

Ukraine plans next move amid retreat

Associated Press

KHERSON, Ukraine — The Ukrainian sniper adjusted his scope and fired a 50-caliber bullet at a Russian soldier across the Dnieper River. Earlier, another Ukrainian used a drone to scan for Russian troops.

Two weeks after retreating from the southern city of Kherson, Russia is pounding the town with artillery as it digs in across the Dnieper River.

Ukraine is striking back at Russian troops with its own long-distance weapons, and Ukrainian officers say they want to capitalize on their momentum.

The Russian withdrawal from the only provincial capital it gained in nine months of war was one of Moscow's most significant battlefield losses. Now that its troops hold a new front line, the army is planning its next move, the Ukrainian military said through a spokesman.

Ukrainian forces can now strike deeper into the Russian-controlled territories and possibly push their counteroffensive closer to Crimea, which Russia illegally captured in 2014.

Russian troops continue to establish fortifications, including trench systems near the Crimean border and some areas between the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in the east.

In some locations, new fortifications are up to 37 miles behind the current front lines, suggesting that Russia is preparing for more Ukrainian breakthroughs, according to the British Ministry of Defense.

"The armed forces of Ukraine seized the initiative in this war some time ago," said Mick Ryan, military strategist and retired Australian army major general. "They have momentum. There is no way that they will want to waste that."

Crossing the river and pushing the Russian forces further back would require complicated logistical planning. Both sides have blown up bridges across the Dnieper.

"This is what cut Russians' supply lines and this is also what will make any further Ukrainian advance beyond the left bank of the river more difficult," said Mario Bikarski, an analyst with the Economist Intelligence Unit.

In a key battlefield development this

week, Kyiv's forces attacked Russian positions on the Kinburn Spit, a gateway to the Black Sea basin, as well as parts of the southern Kherson region still under Russian control. Recapturing the area could help Ukrainian forces push into Russian-held territory in the Kherson region "under significantly less Russian artillery fire" than if they directly crossed the Dnieper River, said the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank. Control of the area would help Kyiv alleviate Russian strikes on Ukraine's southern seaports and allow it to increase its naval activity in the Black Sea, the think tank added.

Some military experts say there's a possibility the weather might disproportionately harm poorly-equipped Russian military members and allow Ukraine to take advantage of frozen terrain and move more easily than during the muddy autumn months, ISW said.

Russia's main task, meanwhile, is to prevent any further retreats from the broader Kherson region and to strengthen its defense systems over Crimea, said Bikarski, the analyst.

Philippines asks China reason for latest sea dispute

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The Philippines has sought an explanation from China after a Filipino military commander reported that the Chinese coast guard forcibly seized Chinese rocket debris in the possession of Filipino navy personnel in the disputed South China Sea, officials said Thursday.

Sunday's incident off Philippine-occupied Thitu island is the latest flareup in the long-seething territorial disputes involving China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. China has denied its coast guard forcibly seized the debris from the Filipino sailors.

Department of Foreign Affairs spokesperson in Manila, Maria Theresa Daza, said without elaborating that a diplomatic note was relayed to China for "clarification from the Chinese side over the incident."

Vice Adm. Alberto Carlos, who heads the military's Western Command, said the Filipino sailors, using a long-range camera, spotted the debris drifting in strong waves near a sandbar about 800 yards offshore. They set out on a boat and retrieved the floating object and started to tow it back to Thitu Island.

As they were traveling back to the island, "they noticed that a China coast guard vessel with bow number 5203 was approaching their location and subsequently blocked their pre-plotted course twice," Carlos said in a statement.

The Chinese coast guard vessel then deployed an inflatable boat with personnel who "forcefully retrieved said floating object by cutting the towing line" attached to the Filipino sailors' rubber boat. The sailors decided to return to their island, Carlos said, without detailing what happened.

Chinese coast guard ships have blocked Philippine supply boats delivering supplies to Filipino forces in the disputed waters in the past but seizing objects in the possession of another nation's military constitutes a more brazen act.

China's Foreign Ministry in Beijing has denied that the debris was seized forcibly.

"The Philippine side salvaged and towed the object first. After friendly consultation at the site, the Philippine side returned the object to China, and China expressed appreciation for that," ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said Monday. "There was no such thing as interception or forcible seizure at the scene."

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said he would also seek clarification when he visits Beijing in January to meet China's leader Xi Jinping.

Peltola, Murkowski defeat Trump-backed challengers

The Washington Post

Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola on Wednesday became the first Alaska Native to win a full term in Congress, securing reelection along with Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who both defeated challengers endorsed by former President Donald Trump after state officials finished a final round of vote-counting.

Peltola, who made history with her August special election win, and Murkowski, a senator for two decades, led after earlier vote counts. But the centrist lawmakers' victories were not clinched until Wednesday, when the Alaska Division of Elections redistributed votes under the state's new ranked-choice voting system.

