

Medals approved for Kabul blast victims

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Senate has unanimously approved legislation to award Congressional Gold Medals to the 13 American service members killed in a suicide bombing at the Kabul airport in the final days of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

The Senate's approval Wednesday night to award the highest congressional honor to the troops killed in an Islamic State attack Aug. 26 at Hamid Karzai International Airport sends the measure to President Joe Biden for his signature. The House passed the bill by voice vote in October.

"Today, the United States Senate moved to recognize the courage, sacrifice and service of the 13 brave young men and women who were killed in Afghanistan," Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., said in a statement. "During a pivotal point for our nation, they gave the last full measure for our freedoms. I look forward to the president honoring these American heroes and swiftly signing this bill into law."

Eleven Marines, a soldier and a Navy corpsman were killed in the blast — the final American military deaths in Afghanis-

tan during the war launched by the United States in the weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

The bill would award the Congressional Gold Medal to Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Max Soviak, 22; Army Staff Sgt. Ryan Knauss, 23; and Marines Lance Cpl. Kareem Nikoui, 20; Lance Cpl. David Espinoza, 20; Lance Cpl. Rylee McCollum, 20; Lance Cpl. Jared Schmitz, 20; Cpl. Hunter Lopez, 22; Staff Sgt. Taylor Hoover, 31; Cpl. Daegan William-Tyler Page, 23; Sgt. Nicole Gee, 23; Cpl. Humberto Sanchez, 22; Lance Cpl. Dylan Merola, 20, and Sgt. Johanny Rosario Pichardo, 25.

They were killed as they supported American-led efforts to evacuate thousands of Afghans and allies attempting to flee the Taliban in the days after the Islamist group swept back into power for the first time since 2001. The fallen troops were near a crowded airport gate when the blast went off, killing them, more than 160 Afghan civilians and wounding dozens more in one of the deadliest single incidents of the 20-year war.

Rep. Lisa McClain, R-Mich., introduced the bipartisan legislation to honor the fallen

troops on Aug. 31, just hours after the last American military troops left Afghanistan.

"The American service members went above and beyond the call of duty to protect citizens of the United States and our allies to ensure they are brought to safety in an extremely dangerous situation as the Taliban regained control over Afghanistan," the bill reads. "The American service members exemplified extreme bravery and valor against armed enemy combatants [and] ... members dedicated their lives and their heroism deserves great honor."

The Congressional Gold Medal dates back to American Revolution and serves as Congress' "highest expression of national appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions," according to a House description of the award. It has been awarded 173 times to individuals or groups of people.

"The service and sacrifice of these 13 brave men and women will never be forgotten," McClain said in a statement on Thursday. "I'm proud this important legislation to award these heroes with Congress' top honor is one step closer to becoming law."

Marines may see leniency on vaccination deadline

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — Active-duty Marines who do not comply with the directive to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by the department-mandated Nov. 28 deadline will be counseled and given the chance to comply before being forced out of the military, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro told reporters Wednesday.

Administrative messages to the Navy and Marine Corps, which both fall under the secretary's authority, say sailors and Marines who do not comply with the military-wide vaccine mandate will be administratively separated and could face further administrative punishment unless they have an approved or pending waiver.

However, when asked about the Marine Corps during a phone conference with reporters Wednesday, Del Toro signaled there may be some deadline wiggle-room

for those who change their minds.

"We're going to ... offer them an opportunity to change their mind," Del Toro said, adding that the service won't just kick Marines out as soon as the deadline hits.

Del Toro didn't directly address non-compliant sailors during Wednesday's call, but during a recent visit to San Diego, he said the service will take a similar approach to non-compliant sailors.

"We're going to work with those that decide not to get vaccinated for whatever reason," Del Toro told reporters in San Diego on Nov. 8. "We're going to counsel them, we're going to talk to them and we're going to give them opportunities first."

Although the secretary did not say just how much lenience non-compliant sailors and Marines can expect upon missing the deadline, administrative messages issued by the services suggest it won't be much.

Both branches have been instructing their unit commanders on how to prepare for and proceed with administrative separations for those who refuse the vaccine.

The latest, issued Monday by the Navy, instructs commanders to begin preparing for administrative separation for any sailors refusing the vaccine and await further orders.

A Marine administrative message issued Oct. 23 instructs commanders to provide lists of all non-compliant, active-duty Marines by Nov. 30. Navy and Marine reservists have until Dec. 30 to be fully vaccinated.

Among the active-duty ranks, 94% of the Marine Corps is at least partially vaccinated and 91% are fully vaccinated, the Corps said Thursday. In its reserve component, 75% are partially vaccinated and 66% fully vaccinated.

Gillibrand urges NDAA abuse compensation

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Advocates for military justice reform have spent the last decade pushing for commanders to be removed from the decision to prosecute sexual assault and harassment among service members.

