

Houthis claim they shot down US drone

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen's Houthi rebels shot down what they described as an American drone early Friday, potentially the latest downing of a U.S. spy drone as the militants continue their attacks on the Red Sea corridor.

The U.S. military acknowledged the videos circulating online showing what appeared to be a flaming aircraft dropping out of the sky and a field of burning debris in what those off-camera described as an area of Yemen's al-Jawf province. The military said it was investigating the incident, declining to elaborate further.

It wasn't immediately clear what kind of aircraft was shot down in the low-quality night

video. The Houthis, in a later statement, claimed to have downed an American MQ-9 Reaper drone.

The Houthis have surface-to-air missiles — such as the Iranian missile known as the 358 — capable of downing aircraft. Iran denies arming the rebels, though Tehran-manufactured weaponry has been found on the battlefield and in sea shipments heading to Yemen for the Shiite Houthi rebels despite a United Nations arms embargo.

The Houthis have been a key component of Iran's self-described "Axis of Resistance" during the Mideast wars that includes Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hamas and other militant groups.

Since Houthis seized the

country's north and its capital of Sanaa in 2014, the rebels have shot down MQ-9 Reaper drones in Yemen in 2017, 2019, 2023 and 2024. The U.S. military has declined to offer a total figure for the number of drones it has lost during that time.

Reapers, which cost around \$30 million apiece, can fly at altitudes up to 50,000 feet and have an endurance of up to 24 hours before needing to land. The aircraft have been flown by both the U.S. military and the CIA over Yemen for years.

The Houthis have targeted more than 90 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023. They seized one vessel and sank two in the campaign that has al-

so killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by a U.S.-led coalition in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels.

The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the U.K. to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran. The tempo of the Houthi sea attacks also has waxed and waned over the months.

In October, the U.S. military unleashed B-2 stealth bombers to target underground bunkers used by the Houthis.

Think tank: European countries spending more on defense

Associated Press

PRAGUE — European nations boosted their defenses in response to the annexation of the Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a London-based think tank said Friday, but much remains to be done for them to be ready to face threats from Russia.

That's the conclusion of a report released by the International Institute for Strategic Studies released as it opened a three-day gathering in the Czech capital to discuss European and transatlantic military capabilities.

"NATO has not just significantly increased its ambitions regarding its deterrence and war-fighting posture, but European members have sought to address critical capability and readiness shortfalls," the

report said. "Unsurprisingly, however, after decades of neglect and underinvestment, much remains to be done and progress has been mixed."

It was released as European leaders, including NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, were reassessing their transatlantic relations in Budapest, Hungary in the hope that Donald Trump's second U.S. presidency will avoid the strife of his first administration and maintain a strong common stance on Russia.

Ben Schreer, executive director, IISS-Europe, said that European defense is "at the most critical time" now.

"The U.S. election will add even more pressure on European nations to invest more in their own defenses but at the same time considering how to continue to help Ukraine win

this war," Schreer said.

During his election campaign, Trump threatened actions that could have groundbreaking consequences for nations across Europe, from a trade war with the EU to a withdrawal of NATO commitments and a fundamental shift of support for Ukraine in its war with Russia.

During his first 2017-2021 term, Trump pushed NATO's European members to spend more on defense, up to and beyond 2% of gross domestic product, and to be less reliant on U.S. military cover.

In that respect, some progress has been made, with 2024 defense spending by NATO's European members states 50% higher than it was 10 years ago, the report said.

But problems remain, the IISS said, naming a lack of sta-

bility in public financing that "ultimately limits (the defense) industry's ability to invest with confidence."

Moreover, "regulatory hurdles and application of environmental, social and governance standards will continue to act as barriers to investment," it said.

Europe's defense industry managed to increase output of some products after 2022, especially those with high demand from Ukraine, such as air defense and artillery.

But European countries also donated their own weapons to Ukraine, including F-16 fighter jets, and "remain dependent on the U.S. for some important aspects of their military capability," looking also to Brazil, Israel and South Korea to meet their needs due to a lack of their production capacity.

Trump taps Susie Wiles for chief of staff

Associated Press

President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday named Susie Wiles, the co-manager of his presidential campaign, as his White House chief of staff, elevating a longtime Florida political hand who has helped orchestrate some of the most crucial Republican wins in the state.

Wiles, who has worked for Republican politicians ranging from Jacksonville mayors to gubernatorial and presidential hopefuls, will become the first woman to serve in the prestigious White House role. In a statement, Trump called Wiles an “integral part” of his campaign and credited her with helping him “achieve one of the greatest political victories in American history.”

“Susie is tough, smart, innovative, and is universally ad-

mired and respected,” Trump said in a statement. “Susie will continue to work tirelessly to Make America Great Again. It is a well-deserved honor to have Susie as the first-ever female Chief of Staff in United States history. I have no doubt that she will make our country proud.”

Wiles’ appointment comes just two days after Trump reclaimed the White House in a dramatic upset for Democrats that saw the former president sweep several key battleground states.