At a victory party at a downtown Anchorage brewery Wednesday night, Peltola told reporters that Alaskans have

given her a "a two-year contract."

"And I will be happy to work for Alaskans again, as long as they'll have me," she said. Her win, she added, shows that Alaskans "wholeheartedly embrace nonpartisanship and working together."

In the race for governor, Republican Mike Dunleavy won reelection with over 50% of the votes, avoiding the ranked-choice process. Peltola and Murkowski had crossed party lines to endorse each other ahead of the election, forming an alliance rooted in the similar space they occupy on the political spectrum. Their wins cap an election season in which voters across the country tended to show a preference for incumbents in battleground races.

"I am honored that Alaskans — of all regions, backgrounds and party affiliations — have

once again granted me their confidence to continue working with them and on their behalf in the U.S. Senate," Murkowski said in a statement Wednesday night. "I look forward to continuing the important work ahead of us."

The outcome marked another blow to Trump in this year's midterm elections. Many candidates affiliated with the former president and his polarizing positions fell in defeat in battleground contests, and his overall record was mixed in competitive races where he endorsed. That list includes former Republican governor Sarah Palin, who challenged Peltola with Trump's backing, and Republican Kelly Tshibaka, a former state and federal official who ran against Murkowski with the former president's support.

After the final round of ranked-choice voting, Murkow-

ski had 53.7% of the vote to 46.3% for Tshibaka. In the House race, Peltola had 55% of the vote to Palin's 45%.

Peltola ran a locally focused campaign with both traditional and unconventional Democratic platform planks — she touted her support for abortion rights and "pro-fish" views, along with her endorsement of a new Alaska oil project and the large gun collection that she and her family maintains.

Peltola's win secures her first full two-year term on Capitol Hill and follows her victory in August to temporarily fill her state's only seat in the U.S. House — one that was vacated after the sudden death of longtime Republican Rep. Don Young. Peltola beat Palin in that race, too, becoming the first Alaska Native member of Congress and her state's first woman to fill the seat.

New York's first pot crop jeopardized by court fight

Associated Press

Albany, N.Y. — A court fight that has prevented New York from awarding marijuana dispensary licenses in some parts of the state could wind up hurting small farms that just harvested their first cannabis crop, officials warned a judge Tuesday. New York on Monday issued its first 36 licenses for dispensaries, which will become the only places in the state where recreational marijuana is sold legally. The state, though, has had to delay plans to authorize scores more dispensaries because of a legal battle over its licensing criteria.

U.S. District Court Judge Gary Sharpe blocked the state from issuing licenses in Brook-

lyn and swaths of upstate New York after a company owned by a Michigan resident challenged a requirement that applicants demonstrate "a significant presence in New York state."

In a court filing Tuesday, the state asked the judge to loosen that injunction to prevent jeopardizing a marijuana harvest worth an estimated \$1.5 billion, now waiting to be distributed to retailers. Blocking the state from approving licenses in four other regions including central and western New York, the mid-Hudson and Brooklyn, would cause "significantly more harm than necessary," the state argued. It was unclear when Sharpe might rule on the request.

WHO, CDC: 40 million kids miss measles vaccine dose

Associated Press

LONDON — The World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say measles immunization has dropped significantly since the coronavirus pandemic began, resulting in a record high of nearly 40 million children missing a vaccine dose last year.

In a report issued Wednesday, the WHO and the CDC said millions of children were now susceptible to measles, among the world's most contagious diseases.

The WHO and CDC said continued drops in vaccination, weak disease surveillance and delayed response plans due to COVID-19, in addition to ongo-

ing outbreaks in more than 20 countries, mean that "measles is an imminent threat in every region of the world."

Scientists estimate that at least 95% of a population needs to be immunized to protect against epidemics; the WHO and the CDC reported that only about 81% of children receive their first dose of measles vaccine while 71% get their second dose, marking the lowest global coverage rates of the first measles dose since 2008.

"The record number of children under-immunized ... shows the profound damage immunization systems have sustained during the COVID-19 pandemic," CDC director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said.

Suspect in club killing held without bail

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — The alleged shooter facing possible hate crime charges in the fatal shooting of five people at a Colorado Springs gay nightclub was ordered held without bail in an initial court appearance Wednesday as the suspect sat slumped over in a chair.

Anderson Lee Aldrich, 22, could be seen with injuries visible on their face and head in a brief video appearance from jail. Aldrich appeared to need prompting by defense attorneys and offered a slurred response when asked to state their name by El Paso County Court Judge Charlotte Ankeny.

The suspect was beaten into

submission by patrons during Saturday night's shooting at Club Q and released from the hospital Tuesday. The motive in the shooting was still under investigation, but authorities said Aldrich faces possible murder and hate crime charges.

Hate crime charges would require proving that the shooter was motivated by bias, such as against the victims' actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The charges against Aldrich are preliminary, and prosecutors have not yet filed formal charges.