Now some of those same advocates want military victims of sex-related crimes to have the right to sue the government for negligence or failing to prevent the assault.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said she was pushing to get a vote this week on an amendment to the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act that would do it. Called the Military Claims Act, the amendment would allow service members who experience personal injury or death due to a sex-related of-

fense committed by another service member to file a claim in the same way that civilians can. The member's next-of-kin could file in instances of death.

The Congressional Budget Office reviewed a similar amendment that was proposed in the House, but did not pass, and estimated it could cost the Pentagon \$500 million during the next 10 years. The preliminary number was subject to "considerable uncertainty," according to the estimate.

During the past 10 years as Gillibrand and others have pushed for these changes, she said Congress has provided more than \$2 billion for the Pentagon to tackle the issue of sexual assault. Yet, "nothing has really changed," she said Thursday at a rally in Washington to call for justice for Army Spc.

Vanessa Guillen.

The 20-year-old soldier was killed in April 2020 by a fellow soldier at Fort Hood, Texas. Prior to her death, Guillen told her family she had faced sexual harassment on base, but was too afraid to report it.

"It is wrong that justice is not possible for Vanessa Guillen's family and for Vanessa Guillen," Gillibrand said. "The service member deserves to be compensated by filing a claim against the organization that failed to protect them."

Portions of another bill from Gillibrand, the Military Justice Improvement and Prevention Act, have already been added to the Senate version of the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual bill that sets spending and policy for the Defense Department.

Lawmakers seek subpoena power for VA watchdog

By NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee want to grant subpoena power to the federal watchdog for the Department of Veterans Affairs, allowing the office to force people to testify under oath.

The Strengthening Oversight for Veterans Act would grant subpoena power to the VA Office of Inspector General. While the office can compel VA employees and contractors to testify, it has no authority to force former employees or other individuals to participate in its investigations.

The lack of court-enforced subpoena power has "hampered prior oversight efforts," said Christopher Wilber, counselor to the VA inspector general. Wilber spoke Wednesday at a hearing of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., along with Sens. Jon Tester, D-Mont., and John Boozman, R-

Ark., introduced the bill in August, following the trial and sentencing of a former nursing assistant who confessed to using insulin to kill seven elderly patients at the VA hospital in Clarksburg, W.Va.

The VA Inspector General's Office investigated the hospital to understand how the killings could've gone undetected for nearly a year. Inspectors sought an interview with a "key individual" who worked in risk mitigation at the hospital during the time of the killings, Wilber said. The person left his or her job while the investigation was underway, and the IG had no way of compelling him or her to testify.

"Subpoena power is imperative to our ability to reach out to someone like that, serve the subpoena and require them to talk to us," Wilber said. "It was a critical investigation to understand the root causes of the problems that occurred in Clarksburg so that we could make recommendations to the department."

VA secretary says stop-gap funding may hurt vets' care

By NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough warned Thursday against a scheme by some Republicans to avoid approving a new federal budget and instead pass a stop-gap measure that freezes funding at last year's amounts for the next 10 months.

McDonough argued the action would have negative effects on veterans' health care.

"It would have very serious ramifications for community care, very serious ramifications for direct care — meaning very serious ramifications for care for our veterans," he said during his monthly news conference from VA headquarters.

Congress failed to approve a new federal budget by the start of the new fiscal year on Oct. 1. Instead, it passed a measure that funded the government at last year's amounts until Dec. 3. Congress must act before Dec. 3 to avoid a government shut-

down.

Democrats are considering a bill that would fund the government for an extra couple of weeks, meaning Congress would have to act again to pass another bill days before Christmas. According to Politico, Democrats are hoping the idea will prompt Republicans to instead discuss a new, sweeping federal budget deal.

Republicans, however, are considering a long-term continuing resolution, or CR, that would drag out last year's spending levels until the beginning of October 2022, Politico reported. The action would freeze the government budget at levels enacted under former President Donald Trump.

Democrats are seeking a 10% funding increase for the VA in fiscal 2022, bringing its total budget to nearly \$270 billion. Forcing a 10-month continuing resolution would keep the VA at last year's budget of \$243 billion — an amount last negotiated under Trump's administration.

Rittenhouse acquitted of Kenosha shootings

Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. — Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of all charges Friday after pleading self-defense in the deadly Kenosha shootings that became a flashpoint in the nation's debate over guns, vigilantism and racial injustice.

Rittenhouse, 18, cried and hugged one of his attorneys upon hearing the verdict.

He had been charged with homicide, attempted homicide and reckless endangering after killing two men and wounding a third with an AR-style semi-automatic rifle during a tumultuous night of protests over police violence against Black people in the summer of 2020. The former police youth cadet is white, as were those he shot.

The jury, which appeared to be overwhelmingly white, deliberated for close to

3½ days.

Rittenhouse could have gotten life in prison if found guilty on the most serious charge, first-degree intentional homicide, or what some other states call first-degree murder.

As the verdict drew near, Gov. Tony Evers pleaded for calm and said 500 National Guard members would be ready for duty in Kenosha if needed.