Wiles, a disciplined operative known for eschewing the public spotlight, helped oversee the Trump campaign’s strategy and messaging alongside co-campaign manager Chris LaCivita. Speaking to a crowd at his election-night watch party in West Palm Beach Wednesday morn-

ing, Trump credited Wiles for her work on his reelection bid.

“We call her the ice maiden,” Trump said. “Susie likes to stay in the background.”

Wiles isn’t a newcomer to Trump’s orbit. She directed his successful presidential campaign in Florida in 2016. She went on to work on Ron DeSantis’ 2018 gubernatorial campaign before a falling out with the Florida governor. Wiles eventually returned to work on Trump’s 2020 reelection bid, in which he won Florida but lost the overall race.

As Trump’s incoming chief of staff, Wiles is expected to play a crucial role in filling out the president-elect’s Cabinet.

Wiles’ appointment as White House chief of staff is the first major staffing decision from Trump since his victory in

Tuesday’s election. His transition team, which will help Trump hire for some of his administration’s most prominent roles, is led by former Small Business Administration head Linda McMahon and billionaire businessman Howard Lutnick.

In a statement issued earlier on Thursday, McMahon and Lutnick said that they were prepared to move forward with the hiring process for Trump’s incoming administration, insisting that the former president’s electoral victory amounted to a “mandate” from the American people.

“As he chooses the best people to join his team and best policies to pursue, his transition team will ensure the implementation of President Trump’s commonsense agenda starting on Day 1,” they said.

Misinformation fears remain despite calmer election

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—A relatively trouble-free presidential election was good news for those working to restore faith in the system. Less encouraging was a flood of misinformation that sought to undermine trust in voting and sow chaos, something experts say is likely to get worse in the years ahead.

The most significant test for officials on Election Day was a series of bomb threats reported in five battleground states, some of which forced polling places to be evacuated temporarily. The day otherwise played out like most other election days, with only routine problems, and former President Donald Trump’s commanding lead allowed the presidential race to be called early Wednesday.

“High turnout and wide margins — that’s all we ever hope for,” said Zach Manifold, the

elections supervisor in Gwinnett County, Ga.

The more than 84 million people who voted early, either in person or by mail, eased the crush on Tuesday and provided election workers with more flexibility to respond to unexpected problems.

“Yesterday and the election season was a wonderful example of how early voting is so important to maintain security, and how it actually minimized and mitigated some of the threats that we saw,” David Becker, a former U.S. Justice Department attorney who leads the Center for Election Innovation and Research, said the day after Election Day.

When the bomb threats came in — starting early in the day in the Atlanta area and then spreading to Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — election officials were pre-

pared. They had spent the better part of the year meeting with local law enforcement, training through various scenarios and updating their emergency plans.

“I saw professionals all across the country saying, ‘OK, here’s what we’re going to do,’” said Carolina Lopez, a former local election official who leads the Partnership for Large Election Jurisdictions.

The FBI said the threats appeared to originate from Russian email domains, though federal cybersecurity officials cautioned the culprits were not necessarily Russian.

Interference from Russia and other foreign adversaries was a constant theme running through election season.

Russia, Iran and China steadily increased their use of English-language disinformation in the months leading up to Election

Day. Their motives varied, but their tactics were similar: using networks of bogus social media accounts and websites to spread content designed to erode confidence in election security and American democracy.

Russia was particularly audacious, creating and spreading staged videos that aimed to smear Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. The Kremlin’s efforts this year also involved paying a Tennessee media company \$10 million to produce pro-Russian content.

“Russia clearly interfered in this election,” said Brian Taylor, a political science professor and Russia expert at Syracuse University. He said Russia’s objectives were to “help Trump and to sow chaos more generally — although there is no evidence that their activities changed the outcome.”

Teen arrested, tried to enter Wisconsin school while armed

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — A 13-year-old boy who had researched school shootings online was arrested hours after he tried to enter a Wisconsin elementary school while armed and then fled when confronted by school staff, police said.

"We narrowly missed a tragedy," Kenosha Police Chief Patrick Patton said Thursday afternoon.

Police believe the boy had a firearm when he was stopped around 9 a.m. Thursday while trying to enter Roosevelt Elementary School with a backpack and a duffle bag in Kenosha, about 35 miles south of Milwaukee.

School staff members questioned the teen in a secured entrance area, and surveillance video showed a large black bag at his side, Patton said.

"The only reason the individual was not able to fully enter the school was because of the quick and diligent actions of the school staff," he said Thursday at a news conference. The boy immediately fled on foot when school staff approached him, Patton said.

The "suspect actually tried numerous outside doors and entrances before coming around to where our secured entry is," said Kenosha Unified School District Superintendent Jeff Weiss.

The teen attends Mahone Middle School and was a former Roosevelt Elementary student, police said. Officers arrested him at his home around 2 p.m. following a communitywide search, police said in a news release Friday morning.

Investigators "have information that the suspect performed

multiple internet searches related to school shootings," Patton said, adding that the teen had shared videos and made several comments to fellow students for weeks before Thursday.

"This is something that had been told to people of his growing intentions," Patton said. "We know that there is internet searches and all the red flags that we would look for and expect someone to report were there."

