr. scored a season-best 37 points on 13-for-17 shooting and Charlotte won at Memphis to snap a five-game losing streak.

**Nuggets 101, Pacers 98:** Will Barton scored a season-high 30 points, helping to make up for the absence of suspended star Nikola Jokic, and host Denver beat Indiana.

**Celtics 104, Raptors 88:** Jayson Tatum had 22 points, 12 rebounds and seven assists in host Boston's victory over Toronto.

**Bulls 117, Mavericks 107:** Zach LaVine scored 23 points and Lonzo Ball made seven of Chicago's 15 three-pointers in a win over visiting Dallas.

**Wizards 97, Cavaliers 94:** Kyle Kuzma hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 12 seconds left and Washington scored the final five points to win at Cleveland.

**Pistons 112, Rockets 104:** Jerami Grant scored a season-high 35 points to help Detroit win at Houston in a matchup of two of the worst teams in the NBA.

**Spurs 136, Kings 117:** Dejounte Murray had 26 points and San Antonio never trailed, overcoming De'Aaron Fox's season-high 37 points in rolling past visiting Sacramento.

**Thunder 108, Pelicans 100:** Lu Dort scored 27 points, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 24 points and Oklahoma City won at New Orleans for its third straight victory.

# Nylander scores twice, lifts Leafs in shutout win

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — William Nylander scored twice, Jack Campbell stopped 36 shots for his second shutout of the season and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-0 on Wednesday night.

Ondrej Kase also scored and Auston Matthews had a pair of assists for the Maple Leafs, who were without injured captain John Tavares and won for the sixth time in seven games. Campbell got his sixth career shutout.

Philadelphia goalie Carter Hart had 30 saves.

"They were playing a real solid game and it was tough to get those Grade-A chances," Flyers coach Alain Vigneault said.

Nylander made it 1-0 with 8:49 left in the second period on a fluke goal. The puck deflected off his right toe and under Hart's right arm after Jake Muzzin's pass went off defenseman Travis Sanheim's stick and high into the air near the crease. It was originally ruled no goal by the officials due to a kicking motion but overturned after video review.

"I didn't really know if I kicked it or not," Nylander said.

**Predators 4, Stars 2:** Tanner Jeannot had a goal and an assist, Juuse Saros stopped 25 shots, and visiting Nashville beat Dallas.

Ryan Johansen, Matt Duchene and Colton Sissons also scored for the Predators, who are 6-1-1 in their last eight games. Sissons scored an empty-net goal with 43 seconds left after Dallas cut a 3-0 deficit to 3-2.

Roope Hintz and Miro Heiskanen scored for the Stars, who have lost six of their last seven games (1-4-2). Braden Holtby made 18 saves.

**Wild 5, Coyotes 2:** Kevin Fiala had a goal and two assists, and visiting Minnesota got its fourth straight win by beating Arizona.

Joel Eriksson Ek, Marcus Foligno, Dmitry Kulikov and Kirill Kaprizov also scored for the Wild. Kaapo Kahkonen stopped 23 shots while starting for the second straight game. Minnesota has scored five goals in all four games of its current streak.

Shayne Gostisbehere had a goal and an assist — giving him points in his last two games — and Andrew Ladd also scored for Arizona, which trailed 2-0 after 9 minutes. Scott Wedgewood replaced Karel Vejmelka in goal in the third period for the Coyotes (1-11-1). Vejmelka finished with 17 saves, and Wedgewood stopped all eight shots he faced.