Rittenhouse was 17 when he went from his home in Antioch, Ill., to Kenosha after businesses in the city were ransacked and burned over the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, by a white police officer.

Carrying a weapon that authorities said was illegally purchased for the underage Rittenhouse, he joined other armed citizens in what he said was an effort to protect prop-

erty and provide medical aid.

Bystander and drone video captured most of the frenzied chain of events that followed: Rittenhouse killed Joseph Rosenbaum, 36, then shot to death protester Anthony Huber, 26, and wounded demonstrator Gaige Grosskreutz, now 28.

Prosecutors portrayed Rittenhouse as a “wannabe soldier” who had gone looking for trouble that night and was responsible for creating a dangerous situation in the first place by pointing his rifle at demonstrators.

But Rittenhouse testified: “I didn’t do anything wrong. I defended myself.”

Breaking into sobs, he told the jury he opened fire after Rosenbaum chased him and made a grab for his gun. He said he was afraid his rifle was going to be wrested away and used to kill him.

US expands COVID-19 booster shots to all adults

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. regulators on Friday moved to open up COVID-19 booster shots to all adults, expanding the government's effort to get ahead of rising coronavirus cases that experts fear could snowball into a winter surge as millions of Americans travel for the holidays.

The Food and Drug Administration's decision stands to simplify what has been a confusing list of who's eligible by allowing anyone 18 or older to choose either a Pfizer or Moderna booster six months after their last dose — regardless of which vaccine they had first. The move came after about a dozen states had started offering boosters to all adults.

“We heard loud and clear that people needed something simpler — and this, I think, is simple,” FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks told The Associated Press.

There's one more step before the approach becomes official: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention must agree to expand Pfizer and Moderna boosters to even healthy young adults. Its scientific advisers were set to debate it later Friday.

If the CDC agrees, tens of millions more Americans could have three doses of protection before the new year. Anyone who got the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine can already get a booster.

All three COVID-19 vaccines used in the

U.S. offer strong protection against severe illness including hospitalization and death without boosters, but protection against infection can wane with time. Previously, the government had cleared boosters of Pfizer's vaccine, as well as the similar Moderna vaccine, only for vulnerable groups including older Americans and people with chronic health problems.

But Pfizer last week asked the FDA to expand that decision to everyone, citing new data from a study of 10,000 people. Ultimately, the FDA decided there was enough evidence, from studies and real-world use of boosters, to back the expansion for both Pfizer and Moderna.

2 men convicted of killing Malcolm X are exonerated

Associated Press

NEW YORK — More than half a century after the assassination of Malcolm X, two of his convicted killers were exonerated Thursday after decades of doubt about who was responsible for the civil rights icon's death.

Manhattan judge Ellen Biben dismissed the convictions of Muhammad Aziz and the late Khalil Islam, after prosecutors and the men's lawyers said a renewed investigation found new evidence that undermined the case against the men and determined that authorities withheld some of what they knew.

“The event that has brought us to court today should never have occurred,” Aziz told the court. “I am an 83-year-old man who was victimized by the criminal justice system.”

It pained Islam's sons, Ameen Johnson and Shahid Johnson, that their parents died before seeing the conviction reversed. Still, Ameen Johnson said his father would have been ecstatic to clear his name.

“His reputation meant a lot to him,” the son said, and now “we don't have to watch over our backs, worrying about any repercussions from anybody who thought that he might have been the one that killed Mal-

colm X.”

Aziz and Islam, who maintained their innocence from the start in the 1965 killing at Upper Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom, were paroled in the 1980s. Islam died in 2009.

“There can be no question that this is a case that cries out for fundamental justice,” Biben said.

Malcolm X gained national prominence as the voice of the Nation of Islam, exhorting Black people to claim their civil rights “by any means necessary.” His autobiography, written with Alex Haley, remains a classic work of modern American literature.

Seoul: Russia, China in air buffer zone

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea said Friday it scrambled fighter jets to respond to a group of Russian and Chinese warplanes that entered its air buffer zone unannounced.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it detected seven Russian and two Chinese military aircraft in the country's air defense identification zone off its eastern coast.

Anticipating the moves, South Korea had already sent fighter jets and other aircraft to the area to prevent accidental clashes, but the Russian and Chinese planes left without breaching South Korea's territorial airspace, the Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

China later told South Korea through a

military communication channel that the flights were part of its routine military exercises with Russia.

"(We) assess the current situation as a joint exercise between China and Russia and additional analysis is needed," the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement Friday that the Russian military was conducting joint aerial patrols with China.

On Friday, "an air group consisting of two Tu-95MS strategic bombers of the Russian Aerospace Forces and two Hun-6K strategic bombers of the Air Force of the People's Liberation Army of China carried out aerial patrols over the waters of the Sea of Japan

and the East China Sea," it said.

The ministry said the joint patrol was carried to further develop Russian-Chinese relations, improve coordination between the two armed forces and for "strengthening global strategic stability."