Defense attorneys said late Tuesday that the suspect is nonbinary and in court filings referred to the suspect as "Mx. Al-

drich." The attorneys' footnotes assert that Aldrich is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns.

Prosecutor Michael Allen repeatedly referred to the suspect as "he" during a press briefing after the hearing and said the suspect's gender status would not change anything about the case in his opinion. Allen said Aldrich was "physically competent" to stand charges.

Ankeny set the next hearing for Dec. 6.

Of 17 people injured by gunshots in the attack, 11 remained hospitalized late Wednesday, officials said.

Aldrich's name was changed more than six years ago as a teenager, after filing a legal pet-

ition in Texas seeking to "protect himself" from a father with a criminal history including domestic violence against Aldrich's mother.

Aldrich was known as Nicholas Franklin Brink until 2016. Weeks before turning 16, Aldrich successfully petitioned a Texas court for a name change, court records show. A petition for the name change was submitted on Brink's behalf by his legal guardians at the time.

"Minor wishes to protect himself and his future from any connections to birth father and his criminal history. Father has had no contact with minor for several years," said the petition filed in Bexar County, Texas.

No suspect, no weapon in Idaho student slayings

Associated Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Ten days after four University of Idaho students were stabbed to death in their rooms, police said Wednesday they still have not identified a suspect or found a murder weapon, and they continued asking for tips and surveillance video.

Moscow Police Capt. Roger Lanier told a news conference his department is putting all of its resources into solving the case and that investigators are prepared to work through the Thanksgiving holiday.

Authorities gave no indication that they're any closer to making an arrest, but they did stress that they continue processing forensic evidence gathered from the home where the students were killed. Additional surveillance video could be just as helpful for what it doesn't show as what it does, said Police Chief James Fry.

"We continue moving forward to understand why this occurred in our community," Fry said.

The killings stunned bucolic Moscow, a college town and agricultural center that got its first Target store last year. The city, population of 26,000, is surrounded by rolling wheat and bean fields and had not seen a homicide since 2015.

The victims were housemates Madison Mogen, 21, of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Xana Kernodle, 20, of Post Falls, Idaho; Kaylee Goncalves, 21, of Rathdrum, Idaho; and Kernodle's boyfriend, Ethan Chapin, 20, of Mount Vernon, Washington.

Police said Tuesday they had pursued tips that Goncalves had a stalker, but they hadn't been able to identify one. They also have knocked down rumors about other incidents — including a car break-in and a

dog's slaying — being potentially related to the case, as well as a rumor that the victims had been tied up or gagged.

According to investigators, Mogen and Goncalves had been out at a bar and a food truck before returning home at about 1:45 a.m. that Sunday. Kernodle and Chapin had been at a fraternity house and returned home about the same time. Two other housemates, whose names haven't been released, got back about 45 minutes earlier.

Just before noon, a 911 call from the house reported an unconscious person; it had been placed from the phone of one of the housemates. Officers found the four students dead, two on the second story and two on the third. At least some appeared to have been attacked in their sleep, and some had defensive wounds, police said. There were no signs of sexual assault.

Gunman in Walmart shooting ID'd as team leader

Associated Press

CHESAPEAKE, Va. — The Walmart employee who pulled out a handgun before a routine meeting and killed six co-workers Tuesday was identified as an overnight team leader.

The gunman was identified as Andre Bing, 31, an overnight team leader who had been a Walmart employee since 2010. Po-

lice said he had one handgun and several magazines of ammunition.

Tyler said the overnight stocking team of 15 to 20 people had just gathered in the break room to go over the morning plan. She said the meeting was about to start, and one team leader said: "All right guys, we have a light night ahead of us." Then Bing turned around and opened fire on the staff.

"He was just shooting all throughout the room. It didn't matter who he hit. He didn't say anything. He didn't look at anybody in any specific type of way," Briana Tyler, a Walmart employee, said Wednesday.

The gunman was dead when officers arrived late Tuesday at the store in Chesapeake, Virginia's second-largest city. Authorities said he apparently shot himself.

Kim's sister insults, threatens Seoul

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attacked South Korea with a string of insults on Thursday for considering new unilateral sanctions against the North, calling its president and his government “idiots” and “a running wild dog gnawing on a bone given by the U.S.”

Kim Yo Jong's diatribe came two days after South Korea's Foreign Ministry said it was considering additional sanctions on North Korea over its recent barrage of missile tests. The ministry said it would also consider taking action against alleged cyberattacks by North Korea — believed to be a key new source of funding for its weapons program — if the North conducts a major provocation like a nuclear test.

“I wonder what ‘sanctions’ the South Korean group, no more than a running wild dog gnawing on a bone given by the U.S., impudently will impose on North Korea,” Kim

Yo Jong said in a statement carried by state media. “What a spectacle sight!”