Police received at least one video of the student wielding what investigators believe is a rifle, Patton said. The chief played a video at Thursday's news conference that shows the student holding a firearm as he appears to practice room-entry techniques, Patton said.

The chief did not specify when or where the video was filmed, but it appears to have been filmed in a home. In one scene, a cat strolls by in front of what appears to be a couch.

Police have not released the boy's identity or said how he had access to the gun. They said the suspect's mother is cooperating with police.

The teen told detectives he went to the elementary school to sell candy but later told a social worker he intended to scare students, police said Friday.

A search of his home netted several pellet guns that resembled real handguns and a pellet gun that resembled a real rifle, but it did not uncover any actual firearms, police said. The teen's mother told investigators he doesn't have access to real guns.

All Kenosha Unified schools were placed on a "secure hold" lockdown for the rest of Thursday.

At least 4 wildfires are burning in bone-dry NJ

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, N.J. — Firefighters in New Jersey were stretched even thinner on Friday when another wildfire broke out in the state's bone-dry conditions.

At least four wildfires were burning in the state, stretching from the Pinelands in the central and western parts of the state to the New York City suburbs.

The latest fire broke out along the Palisades Interstate Parkway in Englewood Cliffs in Bergen County, across the Hudson River from New York.

It was smaller than the three others burning in New Jersey, each of which had burned less

than a square mile as of late Thursday.

Those fires, in Jackson, Glassboro and Evesham, were between 50% and 80% contained Friday.

The Englewood Cliffs fire was 30% contained, and no homes were threatened by it.

Conditions were even more hazardous Friday than they were the day before, with the National Weather Service issuing a red flag warning calling for gusty winds and low humidity that could help spread fires quickly.

New Jersey has not received measurable precipitation in over a month, the weather service said, setting a new record.

Southern Calif. fire levels hillside neighborhoods

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Residents in the foothills above Camarillo are grappling with scenes of utter destruction after the Mountain fire flattened scores of homes.

More than 130 structures were lost, the majority of them houses, when flames swept through the area, and more than 80 others were damaged.

"The only thing left standing of our house is the two chimneys," said resident Darren Kettle. "It was just, my heart dropped to my stomach. It's just shocking, traumatic. ... Speechless. Just the range of emotions."

Fierce Santa Ana winds were expected to ease somewhat Friday, lessening the chance of the fire spreading farther. But threats still remain with the fire only 7% contained and more than 11,700 structures still threatened, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

In neighborhoods that were ravaged by the fire on Wednes-

day, the painful process of assessing the damage is just beginning.

The Mountain fire has burned more than 20,400 acres, with parts of Camarillo and Moorpark hardest hit. The greatest devastation happened Wednesday when the fire swept unchecked through some neighborhoods. Winds were so powerful that retardant-dropping aircraft could not fly for several hours.

Planes were back in the air Thursday, and that helped in the battle, along with firefighters from across the region who joined in the effort. The flames were fueled by a wind event that was the fiercest seen in years, but the winds continued to decrease throughout the day.

Gov. Gavin Newsom spent Thursday meeting with first responders and visiting communities affected by the blaze. He proclaimed a state of emergency in Ventura County to help mobilize resources to combat the fast-moving fire.

Israeli soccer fans attacked in Amsterdam

Associated Press

AMSTERDAM — Israeli fans were assaulted after a soccer game in Amsterdam by hordes of young people apparently riled up by calls on social media to target Jewish people, Dutch authorities said Friday. Five people were treated for injuries at hospitals and dozens were arrested.

Tensions had been mounting in the Dutch capital over Israel's campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, even before Thursday night's Europa League match between Ajax and Maccabi Tel Aviv. Amsterdam authorities banned a planned pro-Palestinian demonstration near the stadium, and video showed a large crowd of Israeli fans chanting anti-Arab slogans en route to the game.

Afterwards, youths on scooter

ers and on foot crisscrossed the city in search of Israeli fans, punching and kicking them and then fleeing quickly to evade police, Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema said.

In Telegram groups, she added, "there is talk of people going on a Jew hunt. That is so shocking and so despicable that I still cannot fathom it."

Police had to escort some fans back to hotels, according to authorities.

Ofek Ziv, a Maccabi fan from the Israeli city of Petah Tikva, said someone — he didn't see who — threw a rock at him as he and a friend left the stadium. He was hit in the head, causing light bleeding. He said a group of Arab men began to chase him, before he and his friend got into a taxi, picking up other fans. They took shelter at a hotel.

"I'm very scared; it's very striking. This shouldn't happen to anyone, specifically in Amsterdam. Lots of friends were hurt, injured, kidnapped, robbed, and the police didn't come to help us," he said.

Another fan, Alyia Cohen, said that he and his friends were approached by a number of hostile men as they got back to their hotel after the match. Because the group wasn't wearing Maccabi shirts "they did not recognize that we are Israelis ... Nothing happened to us, but there was big chaos there that we did not expect."

Speaking as he arrived back in Israel, he said he would go back for further matches. "We are not afraid of anything; ours is the people of Israel."

Amsterdam police spokeswoman Sara Tillart said it was too

early in the investigation to say if anybody other than soccer fans was targeted.