Air defense identification zones usually expand beyond the country's territory to allow more time to respond to potentially hostile aircraft. Military planes entering another country's air defense identification zone are required to notify it in advance.

Chinese and Russian warplanes have often entered South Korea's air defense identification zones in recent years as they increasingly flex their muscle amid an intensifying competition with the United States.

No more migrant camps along Belarus border

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — Polish authorities said Friday there are no more migrants camping along the Belarus side of the European Union's eastern border, but attempts at illegally crossing into the bloc's territory are continuing and becoming more aggressive.

Around 50 migrants got through a fence into Poland on Thursday, Anna Michalska, a spokeswoman for Poland's Border Guard said. They included a family of five who said they wanted to stay and live in Poland, opening a procedure toward settlement. The others will have to return to Belarus,

Michalska said.

Two other large groups of migrants were prevented from entering. Some migrants have thrown stones and used branches to hit Polish border guards.

Hundreds of Iraqis flew back home Thursday from Belarus after abandoning their hopes of reaching the EU.

Still, many migrants hoping to reach European soil remained in a heated warehouse that Belarus recently made available near the border. The migrants had been camping in a cold and wet forest since Nov. 8.

Tensions flared at the Poland-Belarus

border in recent days, with about 2,000 people trapped between forces from the two countries. The U.N. refugee agency says about half the migrants at the border area were women and children.

The standoff set alarm bells ringing in the region. The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the EU in retaliation for its sanctions on his authoritarian regime. Belarus denies engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since last summer and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Growing number of Syrian kids forced to work

Washington Post

Syria's decade-long war is creating a lost generation. As families carved out a life amid conflict and economic crisis, 2 in 3 children found themselves without access to education. Many are now the breadwinners, working long shifts in tough conditions to bring home much-needed pay.

Aid groups say the coronavirus pandemic has made things worse. Raqqa, a city still rebuilding after the Islamic State's rise and fall, is home to the highest proportion of households in Syria that are struggling to put enough food on the table.

Children at this mechanic's workshop said their parents felt there was little choice. "We need money, and I won't make that in school," said Aboud Ashour, 14. The

boys have learned to look out for one another, they said. They are most protective of Oday, who has worked at the yard since his parents died. The orphan does not know his surname.

Some of Syria's richest oil fields are in Hasakah province, which is in the northeastern portion of the country under the control of Kurdish-led forces aligned with the United States. An increasing number of children are also working in the northeast's network of makeshift oil refineries.

Most of the children interviewed by Washington Post reporters had suffered burns in the process. The chemicals made their lungs hurt, they said. Sometimes the chemicals made them hallucinate. Haytham, 15, said he had started working on the

site after his father was killed in the war, leaving the family without a salary.

About 2.8 million Syrian children no longer have access to formal education; 1 in 3 schools have been destroyed, damaged or used for military purposes. Some children who do go to school still head out to work in the evening. Some wait tables in restaurants or slice shawarma meat. These boys hawk watermelons at the fruit market.

At a plastics recycling plant, Fatima Ali Hamees' voice was almost lost amid the din of the shredding machines that break down bottles for reuse. It had been a year since Fatima, 14, dropped out of school to work at the facility. She starts at 6 in the morning and finishes at 3 in the afternoon. But she misses the classroom.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Capitol to recognize military, first responders

WV CHARLESTON — Two trees to be displayed in the West Virginia Capitol during the holidays will display photos recognizing military and first responders.

West Virginians can submit photos to be displayed on the trees, according to a news release from Gov. Jim Justice and first lady Cathy Justice.

The trees will be placed in the west rotunda of the main Capitol building. A third tree will be decorated by Gold Star Mothers and families to honor people who died while serving the country.

Photos will not be returned, and photocopies should be submitted. The military recognition form and the first responder recognition form and tag are available online.

Man convicted of murder of wife, other crimes

MI DAVISON — A Michigan man accused of spiking his wife's cereal with heroin was convicted of murder and other crimes.

The medical examiner had classified Christina Harris' death in 2014 as an accidental overdose. But investigators subsequently alleged that it was a murder scheme hatched by Jason Harris at their Davison home in Genesee County.

Family members insisted that Christina didn't use drugs. Indeed, a sample of frozen breast milk showed no evidence of it.

"This was a very tragic case and my heart goes out to the family and friends," prosecutor

David Leyton said.

Harris was charged in 2019, five years after his wife's death. He received \$120,000 in life insurance benefits. Two weeks after Christina's death, another woman moved into the home.

Harris faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison.

4 juveniles hurt after crashing stolen vehicle

NC WINSTON-SALEM — Four juveniles riding in a stolen vehicle were injured when they crashed into a home, police in North Carolina said.

Winston-Salem police said one of the juveniles was listed in serious condition with non-life-threatening injuries, the Winston-Salem Journal reported.

Officers arrived at a location on the city's south side and found a 2006 Toyota Tacoma had run off the road and struck a home. Witnesses told police that they heard multiple gunshots in the area before the pickup hit the home, but no one was injured from the gunfire, according to police.