She called South Korea's conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol and his administration “idiots who continue creating the dangerous situation.” She added that South Korea “had not been our target” when Moon Jae-in — Yoon's liberal predecessor who sought reconciliation with North Korea — was in power. The comment could be seen as an attempt to foster anti-Yoon sentiment in South Korea.

“We warn the impudent and stupid once again that the desperate sanctions and pressure of the U.S. and its South Korean stooges against (North Korea) will add fuel to the latter's hostility and anger and they will serve as a noose for them,” Kim Yo Jong said.

Kim Yo Jong's official title is vice department director of the Central Committee of the North's ruling Workers' Party. But South Korea's spy agency says she is the

North's second-most powerful person after her brother and handles relations with South Korea and the United States.

South Korea quickly shot back at Kim Yo Jong's insults of Yoon, saying it's “very deplorable for her to denounce our head of state with rough, substandard words and show no basic forms of etiquette.” Seoul's Unification Ministry said in a statement that it strongly condemns what it called “her impure attempt to incite antigovernment struggles and shake our system” in South Korea.

Last month, South Korea imposed its own sanctions on 15 North Korean individuals and 16 organizations suspected of involvement in illicit activities to finance North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs. They were Seoul's first unilateral sanctions on North Korea in five years, but experts say they were largely symbolic because the two Koreas have few financial dealings between them.

Erdogan vows Syria invasion, Kurds prepare their response

Associated Press

QAMISHLI, Syria — Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed Wednesday to order a land invasion of northern Syria targeting Kurdish groups, amid years-long border violence and repeated Turkish incursions.

Turkey has launched a barrage of airstrikes on suspected militant targets in northern Syria and Iraq in recent days, in retaliation for a deadly Nov. 13 bombing in Istanbul that Ankara blames on the Kurdish groups. The groups have denied involvement in the bombing, and say Turkish strikes have killed civilians and threatened the fight against Islamic State.

Ankara's allies, particularly Russia, have attempted to avert a ground incursion, but Erdogan said Wednesday in a speech to his ruling party's legislators in Ankara that the air operations are “just the beginning” and that Turkey is determined to “close down all of our southern borders ... with a security strip that will prevent the possibility of attacks on our country.”

Turkey has carried out a series of incursions into Syria since 2016 and already controls parts of northern Syria.

Erdogan said the new military offensive, planned to take place “at the most convenient

time for us” would target the regions of Tel Rifaat, Manbij and Kobani, which is also known by its Arabic name Ayn Al Arab.

“The day is near when those concrete tunnels which the terrorists use for safety will become their graves,” he said.

The commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in northeast Syria, meanwhile, said his group is prepared to repel a ground invasion by Turkey.

SDF head Mazloum Abdi told the Associated Press that his group has been preparing for another such attack since Turkey launched a ground offensive in the area in 2019 and “we believe that we have reached a level where we can foil any new attack. At least the Turks will not be able to occupy more of our areas and there will be a great battle.”

He added, “If Turkey attacks any region, the war will spread to all regions ... and everyone will be hurt by that.”

Following the weekend's airstrikes, Turkish officials said that suspected Kurdish militants fired rockets Monday across the Syrian border into Turkey, killing at least two people and wounding 10 others.

Abdi denied that SDF had struck inside Turkish territory.

Russia's Duma approve LGBTQ ‘propaganda’ bill

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian lawmakers on Thursday gave their final approval to a bill that significantly expands restrictions on activities seen as promoting gay rights in the country, another step in a yearslong crackdown on the country's embattled LGBTQ community.

The new bill expands a ban on what authorities call “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” to minors, established by legislation dubbed the “gay propaganda” law. It was adopted by the Kremlin in 2013 in an effort to promote “traditional values.”

This year, lawmakers moved to ban spreading such information to people aged 18 and older.

The bill was approved in the third and final reading on Thursday by the State Duma, the lower house of parliament. It will go next to the upper house, the Federation Council, and then to President Vladimir Putin, whose signature will give it legal force.

The new bill outlaws all advertising, media and online resources books, films and theater productions deemed to contain such “propaganda,” a concept loosely defined in the bill.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

'Wrongfully imprisoned' man awarded \$45M

OH DAYTON — A federal jury awarded \$45 million to a man who spent two decades in prison on rape and kidnapping convictions that were later overturned.

The Montgomery County verdict came in the civil lawsuit filed by Roger "Dean" Gillispie and followed a judge's declaration last year that he was wrongfully imprisoned.

The Fairborn man was convicted in 1991 in the rapes and kidnappings of three women in two attacks in Miami Township and Harrison Township. He moved for a new trial in 2008, arguing that new evidence pointed to another suspect and authorities had suppressed exculpatory evidence.

A court threw out the convictions and ordered a new trial, and a judge eventually dismissed the case. Gillispie was released in 2011.

Opening weekend deer kill up 14%

WI MADISON — Hunters killed 14% more deer during this year's nine-day gun season's opening weekend than in 2021 largely due to snow cover that made hunting easier, state wildlife officials said.