Five people were treated in the hospital and released, while some 20 to 30 people suffered light injuries, police said. At least 62 suspects were arrested, with 10 still in custody, the city's public prosecutor, René de Beukelaer, told reporters at a news conference Friday.

With condemnation of the violence as antisemitic pouring in from around Europe, the attacks shattered Amsterdam's long-cherished view of itself as a beacon of tolerance and haven for persecuted religions, including Sephardic Jews from Portugal and Spain centuries ago.

Halsema called the violence "an eruption of antisemitism that we had hoped never again to see in Amsterdam."

Israel's defense minister Gallant concedes position

Associated Press

Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant officially stepped down Friday in a ceremony that replaced him with Israel Katz, the former foreign minister, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fired Gallant earlier this week.

Israel has been rocked by Gallant's dismissal, with the news setting off mass protests across the country. Many in Israel view Gallant as the sole moderate voice in a far-right government, and see his removal as a sign that the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu has lost interest in returning hostages still held in Gaza.

Israel Katz, his replacement, currently serves as foreign minister and is a longtime Netanyahu loyalist and veteran Cabinet minister.

Also Friday, the Israeli military body handling aid to Gaza,

COGAT, said it is preparing to open a new aid crossing into Gaza as the deadline for a U.S. deadline to increase desperately-needed aid into the war-ravaged territory approaches. But the body did not say when the crossing will open nor if aid will be delivered to the north of Gaza, where the UN and aid groups say the humanitarian situation is most dire.

The United Nations humanitarian office says Israel's monthlong offensive in northern Gaza is preventing the estimated 75,000 to 95,000 Palestinians in the north from receiving essential items for their survival.

On Thursday, the Israeli military says it will allow 300 truckloads of humanitarian aid supplied by the United Arab Emirates to enter the Gaza Strip in the coming days. That's less than the 350 trucks per day the U.S. said it wants to see enter.

Russia blasts Ukraine with more aerial attacks

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles, bombs and drones battered three regions of Ukraine in targeted nighttime attacks, officials said Friday, as Russia mounts an intensified aerial campaign that Ukrainian officials say they need more Western help to counter — even as doubts deepen over what Kyiv can expect from a new U.S. administration.

Since the war began almost three years ago following Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor, the Russian military has repeatedly used its superior air power to blast civilian targets across Ukraine. More than 10,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed in the conflict, according to the United Nations.

A nearly 1,000-pound glide bomb severely damaged a high-rise apartment building in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, in the middle of the

night, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said. At least 25 people, including an infant, were injured, he said.

Glide bombs, for which Ukraine has no effective countermeasure, obliterate their targets, sending out a powerful shock wave and often leaving a wide crater.

In the southern city of Odesa, a Russian drone attack killed one person and injured nine others overnight, regional Gov. Oleh Kiper said.

In the capital Kyiv, falling wreckage from intercepted missiles injured four people, regional Gov. Ruslan Kravchenko said.

In total, Russia fired 92 drones and five missiles at Ukraine during the night, Ukraine's air force said. Four missiles and 62 drones were intercepted, and 26 drones were jammed electronically, it claimed.

Jackson, Ravens rally to defeat Bengals

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Facing his largest deficit in three years, Lamar Jackson led Baltimore back with another dazzling display.

He danced along the sideline on one scramble, turning a potential 20-yard loss into a 10-yard gain. He left his feet while throwing the winning touchdown pass, finding Rashod Bateman in the end zone with a flick of a wrist and a follow-through that looked almost like a basketball player's.

Jackson threw three fourth-quarter touchdown passes, and the Ravens stopped Cincinnati on a 2-point conversion with 38 seconds remaining to hold off the Bengals 35-34 on Thursday night. The Ravens rallied from a 21-7 third-quarter deficit, overcoming a huge game from Cincinnati receiver Ja'Marr Chase.

"It starts with Lamar, and oftentimes it ends with Lamar,"

Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said. "But in between Lamar and Lamar, there's a lot of great players out there that are surrounding him. I think that's kind of where our offense is at right now."

Baltimore had 231 of its 389 total yards in the fourth quarter.

Chase finished with 11 catches for 264 yards and three touchdowns, including a 5-yarder in the final minute to bring the Bengals (4-6) within one. Cincinnati — which lost to Baltimore in overtime last month — decided to go for 2 and the lead, and Joe Burrow's pass for Tanner Hudson sailed high.

"We had our opportunity," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. "We got down there, went for two and just didn't work out for us. This team is going to continue to put us in good positions, and there's going to be a point in the season where that turns."

The 14-point deficit was the largest for Baltimore (7-3) since

the finale of the 2022 regular season at Cincinnati — a game Jackson missed because of an injury. The last time the Ravens trailed by 14 with Jackson on the field was exactly three years earlier. On Nov. 7, 2021, Baltimore rallied from a 24-10 deficit to beat Minnesota 34-31.

Cincinnati actually had the ball while up 14 in the third, but a fumble by Chase Brown gave the Ravens a short field, and a nifty scramble along the sideline by Jackson set up Derrick Henry's 1-yard touchdown run. With the ball at the 11, Jackson dropped back and retreated all the way to the 30 before outrunning a couple rushers to the sideline, turning upfield and managing to stay in bounds all the way to the 1.