The other three juveniles were taken to a local hospital, where their conditions were listed as stable. Police didn't identify the juveniles because of their age.

The home sustained minor damage, police said.

Agency probing killing of bear with arrows

NM TAOS — New Mexico authorities are investigating the fatal shooting of a bear with arrows along a road near Taos.

Game and Fish Department

spokesman James Pitman told the Albuquerque Journal that the killing occurred Oct. 29.

Pitman said beating hunting was in season then but that it's illegal to shoot an animal on the edge of a public road.

Pitman said the department identified a suspect but not yet filed a case report.

Mussel-infested boats reach record number

ID IDAHO FALLS — The Idaho Department of Agriculture said a record number of watercraft fouled with invasive mussels were caught at the state's boat inspection stations this year.

Still, officials reported that Idaho's waterways remain free of the invasive quagga and zebra mussels, the Post Register reported.

"We had a big year as far as quagga and zebra mussel-fouled boats," said Nic Zurfluh with the Agriculture Department's invasive species office. "We're currently at 52."

That's just over the previous record of 50 infested boats caught in 2018. Idaho reported 35 mussel-fouled boats last year.

Most of the infested watercraft found this year came through the Idaho town of Malad after visiting Lake Powell in Utah.

Bill would let EMTs treat injured K-9s

MA BOSTON — First responders would be allowed to treat and transport injured police dogs to veterinary hospitals under a bill that was unanimously approved

by the Massachusetts Senate this week.

Nero's bill was named for the K9 partner of slain Yarmouth Police Sgt. Sean Gannon.

Gannon was fatally shot in 2018 while serving an arrest warrant. Nero was also shot, but because of current state law, EMTs weren't allowed to treat or transport him.

Nero had to be rushed to the animal hospital in the back of a police cruiser and survived the shooting.

"K-9 officers protect the men and women in law enforcement as well as the community at large," said Democratic state Sen. Mark Montigny, lead sponsor of the bill. "These animals endure extreme danger from gun violence, narcotics, and even explosive materials. Allowing our emergency personnel to provide basic treatment and transport is a commonsense measure that honors their contributions across the commonwealth."

Police: Shoplifter was carrying jewelry case

KY GEORGETOWN — A shoplifter was stopped while carrying an entire jewelry display case out of a Kohl's store in Georgetown, Ky., the Lexington Herald-Leader reported.

The man is believed to have been involved in thefts at other stores in Lexington, Louisville and Richmond, police said.

"The estimated loss from the stores that have been hit in this chain of thefts is estimated to be in excess of \$200,000," Georgetown police said in a Facebook post.

-From The Associated Press

STARS  STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Ohtani unanimous choice as AL MVP; Harper takes NL

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Shohei Ohtani was unanimously voted American League MVP on Thursday for a two-way season not seen since Babe Ruth, and Bryce Harper earned the National League honor for the second time.

Ohtani received all 30 first-place votes and 420 points in voting by members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America. Toronto first baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr. was second with 29 seconds and 269 points, and Blue Jays infielder Marcus Semien was third with 232 points. Kansas City catcher Salvador Perez got the other second-place vote.

Ohtani hit .257 with 46 homers, 100 RBIs and a .965 OPS as the Los Angeles Angels' full-time designated hitter, and he went 9-2 with a 3.18 ERA in 23 starts with 156 strikeouts and 44 walks in 130½ innings. It was the first full season on the mound for the 27-year-old right-hander following Tommy John surgery in 2019.

Ohtani won AL Rookie of the Year in 2018 after leaving the Pacific League's Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters to sign with the Angels. This year he became the first two-way starter in the history of the All-Star Game, which began in 1933.

Ruth had just two seasons in which he thrived at the plate while pitching regularly. He batted .300 with 11 homers and 61 RBIs in 1918 while going 13-7 with a 2.22 ERA for Boston, then hit .322 with 29 homers and 113 RBIs in 1919 while going 9-5 with a 2.97 ERA. Ruth

was sold to the Yankees that December and made only five mound appearances in his final 16 seasons.

Ohtani became the second Japanese MVP winner after Seattle outfielder Ichiro Suzuki in 2001.

Guerrero, 22, tied for the major league lead with 48 homers, batting .311 with 111 RBIs. His father, Vladimir, won the 2004 AL MVP award with the Anaheim Angels.

Semien batted .265 with 42 homers and 102 RBIs. The 31-year-old is among this off-season's top free agents.

Harper received 17 of 30 first-place votes and 348 points from a separate panel. Washington outfielder Juan Soto was second with six firsts and 274 points, and San Diego shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr. was third with two firsts and 244 points.

Harper overcame getting hit in the face with a 97 mph pitch from Génesis Cabrera of the St. Louis Cardinals on April 28 to bat .309 with 35 homers for Philadelphia. The 29-year-old led the major leagues with a .465 slugging percentage and 1.044 OPS, tied for the lead with 42 doubles and had 84 RBIs.