The Department of Natural Resources released data that shows hunters registered 103,623 deer last weekend. That compares with 90,023 deer during last year's opening weekend. The annual average opening weekend harvest from 2017 to 2021 was 102,347.

DNR wildlife biologist Jeff Pritzl said snow cover helped

hunters spot and track deer.

The nine-day gun season ends on Sunday.

Man sentenced for cannabis pen fraud

CA LOS ANGELES — A man who once competed on the Philippines national decathlon team was sentenced to 17½ years in federal prison for bilking investors out of more than \$35 million with a phony scheme to market cannabis vape pens.

David Joseph Bunevacz, 53, of Calabasas, also was ordered to pay \$35.2 million in restitution by U.S. District Judge Dale S. Fischer. He pleaded guilty to securities fraud and wire fraud.

Bunevacz raised millions of dollars from at least 10 investors, prosecutors said. But instead of financing business operations, Bunevacz was accused of using much of it to fund a lavish lifestyle.

Bunevacz is a former decathlete at the University of California, Los Angeles, and competed for the Philippines in the 1990s.

Famed Victorian house from 'Goonies' for sale

OR PORTLAND — Good news for fans of "The Goonies:" the Victorian home featured in the film is on sale in Astoria, and potential buyers are considering making it more accessible to the public.

"We have a few interested parties right now," said realtor Jordan Miller, the listing agent. "It seems to be everybody's intention to be able to open up the house and have more access."

The 1896 home has been listed with an asking price of \$1.7

million on Zillow, where it's described as "fully loaded with history, nostalgia and iconic level of fame."

Since the movie hit theaters in 1985, fans have flocked to the home in northwestern Oregon's historic port of Astoria. The city celebrates Goonies Day on June 7, the film's release date.

City OKs replacement for Columbus statue

CT NEW HAVEN — A public monument representing the Italian-American immigrant experience was approved by the New Haven Board of Alders, replacing a Christopher Columbus statue that was removed in 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd.

The Wooster Square Monument Committee announced a new campaign to raise the estimated \$300,000 needed to commission the sculpture and underwrite the total cost of the monument. The committee estimates it will take about 18 months to raise the necessary funds and for the monument to be sculpted and installed.

Designed by Marc-Anthony Massaro, the sculpture will depict a young Italian family that has just arrived in the U.S. It is named "Indicando la via al futuro," or "Pointing the way to the future."

Indictment: Father, son shot at delivery driver

MS BROOKHAVEN — A father and son were indicted by a grand jury after allegedly chasing and shooting at a FedEx driver in January after he dropped off a

package in a Mississippi city.

Brandon and Gregory Case, who are both white, were re-arrested and indicted for attempted first-degree murder, conspiracy and shooting into the vehicle of D'Monterrio Gibson, who is Black. The charges were upgraded from conspiracy and aggravated assault.

Gibson, 24, was not injured. But the chase and gunfire have sparked social media complaints of racism in Brookhaven.

Whales off coast delay crabbing season

CA SAN FRANCISCO — For the fourth year in a row, the start of the commercial Dungeness crab season in California will be delayed to protect humpback whales from becoming entangled in trap and buoy lines, it was announced.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife delayed the start of the commercial season, which usually begins Nov. 15, until further notice for waters between the Mendocino county line and the border with Mexico.

The situation will be reassessed on or before Dec. 7 and if conditions allow, commercial crabbing could be permitted on Dec. 16, the department said.

Humpback whales can get caught in the vertical ropes connected to heavy commercial traps, which they can drag around for months, leaving them injured, starved or so exhausted that they can drown.

The department said there have been 15 confirmed entanglements of humpback whales by fishing gear off California this year.

— From Associated Press

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Ohio State seeks revenge on Michigan

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio State has been counting the days until it could get a shot at revenge.

Not like the Buckeyes are ever able to forget. An electronic display in the football practice facility counts down the days, hours and minutes left before kickoff of the next game against Michigan.

But the feelings are rawer this time, the No. 2 Buckeyes edgier in the buildup to Saturday's game because of how things went down last year in Ann Arbor.

"Every single day we think about it," defensive end Zach Harrison said of that humiliating 42-27 loss to Michigan, an opponent that generations of Ohio State players and fans have been trained to hate with a passion.

"It's the one game that we've had in the back of our minds all year, and now it's time," safety Lathan Ransom said. "I'm pretty sure you can imagine how we're feeling without me saying too much."

That loss a year ago snapped Ohio State's eight-game winning streak in the series as well as its run of 26 straight wins over Big Ten opponents. It denied the Buckeyes a Big Ten championship for the first time in five seasons and ended its chances to get into the College Football Playoff.

"Of course, we've been licking our wounds for 365 days, hearing all the laughing and everything that everybody's been saying," said C.J. Stroud, Ohio State's quarterback and a Heisman Trophy contender. "So man, we're very excited."