"Just trying to make something happen. That's all that was," Jackson said. "I was going to throw the ball away, but when I turned I had room."

In the fourth, Tylan Wallace

turned a short pass into an 84-yard touchdown, barely staying inbounds himself as a couple of Cincinnati defenders failed to stop him. Justin Tucker missed the extra point, but the Ravens were within one.

Cincinnati drove into Baltimore territory, but on both third-and-2 and fourth-and-2, Burrow threw incomplete deep. Jackson gave the Ravens the lead with an 18-yard touchdown pass to Mark Andrews, and then the two-time MVP-winning quarterback ran himself for a 2-point conversion.

Chase beat Baltimore deep for a 70-yard touchdown that tied the game at 28 with 5:37 to play, but the Ravens answered with Jackson's 5-yard scoring toss to Rashod Bateman with 1:49 remaining to go ahead 35-28.

Jackson threw for 290 yards and four touchdowns. Burrow threw for 428 yards and four TDs.

Bengals suffer a 2nd frustrating loss to rival Ravens

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Another tight game, another loss for the Cincinnati Bengals. It's a frustrating pattern that has put the struggling team in danger of missing the playoffs despite the outstanding play of Joe Burrow and Ja'Marr Chase.

For the second time in two games against the division rival Baltimore Ravens, the Bengals blew a big lead Thursday night and lost 35-34. Cincinnati was on the cusp of reaching .500 following an 0-3 start, but those hopes vanished as quickly as its

14-point lead in the third quarter.

In their previous game against Baltimore last month, the Bengals (4-6) frittered away a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter before losing 41-38 in overtime.

In this one, Cincinnati led 21-7 before running back Chase Brown had the ball stripped and lost a fumble that Baltimore recovered at the Cincy 31. Five plays later, the Ravens (7-3) scored a touchdown to ignite their comeback.

"We gave them seven points

right there with the fumble," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. "It kind of went back and forth from there."

And when the teams got done trading touchdowns, the Ravens were one point better after Cincinnati failed on a 2-point conversion with 38 seconds remaining.

Burrow went 34 for 56 for 428 yards and four touchdowns, three of them to Chase, who racked up a whopping 264 yards receiving on 11 catches and scored on plays of 67, 70 and 5 yards.

In two games against Baltimore, Burrow has thrown for 820 yards and nine TDs. Chase has amassed 457 yards and five touchdowns.

And incredibly, Cincinnati went 0-2 against its AFC North foe. Burrow and Chase have been magnificent this season, yet their haughty numbers are overshadowed these two digits: 4 and 6.

"It's crazy," Chase said. "I would never in a million years expect me to play this well and he play this well and still have the record like this."

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Analysis: So much for parity in NFL

Associated Press

Nine NFL teams have nearly no chance nine weeks into the season.

The Patriots, Raiders, Jaguars, Browns, Giants, Saints and Panthers are 2-7. The Dolphins and Titans are 2-6.

On the opposite side, 11 teams have at least six wins.

So much for parity.

The league's goal has always been to have every team stay in contention for as long as possible. But 28.1% of the teams — more than a quarter of the league — will likely spend the second half battling for draft positioning.

Maybe Miami still has a chance to stage a turnaround because Tua Tagovailoa is back and playing well. The Dolphins went 1-3 when Tagovailoa was out with a concussion, averaging just 10 points. They've lost both games since his return but scored 27 in each.

Odds makers are giving Miami respect. The Dolphins are just 1-point underdogs on the road against the Los Angeles Rams (4-4) on Monday night.

"I live in real hope, which is how are people's games getting better? Are we getting better?" coach Mike McDaniels said Thursday. "Does that mean it's up to standard or that losses are acceptable? Absolutely not, but

vital to football teams having success in any NFL season is that they master the art of getting better in the noise, and don't confuse noise with just losing.

"Noise is also very loud when you're winning, and sometimes you can have that — you could be sitting at 6-2 and if the ball isn't getting better through all the noise, I don't have real hope. My hope is real is because the football that I'm watching and detailing is improving, and I think the team is focused on trying to have a game where they feel like their brand of football was mastered. I think the football team knows that when that occurs, things will take care of themselves in the win column."

The Dolphins are one of two of the two-win teams that made the playoffs last season. Cleveland is the other. Both finished 11-6 and lost in the AFC wildcard round.

The Jaguars, Saints and Giants had playoff aspirations coming in.

Jacksonville was 9-8 in each of the previous two seasons, winning the AFC South in 2022 and advancing to the divisional round. But this year has been a disaster for coach Doug Pederson, quarterback Trevor Lawrence and the Jaguars. They've lost five games by five points or

fewer.

"You got to build them back," Pederson said. "You have to get them back ready to go for another challenge. I need to show them and talk to them in a way that is accountability, ownership, do your job, do it better, do the little things.

"I have to show that in a team setting, bring it to light and just show the guys, 'Listen, this is what's holding us back right now, plays X, Y and Z,' whatever it is."