But the Phillies missed the playoffs for the third straight season since he signed a \$330 million, 13-year contract. He earned a \$500,000 bonus for winning MVP.

Harper was voted a unanimous MVP with Washington in 2015. He became the fifth player to win MVPs for different teams after Jimmie Foxx, Frank Robinson, Barry Bonds and Alex Rodriguez.

Patriots' defense dominates Falcons

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Led by a defense that is downright nasty, the New England Patriots are suddenly playing with the swagger of their Tom Brady years.

Mac Jones threw a 19-yard scoring pass to Nelson Agholor for the game's only offensive touchdown and Kyle Van Noy and the New England defense took care of the rest, blanking the Atlanta Falcons 25-0 on Thursday night for the Patriots' fifth straight victory.

New England (7-4) has allowed just 13 points in its last three games.

"We're catching our stride," said linebacker Matthew Judon, who picked up another sack to push his total for the season to a career-best 10.5. "We're playing with a lot of confidence."

New England (7-4) wasn't as dominating as four days earlier, when the Patriots blew out the Browns 45-7, but it was a thorough beat-down of a feeble Falcons team that hasn't scored a touchdown in nearly nine quarters.

New England has its longest winning streak since an 8-0 start to the 2019 season, which turned out to be Brady's final year with the Patriots.

"I feel like we've got one of the best defenses in the league," said cornerback J.C. Jackson, who had one of the four interceptions by the Patriots.

Atlanta (4-6) was shut out for the first time since a 38-0 loss to Carolina on Dec. 13, 2015.

Matt Ryan was sacked four times and intercepted

twice, enduring another miserable performance — this one in prime time — after posting the lowest passer rating of his career in a 43-3 rout by the Dallas Cowboys last Sunday.

"It's been a tough five days offensively," Ryan said. "We haven't thrown the ball well enough, we haven't run the ball well enough."

The Patriots drove 76 yards in seven plays for a touchdown early in the second quarter.

Damien Harris did most of the dirty work, running four times for 34 yards and grabbing a 9-yard pass, before Agholor got open over the middle against busted coverage, hauled in the throw from Jones and scooted to the end zone.

Jones completed 22 of 26 passes for 207 yards.

Van Noy had two sacks and capped his brilliant defensive performance with a 35-yard interception return for a touchdown off Falcons backup QB Josh Rosen.

Finishing it off

The Patriots didn't let up, even after the Falcons essentially put up the white flag by pulling Ryan.

Van Noy dropped back into coverage to pick off a pass from Rosen that was intended for Russell Gage, returning it for the TD that finished off the scoring.

The Falcons then sent in third-string quarterback Feleipe Franks, who was treated the same way by the New England defense.

On his only play, Franks was intercepted by Adrian Phillips.

Title games taking shape for Power 5

Associated Press

With two weeks left in the regular season, top-ranked Georgia is the only Power Five team to have clinched a spot in its conference championship game.

More tickets to title games should be punched this weekend.

Second-ranked Alabama (9-1, 5-1, No. 2 CFP), with a victory over No. 21 Arkansas (7-3, 3-3, No. 21 CFP) on Saturday, would lock up the SEC West and a matchup with No. 1 Georgia (10-0, 8-0, No. 1 CFP) in Atlanta in two weeks.

In the ACC, Atlantic Division leader Wake Forest (9-1, 6-0, No. 10 CFP) and Coastal leader Pittsburgh (8-2, 5-1, No. 18 CFP) would square off in the title game in Charlotte on Dec. 4 if each wins one more game. The No. 13 Demon Deacons are at Clemson (7-3, 5-2) and No. 20 Pitt hosts Virginia (6-4, 4-2) this week in matchups of the top two teams in each division.

In the Pac-12, fourth-ranked North leader Oregon (9-1, 6-1, No. 3 CFP) and 24th-ranked South leader Utah (7-3, 6-1, No. 23 CFP) meet in Salt Lake City, and the winner will move on to the title game in Las Vegas on Dec. 3. The loser could still win its division this week if the team behind it in the standings — Oregon State (6-4, 4-3) in Oregon's case and Arizona State (7-3, 5-2) in Utah's — also loses.

What's certain is the Big Ten and Big 12

won't be decided until next week.

Best game

No. 7 Michigan State at No. 5 Ohio State: Michigan State (9-1, 6-1, No. 7 CFP) can take control of the Big Ten East with a win at the Horseshoe. That would give the Spartans head-to-head tiebreakers against Michigan and Ohio State.

If the favored Buckeyes (9-1, 7-0, No. 4 CFP) beat Michigan State, it would set up an Ohio State-Michigan showdown at the Big House next week for a berth in the Big Ten championship game — assuming No. 8 Michigan (9-1, 6-1, No. 6 CFP) wins at Maryland (5-5, 2-5) this week.