The chance for payback comes Saturday at Ohio Stadium.

The stakes could hardly be higher.

A win for No. 2 Ohio State (11-0, 8-0 Big Ten, CFP No. 2) or No. 3 Michigan (11-0, 8-0, CFP No. 3) will mean a trip to Indianapolis for the Big Ten Championship and keeping their national championship dreams alive.

While a scenario may exist that the loser of Saturday's game could still backdoor its way into College Football Playoff, the more likely result is a consolation bowl game and 365 days of pain.

"When you lose this game, it's a tough year," said Ohio State coach Ryan Day. "There's no hiding from that."

Both teams come into the game unbeaten for the first time since 2006. This will be the 13th time since 1942 they'll clash as top-5 teams in the AP Top 25. Arguably, it's the biggest game in the series since 2016, when second-ranked Ohio State beat third-ranked Michigan 30-27 in double overtime.

"It's like two superheroes going at each other," Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh said.

Understand that most Ohio State fans, given the choice, would rather beat Michigan than win a national championship, an ethos ingrained by coach Woody Hayes during his romanticized "Ten Year War" with Bo Schembechler and the Wolverines in the late 1960s and '70s.

But even players who didn't grow up with the rivalry — a majority on both rosters are from somewhere other than Ohio or Michigan — can appreciate everything that's at stake.

Ryan Day, whose only conference loss in his first three seasons was dealt by Harbaugh and the Wolverines last year, said the team talks and thinks about The Game constantly. Players have been saying since training camp that avenging last year's loss is at top of their list of goals.

"We have scars," Day said.

Michigan players say they're looking forward to taking two straight from the Buckeyes — and winning at the Horseshoe — for the first time in more than two decades.

"Nobody wants to lose this game," Wolverines tackle Ryan Hayes said. "We're going to have all the motivation that we need."

Harbaugh last year earned his first victory in the series in six tries. He's every bit as confident this time. He called his players "happy warriors on a happy mission."

Maple Leafs halt Devils' winning streak at 13 games

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — The New Jersey Devils' franchise record-tying 13-game winning streak came to an ugly end.

Real ugly.

Matt Murray made 34 saves and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Devils 2-1 Wednesday night in a game in which New Jersey had three goals disallowed. The final disallowed goal resulted in fans pelting the ice with debris, causing play to be stopped for more than five minutes.

"Nobody feels good. I don't feel good," said Devils coach Lindy Ruff, whose team also hit two goalposts. "I don't like the feeling. I don't like the losing; I know it's been a while, but you don't want that feeling. Now you gotta get over that and get ready for your next game."

While the Maple Leafs enjoyed their seventh win in 11 games (7-1-3) and the goals by John Tavares and Pontus Holmberg, they were miffed about the debris, including

cans of beer, that whizzed by their heads.

"You take cover," said Toronto coach Sheldon Keefe, whose team briefly went to the locker room. "It's all you can do. I've been through that experience a few other times ... but I felt like it could get dangerous."

The three overturned goals riled the sellout crowd at the Prudential Center, but the calls appeared correct.

Goals by Nate Bastian and Damon Severson waved off in the first and second periods, respectively, for goaltender interference. A short-handed tally by Erik Haula was overruled by officials because he kicked the puck into the net. The fact the puck hit off the skate of a Leafs player didn't alter the ruling.

Haula skated onto the ice to try to get the fans to stop tossing debris.

"I don't care if I get a beer spilt on me but I got gear on. There's other people there and you'd hate to see somebody get knocked

with something in the head," said Haula, who added he was hit by a chicken finger.

Toronto became the first team to beat the Devils (16-4) since Washington on Oct. 24.

"We needed to get a win here today, no matter who we're playing," Keefe said. "I mean, that's a tremendous hockey team over there. And they deserve everything that they've gotten here to date. ... This is a character win for our team."

Dougie Hamilton scored on a tip-in with 5:08 to play, bringing the Prudential Center crowd into the game.

Murray made a half-dozen saves in the final minutes, stopping Jesper Bratt, Jack Hughes and Nico Hischier twice on good chances.

"At the end of the game, it was gritty," Murray said.

The Devils' winning streak tied for the fifth-longest in NHL history and was four games shy of the record set by Mario Lemieux and the Pittsburgh Penguins in 1993.

England wary of underdog Americans

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — England scored six goals in its opening World Cup game against Iran, but it was the two it conceded that concern coach Gareth Southgate and provide hope for the United States.

“By the end we looked sloppy,” said Southgate of the 6-2 win over Iran on Monday. He also warned the U.S. would be coming “full-throttle” in Friday’s Group B match.

The tournament has already produced some shocking results, including Saudi Arabia’s win against Argentina and Japan’s upset of Germany.

A win for the U.S. over England would not be on the scale of Saudi Arabia’s win — but Gregg Berhalter’s team is undoubtedly the underdog against one of the tournament favorites.