The Giants also made the playoffs in 2022 when Brian Daboll was AP Coach of the Year in his first season in New York. They went 6-11 last year when quarterback Daniel Jones missed 11 games because of injuries.

Jones is back, but things haven't gone any better for the Giants.

"Well, these guys, everybody, coaches, the players, again, you see that we all do this to try to win," Daboll said. "We spend a lot of time here. We practice the right way. We work hard. When you don't get the results, certainly it's frustrating. You do everything you can do to get a win. Ultimately, that's my job and my job is to support and lead. Again, it should fall on me, not these guys. They're working their butts off."

New Orleans finished 9-8 last season and got off to an impressive start this year, going 2-0 and scoring 91 points in the process. Nothing has gone right for the Saints since Week 3. The losing cost coach Dennis Allen his job this week.

Carolina, New England and Tennessee were supposed to be rebuilding, so it's no surprise each team has struggled.

At least the Patriots have reason for optimism because rookie Drake Maye looks like he can be a franchise quarterback. Las Vegas, Cleveland, Tennessee and Carolina have question marks at that important position.

"I know everyone's excited about our quarterback, and he's a good player for us," coach Jerod Mayo said. "He will continue to develop going forward, but he understands there are a lot of things to work on for himself personally as well. You see some of the other guys, and they're at different points in their rookie year.

"Your rookie year, no matter what position you play, it's always tough. Again, those guys, it's about getting better every single day, and you're going to deal with different situations every single day, whether you're talking on the field or off the field."

McCaffrey expected to make season debut for 49ers

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — San Francisco 49ers All-Pro running back Christian McCaffrey has looked good in his first week back at practice after being sidelined by Achilles tendinitis and is on track to make his season debut Sunday against Tampa Bay.

McCaffrey returned to practice on Monday and has made it through three days of work on the field without any setbacks,

leading coach Kyle Shanahan to say he expects his star's return.

"He's been awesome these last two days," Shanahan told radio station KNBR on Thursday. "You never know (about) a setback or anything, but these two days have been great, and I expect to see him out there."

McCaffrey has been dealing with Achilles tendinitis since early August. He missed almost all of training camp before returning to practice just before

the season opener. He was scratched just before that game against the New York Jets on Sept. 9 and then had a setback at practice Sept. 12.

He was placed on injured reserve two days later and spent the past seven weeks resting and rehabilitating, including a trip to Germany for treatment.

The 49ers (4-4) are counting on McCaffrey's return for a second-half boost. San Francisco has sputtered in the first half of

the season with the offense scoring 3.9 fewer points per game than last season.

"It's been awesome," quarterback Brock Purdy said of getting McCaffrey back.

Jordan Mason has done a good job filling in for McCaffrey with 685 yards rushing in eight games, but the Niners have sorely missed the reigning AP Offensive Player of the Year in the red zone and in the passing game.

Timberwolves rally to beat Bulls 135-119

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Anthony Edwards had 33 points, eight rebounds and six assists, and the Minnesota Timberwolves beat the Chicago Bulls 135-119 on Thursday night.

Minnesota rallied from a 13-point deficit. Julius Randle had 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Timberwolves, and Rudy Gobert finished with 21 points and nine boards.

It was Chicago's fourth consecutive loss. Nikola Vucevic scored 25 points for the Bulls on 11-for-15 shooting. Coby White had 24 points and eight assists.

Chicago led 95-90 after three

quarters, but Minnesota controlled the action in the fourth. Randle's driving layup lifted the Timberwolves to a 107-106 lead with 6:47 left.

Mike Conley had 14 points and 11 assists for the Timberwolves.

Bucks 123, Jazz 100: Damian Lillard scored 34 points, Giannis Antetokounmpo had 31 points and 16 rebounds and host Milwaukee snapped a six-game skid, beating Utah.

Antetokounmpo was back in action after missing a 116-114 loss at Cleveland on Monday night because of a right adductor strain.

The Bucks hadn't lost six

straight games since March 2015. They avoided their first seven-game skid since March 2014, when they dropped eight in a row.

Jordan Clarkson had 18 off the bench to lead the Jazz.

Utah led 71-70 before the Bucks took command with a 17-1 run late in the third quarter. Lillard and Antetokounmpo combined to score Milwaukee's first 15 points in that spurt.

Spurs 118, Trail Blazers 105: Keldon Johnson and Malaki Branham had 17 points each and host San Antonio beat Portland in their fourth game without coach Gregg Popovich.

Popovich has been out since having a medical episode Saturday before a home game against Minnesota. Prior to the game Thursday, Spurs acting head coach Mitch Johnson said the team is unsure when Popovich will return.

Zach Collins and Julian Champagne added 14 points each to help the Spurs snap a two-game skid. Victor Wembanyama had 12 points. Branham exited two minutes into the fourth quarter after rolling his right ankle.

Deandre Ayton had 21 points and 10 rebounds for Portland. Jerami Grant also had 21 points, and Anfernee Simons added 19.

Drama surrounds NASCAR's championship weekend

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — NASCAR heads into its championship weekend locked into a federal antitrust lawsuit with NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan. Its officiating has been under months-long scrutiny, and this week it issued a wave of hefty fines for alleged race manipulation in the final playoff qualifier.