Heisman watch

C.J. Stroud, QB, Ohio State: It's a tight race among Stroud, Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, Michigan State running back Kenneth Walker III and Mississippi quarterback Matt Coral, and voters would be wise to wait until after the conference championship games to turn in their ballots.

Of the four, Stroud has the best remaining regular-season games with top-10 opponents in Michigan State and Michigan.

Stroud created some momentum with his 361 yards passing and five touchdowns against Purdue last week, and he has a chance to put up more big numbers against a Michigan State defense that's given up 350

yards or more through the air in each of its last three games.

Numbers to know

8 — Nation-leading number of Northern Illinois games decided by one score.

10 — Interceptions by Western Kentucky's defense the last two games.

12 — FBS coaching vacancies after Virginia Tech fired Justin Fuente on Tuesday.

1956 — The last season Texas lost five straight games. The Longhorns' current skid hit five games with last week's 57-56 overtime loss to Kansas.

2008 — The last year Kansas won back-to-back Big 12 games. The Jayhawks visit TCU looking for their second straight "W."

Off the radar

Virginia Tech at Miami: Yes, it's a matchup of .500 teams. But it also is a snapshot of the state of college football with decisions on coaches coming fast and furious.

The Hokies announced Tuesday they would move on without Justin Fuente after six seasons, and Hurricanes coach Manny Diaz is in limbo following the Monday firing of athletic director Blake James.

Defensive line coach J.C. Price will serve as Virginia Tech's interim coach for the last two regular-season games. Diaz is set to coach Miami's next two games before his future is announced.

Rielly scores twice to lead Maple Leafs past Rangers

Associated Press

TORONTO — Morgan Rielly scored twice and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the New York Rangers 2-1 on Thursday night for their 10th victory in 11 games.

Jack Campbell made 27 saves for Toronto.

Dryden Hunt scored for New York, and Igor Shesterkin stopped 28 shots.

The Rangers came in with four straight victories, and had earned points in eight of their last nine, but were unable to generate much of an attack until the third period.

The Leafs have won five straight and are 10-1-0 since a four-game slide.

Panthers 4, Devils 1: Spencer Knight made a career-high 45 saves to lift Florida over New Jersey.

The Panthers extended their home regular-season winning streak to 13 games dating to last season.

Hurricanes 2, Ducks 1: Seth Jarvis scored the tiebreaking goal midway through the third period, and visiting Carolina stopped Anaheim's eight-game winning streak.

Ethan Bear scored his first goal of the season and Frederik Andersen made 31 saves against his former team for the Hurricanes, who improved to 13-2-0. Carolina has won three straight.

Lightning 4, Flyers 3 (SO): Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point each scored in the shootout and regulation to lift visiting Tampa Bay over Philadelphia.

Flames 5, Sabres 0: Jacob Markstrom made 27 saves for his fifth shutout, Andrew Mangiapane had two goals and an assist, and visiting Calgary beat Buffalo.

Blue Jackets 5, Coyotes 4 (SO): Boone Jenner had three goals, Yegor Chinakhov scored in the seventh round of a shootout

and visiting Columbus outlasted Arizona.

Oilers 2, Jets 1 (SO): Connor McDavid scored in regulation and the shootout, Kyle Turris also scored in the shootout and host Edmonton beat Winnipeg.

Wild 7, Stars 2: Kirill Kaprizov had a goal and three assists for host Minnesota, which used a four-goal third period to spoil Dallas defenseman Ryan Suter's return.

Penguins 6, Canadiens 0: Teddy Blueger scored two goals and visiting Pittsburgh pounded Montreal to snap a three-game skid.

Blues 4, Sharks 1: Brandon Saad scored twice, Ville Husso made 26 saves, and host St. Louis beat San Jose to snap a four-game skid.

Golden Knights 5, Red Wings 2: Zach Whitecloud scored two goals in his first game back after hand surgery and host Vegas beat Detroit.

Warriors rally from 13 down, top Cavs

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Stephen Curry scored 20 of his 40 points in the fourth quarter, hitting three straight three-pointers, and the NBA-leading Golden State Warriors overcame a 13-point deficit to beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 104-89 on Thursday night.

Curry made 8 of 12 shots, including 4 of 7 three-pointers, in the final period to help Golden State outscore the Cavaliers 36-8. The Warriors ran off the first 17 points of the quarter to seize an 85-81 advantage, holding Cleveland to 12 consecutive empty possessions.

Curry finished 15-for-27 from the field, 9-for-16 beyond the arc and 1-for-1 from the foul line. He increased his NBA-best scoring average to 29.5.

Nemanja Bjelica added 14 points, Andrew Wiggins had 12 points and Draymond Green had four points and 14 rebounds

for Golden State.

76ers 103, Nuggets 89: Tyrese Maxey scored 22 points, Seth Curry added 20 and short-handed Philadelphia beat host Denver to snap a five-game losing streak.

Playing without Joel Embiid and three other regulars, the 76ers held Nikola Jokic to three points in the second half on a night when enraged Nuggets coach Michael Malone was ejected and had to be restrained by Jokic after charging onto the court as the Philadelphia took control in the third quarter.