The two goals conceded against Iran gave Southgate something to focus on in an otherwise encouraging performance.

His message to the players has been clear: They will need to be better against the U.S. team that tied 1-1 with Wales in its opening group game.

“They’re a top nation with a lot of top

players who have played in the Premier League and who we’ve come up against,” said England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford. “But it’s about us as a squad being 100%. It’s about us taking the result from Iran and going into the U.S. game positive.”

One of those Premier League players is Chelsea winger Christian Pulisic, a point of focus for England’s defense.

“He’s good with both feet, very clinical,” Pickford said. “We’ve got to be wary of him.”

A win for England would see it qualify for the round of 16 with a game still to play — but the fate of Lionel Messi and Argentina is proof nothing can be taken for granted.

“It’s what World Cup football is all about,” said Pickford. “There are going to be surprises.”

U.S. goalkeeper Matt Turner is predicting more of them at the World Cup.

“You see that the world of football is leveling out in a lot of ways,” he said. “Teams have game plans. Teams have been investing in their youth academies over a number of years.”

“I think the message is when you have one team that’s bought into the same message,

you can beat anyone on any given day.”

The U.S. famously beat England 1-0 in the 1950 World Cup and the teams tied 1-1 in 2010.

If the U.S. is to produce the latest surprise of this year’s tournament, it will have to contain an England attack that was ruthless in the match against Iran, which featured two goals by Bukayo Saka.

“I think it’s pretty clear he’s one of the young stars of world football,” said his Arsenal teammate Turner. “He’s a top, top player and you don’t need me to tell anybody on our team how much of a threat that he poses in the game.”

United States midfielder Tyler Adams is undaunted by the prospect of coming up against one of the tournament favorites.

Adams, who plays in the Premier League with Leeds, accepts his team is the underdog, but says the game holds no fear for him.

“England are still a big team at the end of the day, but the intimidation factor? I wouldn’t say there’s many things out there that intimidate me, other than spiders,” he said. “So it’s fine for me, but obviously I’ve got to play against all those big players, so I’ve done it before.”

49ers defense has returned to its dominant ways

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The San Francisco 49ers defense got humbled a bit by Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs last month.

Since then, it has been back to the unit’s usual dominance — especially in the second half.

The Niners have put together three straight defensive masterpieces to move into a tie for first place in the NFC West, pitching second-half shutouts against the Rams, Chargers and Cardinals.

“Guys have done a great job in the second half of being where they’re supposed to be, making the plays that they’re supposed to make,” defensive coordinator DeMeco Ryans said Wednesday. “They’re doing an outstanding job. I can’t give those guys enough credit. If you want to win games, you have to close it out in the second half. They’ve done that for three weeks.”

It’s a far cry from what happened back in Week 7 against Kansas City, when the Chiefs scored TDs on the first four drives of the second half in a 44-23 win at Levi’s Sta-

dium.

But San Francisco (6-4) has gotten healthier since then and taken advantage of an easier slate of opponents.

The Niners surrendered a few big plays in the first halves of those three wins, but Ryans’ unit has made the necessary changes to make sure that doesn’t happen in the second half.

“He’s amazing,” defensive end Nick Bosa said about Ryans. “He knows when to make the right calls. I don’t think he’ll be here much longer, unfortunately, if he wants a head job somewhere. But three second-half shutouts in a row is winning football, and if we can keep that up, then with our offense we’re going to be a tough team to beat.”

This marks just the third time since at least 1991 that the Niners have shut out three straight opponents in the second half, doing it on the way to the Super Bowl in 2019 and 1991.

They have allowed just 242 yards after halftime in those games for an average of only 3.1 yards per play.

“That’s just a product of execution,” line-

backer Fred Warner said. “The more energy being brought because you’re making more plays and the whole team feeds off of that. So we just got to continue to be hard on ourselves.”

The 49ers defense has playmakers on all three levels with Bosa spearheading the pass rush with 10½ sacks, Warner and Dre Greenlaw patrolling the middle of the field at linebacker and a much-improved secondary with cornerback Charvarius Ward, emerging big-play safety Talanoa Hufanga and the return of the reliable Jimmie Ward from injury.

Now Ryans wants to see his defense put it all together for a full game and avoid the breakdowns that have led to a few big plays in the first half the last three games.

“We’re thinking about just playing clean football,” he said. “Really the emphasis is how do we do this in the first half. Can we not give up the bonehead play in the first half to even allow teams to be in position to have to shut them out in the second half? The mindset is can we go out and play our best for the entire game?”

After 20 games, NBA contenders emerge

Associated Press

Miami Heat President Pat Riley has a longstanding belief: After 20 games, a team knows its identity.

He's right. And after 20 games, title contenders are usually known as well.