And Truck Series championship contender Ty Majeski was fined \$12,500 for skipping media obligations in North Carolina on Tuesday so he could vote in person in his home state of Wisconsin.

Other than that? Three champions will be crowned starting Friday at Phoenix Raceway.

But those national series races have become a sideshow to the off-track drama that has engulfed NASCAR the past several months. The four drivers who are competing in Sunday's winner-take-all finale have tuned out the distractions, starting with Tyler Reddick, who made the final four for the first time in his career and is trying to give Jordan his first championship since Jordan became a team owner in 2021.

"No, for me, and for our

group, it is championship weekend and everything else is not in our focus," Reddick said Thursday.

A federal judge in North Carolina was due to rule Friday — the same day of the Truck Series championship and the first practice for the Cup Series — on a preliminary injunction filed by 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports. The two teams refused to sign NASCAR's take-it-or-leave-it offer in September on a new revenue-sharing agreement and instead have sued both NASCAR and chairman Jim France.

Now the teams want to be recognized under the charter agreements as they proceed with a lawsuit that accuses NASCAR of being "monopolistic bullies." The ruling is due the same day NASCAR is slated to give its annual "State of the Sport" address.

Ryan Blaney, the reigning NASCAR champion who is seeking to become the first driver to go back-to-back since Jimmie Johnson won five Cup titles in a row from 2006 through 2010, said the off-track issues have nothing at all to do with him or Team Penske. Blaney

and teammate Joey Logano give Ford and Roger Penske a 50% chance to win a third consecutive Cup title.

"For me it feels normal because I am not a part of any of it," Blaney said. "I am part of what I am doing, the championship, so it's nice to not be a part of any of the things going on outside sheer competition. For me, it's a great week, championship week, and we've got a chance to do it. To me, it's normal."

NBC Sports does not think the off-track drama will spill into coverage of the three national series races at Phoenix.

"I think during the race, we are here to crown a champion and I can't imagine us talking about anything other than that," said analyst Jeff Burton, who said play-by-play announcer Leigh Diffey is unlikely to declare Reddick the winner in the same breath as "but there's a lawsuit!"

But there are other issues pending.

NASCAR on Tuesday levied \$600,000 in fines and suspended nine members of three different Cup teams for alleged manipulation at Martinsville Speedway last weekend. NASCAR ruled

Bubba Wallace of 23XI helped fellow Toyota driver Christopher Bell by allegedly faking a flat tire. That allowed Bell to hit the wall to avoid Wallace and ride it for momentum to claim the final spot in the playoffs over William Byron.

But that move had been ruled illegal after Ross Chastain did it in 2022, and it took NASCAR officials nearly 30 minutes post-race Sunday to decide if Bell was disqualified or not. He was, and Byron of Hendrick Motorsports got the final spot.

"It was excruciating," Byron admitted Thursday. "It was so long. I was honestly numb to it. I was just preparing for not being in and thinking we had done all we needed to do to get in."

NASCAR also ruled Tuesday that fellow Chevrolet drivers Chastain and Austin Dillon acted as blockers for Byron over the final few laps.

Trackhouse Racing and Richard Childress Racing appealed the penalties; 23XI withdrew its initial appeal while denying it manipulated the race for Bell, and RCR withdrew the appeal before the hearing. The appeal panel on Thursday ruled Trackhouse violated the rules.

Hurricanes top Pens for 8th straight win

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Jack Roslovic had two goals and an assist as the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-1 on Thursday night for their eighth straight win.

Jordan Martinook, Jacob Slavin and Eric Robinson also scored for Carolina, and Jalen Chatfield had three assists. Pyotr Kochetkov stopped 35 shots.

Blake Lizotte scored for Pittsburgh and Alex Nedeljkovic had 14 saves. The Penguins lost for the eighth time in 10 games.

The Hurricanes needed just 52 seconds to get on the scoreboard with Martinook tipping in a pass by Jordan Staal. Two of Carolina's first three shots got past Nedeljkovic, who spent his first four NHL seasons with Carolina.

Panthers 6, Predators 2: Carter Verhaeghe had two goals and an assist, Aleksander Barkov had three assists for the second time in less than a week and host Florida beat Nashville for their sixth straight victory.

Sam Reinhart got his 11th of the season and pushed his goals streak to five games for the Panthers, who got a goal and an assist from Matthew Tkachuk and two assists from Uvis Balinskis. Tomas Nosek also scored for Florida.

Steven Stamkos and Juuso Parssinen scored for Nashville.

Devils 5, Canadiens 3: A free-wheeling Jack Hughes had a goal and two assists and host New Jersey beat Montreal for their fourth win in five games.

Jesper Bratt had two goals — the last a game-clincher into an empty net — and an assist, and Ondrej Palat and defenseman Jonas Siegenthaler also scored as the Devils extended the Canadiens' winless streak to five games (0-4-1). Jacob Markstrom finished with 21 saves.

Alex Newhook scored twice for Montreal and Brendan Gallagher also had a goal. Sam Montembeault had 22 saves.