Jokic had 30 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists before leaving the court for the locker room late in the fourth quarter. Will Barton returned from a back injury to finish with 19 points, nine rebounds and eight assists for Denver.

Embiid missed his sixth straight game after entering the NBA's COVID-19 health and

safety protocols.

Heat 112, Wizards 97: Jimmy Butler scored 32 points and host Miami beat Washington for its fourth straight victory.

The teams will meet again Saturday night in Washington.

Butler shot 11-for-19 from the field and made all 10 of his free throws in his second consecutive outing over 30 points. Bam Adebayo added 20 points, Gabe Vincent had 18 points and P.J. Tucker 15. The Heat improved to 11-5.

Bradley Beal scored 30 points for Washington, and Kyle Kuzma added 19 points.

Jazz 119, Raptors 103: Rudy Gay hit five three-pointers and scored 20 points in his season debut to help host Utah beat Toronto.

Gay also had five rebounds while playing just 18 minutes. He missed Utah's first 14 games while recovering from off-season surgery on his right heel.

Donovan Mitchell also scored 20 points, and Royce O'Neale added a season-high 16. Rudy Gobert had 14 points and 11 rebounds.

Grizzlies 120, Clippers 108: Ja Morant scored 17 of his 28 points in a third-quarter rally in host Memphis' victory over Los Angeles.

Dillon Brooks and Jaren Jackson Jr. added 18 points each, and Desmond Bane had 16. Brandon Clarke finished with 14 points, 10 of them in the fourth quarter.

Timberwolves 115, Spurs 90: Karl-Anthony Towns had 25 points and 12 rebounds to help host Minnesota beat San Antonio.

D'Angelo Russell added 22 points, and Malik Beasley hit five of Minnesota's season-high 21 three-pointers for all 15 of his points.

Devin Vassell scored 18 points for San Antonio.

Xavier leads wire to wire, beats No. 19 Ohio State

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Jack Nunge had 14 points and 14 rebounds, Paul Scruggs also scored 14 points and Xavier led wire to wire in knocking off No. 19 Ohio State 71-65 on Thursday night.

Jamari Wheeler hit a three-pointer to get Ohio State within two points with 17 seconds left, the closest the Buckeyes had been all evening.

Two free throws by Scruggs pushed the Xavier lead back to four. Scruggs then stole Ohio State's inbound pass and sank two more free throws to ice the game for the Musketeers (3-0).

"When you got a leader like Paul Scruggs, a closer like Paul Scruggs, it keeps everybody kind of right here, even-keeled," Xavier coach Travis Steele said. "There was no panic (against) Ohio State. I give Paul a lot of credit for closing off the

game."

Nate Johnson had 12 points and Adam Kunkel added 10 for Xavier.

"For us to be able to get Ohio State here was an incredible opportunity for us," Steele said. "They got a really good team. I told our guys before the game I felt like this was a statement opportunity for us. I felt like we played towards our identity."

E.J. Liddell had a season-low 17 points for the Buckeyes (3-1), who had dropped two spots in the AP Top 25 after two closer-than-expected games to start the season. Meechie Johnson Jr. had 14 points and Kyle Young scored 12.

No. 3 Kansas 88, Stony Brook 59: At Lawrence, Kan., Ochai Agbaji scored 25 points to continue his torrid start to the season, David McCormack added 12 points and eight rebounds

and the Jayhawks pulled away from the Seawolves.

Christian Braun and Zach Clemence added 11 points apiece for Kansas (3-0), which led by six at halftime before heating up from beyond the arc.

Tykei Greene had 11 points and nine rebounds to lead transfer-heavy Stony Brook (0-2).

No. 22 St. Bonaventure 67, Boise State 61: At Charleston, S.C., Kyle Lofton had 17 points and seven assists, Jaren Holmes added 14 points and 10 rebounds, and the Bonnies beat the Broncos.

St. Bonaventure (3-0) trailed 59-57 with 5:40 remaining after Boise State guard Marcus Shaver Jr. hit a three-pointer. But the Bonnies locked down and held Boise State to 1-for-9 shooting after that.

Emmanuel Akot finished with a career-high 24 points, in-

cluding six three-pointers, for Boise State (1-2).

No. 24 Florida 81, Milwaukee 45: At Gainesville, Fla., Colin Castleton had 19 points and 10 rebounds for his second straight double-double as the Gators celebrated their first game as a ranked team in nine months by routing the Panthers.

Milwaukee freshman Patrick Baldwin Jr., a projected NBA lottery pick, had 13 points on 6-for-15 shooting. He added three rebounds, two blocks, two steals and an assist. Baldwin landed at Milwaukee (1-2) mostly because his dad is the head coach.

Castleton led four Florida players in double figures. Tyree Appleby had 14 points, six rebounds and five assists. Phlandrous Fleming added 12 points. And Anthony Duruji chipped in 12 points and seven rebounds for the Gators (3-0).