Think of this as the end of the season's first quarter. That's basically where the NBA is right now, with teams starting to approach the 20-game mark. There's much basketball left to be played, but 20 games has proven — almost without fail — to be more than enough of a sample size when determining which teams have a legitimate shot at a championship.

The numbers show it. The teams know it, too.

"We look at 20 games," Phoenix coach Monty Williams said. "It can get stretched out a bit if you have injuries, but for the most part, your identity and who you are is pretty much set. You've gone through the league to a degree. ... You kind of have an idea of who you are, where you need to improve, your strengths from a numbers standpoint, and then the players pretty much have an idea of what kind of team you're going to be."

In 2005-06, Miami had the league's 13th-best record through 20 games; the Heat were just 10-10, though few knew at the time Riley was about to return as coach. In 1997-

98, Chicago — then winners of five of the league's last seven titles — was 11th-best in the NBA through 20 games; the Bulls looked bored and were 12-8.

Those are the only two instances of an eventual NBA champion not being in the top 10 in terms of record that deep into a season. (In fairness, there were a few seasons without 10 teams back in the early days, but play along.)

That's bad news for a lot of teams right now.

Each of the last 16 champions have had no worse than the fifth-best record through 20 games.

Golden State last season, best record through 20 games. The 2018-19 Toronto Raptors and 2019-20 Los Angeles Lakers, best record through 20 games. The 2014-15 and 2016-17 Warriors, best record through 20 games.

They all won titles.

That's good news for the Boston Celtics, who are well on their way to having the best record in the NBA at the 20-game mark this season. That's not great news for the Warriors, who are 9-10 and 11th in the West — but are still well within striking distance of everyone. That's also not great news for the Heat, who finished with the best regular-season record in the Eastern Conference

last season and are 8-11 now with a slew of key players hurt.

"We need to figure out what it's going to take to win and figure out what everybody needs to do differently, more consistently," Golden State guard Stephen Curry said. "Forget the road record, you can't even find a sustainable period of success when habits start to form and we're in a position where we're feeling good about ourselves. We're still searching and chasing a little bit."

The Celtics aren't chasing. They're among those being chased. The team with the best record through 20 games has won the title 34 times in the league's first 76 seasons.

"You have to be able to make each other better whether you have the ball or not," said Celtics interim coach Joe Mazzulla, who in the span of less than two months has gone from being an assistant coach, to the person in charge after the Ime Udoka suspension, to the coach of a team that's a popular pick to win the NBA title. "And our guys are bought into making each other better if they have the ball or not. It's cool to watch."

The Celtics should be the first team not to write off anyone. They were 10-10 through 20 games last season and wound up in the NBA Finals, where they fell to Golden State in six games.

Transfer portal puts more value on early tourneys

Associated Press

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas — North Carolina State coach Kevin Keatts knows he needs to work fast to bring along a team that added four transfers this season in key roles.

For coaches across college basketball in the transfer-portal era, playing in an early season tournament offers a boost in finding the right rotations, establishing roles and forging a team's identity. Those chances have come this week with holiday events like the Maui Invitational and the Phil Knight tournaments in Oregon.

For Keatts, it's the Battle 4 Atlantis in the Bahamas, which opened Wednesday with No. 3 Kansas, No. 22 Tennessee, Wisconsin, Southern California, Dayton, BYU and Butler.

"For us, it's trying to figure out, 'All right, where do we go from here? What steps?'" Keatts said Tuesday. "Obviously with transfers, you're trying to get as much chemistry as you can. And it's really hard to do

it in practice situations. So you're kind of thrown into the fire of the game."

It's a challenge facing coaches across the sport, first in the offseason with issues of roster management as players come and go while putting their names in the portal.

From there, it's about fully integrating those players and building cohesion.

"That's the world of transfers," Massachusetts coach Frank Martin said last week before winning the Myrtle Beach Invitational. "That's the hardest thing we as coaches deal with. Everyone's brand new. The beginning of the season, it's a get-to-know ceremony for lack of a better word."

Kansas coach Bill Self sees it, too. His reigning national champions brought in 6-foot-6 wing Kevin McCullar from Texas Tech, and McCullar has started all five games for the Jayhawks, including Wednesday's Atlantis opener against N.C. State.

"Whether it be transfers or incoming freshmen, I think that a lot of people get a

false sense that you can actually become a team a heck of a lot earlier in the season than you actually can," said Self, who made his season debut on the bench Wednesday after serving a four-game suspension tied to an NCAA infractions case.

"There's not one team here yet. Everybody will become a team at some point in time this season, but it usually doesn't happen in early November. We didn't become a team last year until February."

That's why Dayton coach Anthony Grant, who brought in forward Tyrone Baker from Georgia, says teams are "still in that discovery stage."

These tournaments have long been part of the early stages of forging a team's identity, though it was typically with new recruits joining returning veterans. Now, though, there's far more roster turnover and upheaval with players able to move freely from school to school. And that means even experienced players are still learning their way at new programs.