Sabres 6, Rangers 1: Rasmus Dahlin scored 26 seconds into the game, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 25 saves and visiting Buffalo beat Igor Shesterkin and New York.

Dylan Cozens, Tage Thompson, Jordan Greenway and Sam Lafferty had second-period goals as the Sabres won for the second time in six road games.

Shesterkin was pulled by New York in the second. He allowed five goals on 12 shots.

Zach Benson scored a power-play goal for Buffalo in the third after Rangers forward Will Cuyille spoiled Luukkonen's shutout bid at 4:21.

Islanders 4, Senators 2: Bo Horvat had a goal and two assists, and visiting New York beat Ottawa.

Anders Lee had a goal and an assist for New York, which won for the third time in four games. Oliver Wahlstrom and Jean-Gabriel Pageau also scored, and Semyon Varlamov made 28 saves.

Nick Jensen and Drake Batherson scored for Ottawa in the third period. Tim Stutzle had two assists.

Bruins 4, Flames 3 (OT): Brad Marchand scored a backhand off of his own rebound with 20 seconds left in overtime to lift host Boston over Calgary.

Hampus Lindholm, Pavel Zacha and Cole Koepke scored Boston's other goals, and David Pastrnak had two assists. Joonas Korpi also scored for the Bruins.

Calgary received goals from Tyson Barrie, Yegor Sharangovich and Nazem Kadri.

Dustin Wolf made 34 saves for the Flames.

Stars 3, Blackhawks 1: Sam Steel had a goal and an assist in host Dallas' win. Jake Oettinger stopped 25 shots for Dallas, only allowing a power-play goal from Tyler Bertuzzi midway through the third period.

Steel scored with 8:54 left in the first period and assisted Tyler Seguin after sending a shot

across the crease in front of Chicago goaltender Arvid Soderblom. Logan Stankoven added an empty-netter with 46 seconds left in the game.

Soderblom got his fourth start in goal for Chicago and stopped 37 shots.

Flyers 2, Lightning 1: Owen Tippett scored the tying goal in the closing minutes of regulation, then got the clinching shootout goal as visiting Philadelphia beat Tampa Bay.

Travis Konecny also scored in the tiebreaker for the Flyers. Ivan Fedotov stopped 20 shots through overtime, and then denied Gage Gonclaves and Victor Hedman in the shootout to get his first NHL win.

The win was just the fifth in 14 games for the Flyers, who began the night tied with Nashville for the fewest points in the league.

Nikita Kucherov scored his 11th goal of the season for the Lightning, who have lost four in a row.

Utah 4, Blues 2: Dylan Guenther scored the go-ahead goal on a rush with 3:21 remaining to lift visiting Utah.

Guenther tipped away a pass by Jordan Kyrou to create a 2-on-1 break, and his shot deflected off the hip of a sliding Colton Parayko and over the shoulder of St. Louis goaltender Joel Hofer to put Utah in front.

Jack McBain added an empty-netter in the closing seconds, and Matias Maccelli and Michael Kesselring provided the other goals for Utah. Kesselring scored 18 seconds into the game.

Kyrou had evened the score on a one-timer with 6:31 to play. Parayko also scored, and Pavel Buchnevich had the primary assist on both Blues goals.

Hofer had 27 saves for St. Louis, while Utah goaltender Connor Ingram only needed to stop 13 shots.

Jets 1, Avalanche 0: Gabriel Vilardi scored and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 35 shots for his third shutout this season as host

Winnipeg beat Colorado.

Vilardi scored 1:06 into the game, and Hellebuyck made it stand up for the Jets' fifth straight win since snapping a season-opening eight-game win streak. Hellebuyck had nine saves in the first, nine in the second and 17 in the third for his 40th career shutout.

Alexandar Georgiev stopped 27 shots for Colorado.

Canucks 4, Kings 2: Quinn Hughes had a goal and an assist, and visiting Vancouver overcame the loss of top scorer Brock Boeser to beat Los Angeles.

Boeser, who scored a career-high 40 goals last season and leads Vancouver with six goals this year, did not return after taking an illegal check to the head from Kings forward Tanner Jeannot.

Conor Garland scored on the subsequent five-minute power play after Jeannot received a match penalty, tying the score at 1. Jake DeBrusk and J.T. Miller also scored, and Kevin Lankinen made 25 saves.

Quinton Byfield and Vladislav Gavrikov scored for Los Angeles, and Darcy Kuemper finished with 19 saves.

Wild 5, Sharks 2: Matt Boldy had two goals, Kirill Kaprizov recorded three assists and visiting Minnesota beat San Jose.

Mats Zuccarello's goal put the Wild ahead 2-1 in the second period, set up by a no-look pass through multiple defenders by Kaprizov. Kaprizov entered the night sixth in the league with 17 assists.

Boldy scored on the power play in the second to double Minnesota's lead, and Jonas Brodin made it 4-1 with a slap shot from the point in the third. Boldy added an empty-net goal with 1:35 remaining.

Zach Bogosian put the Wild ahead 1-0 in the first.

Macklin Celebrini, the top pick in the 2024 NHL draft, scored both goals for the Sharks.