

## Report: US envoy coached Russians

President Donald Trump steps back from strained Ukraine peace deal process amid flap

*The Washington Post*

KYIV, Ukraine — President Donald Trump's demand that Ukraine sign a deal by Thanksgiving appears to have softened as he leaves some of the most important details of the peace plan in the hands of his envoys, one of whom was just embroiled in a phone leak.

A recording of an alleged phone call between Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and a top aide to Russian President Vladimir Putin from October appears to show the envoy advising the Russians on their negotiating strategy.

Trump postponed a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy ahead of Thursday's deadline, when he had initially threatened to cut off all support to Ukraine if it was not met. On Tuesday, Trump said he was not ready to meet with Zelenskyy or Putin.

"I look forward to hopefully meeting with President Zelenskyy and President Putin soon, but ONLY when the deal to end this War is FINAL or, in its final stages," Trump wrote on social media.

In remarks Wednesday, however, several Russian officials said any peace deal was still far off and reiterated hard-line positions that conflict with the latest amendments to the U.S. peace plan.

The change in Trump's stance offered some relief and could give Kyiv time to strengthen its position before an extremely high-stakes meeting with its most important — and most unpredictable — partner.

But the delay could also thwart Ukraine's hopes to hammer out agreeable terms on the most sensitive issues of the deal without Russian influence.

Trump's comments Tuesday

also cast doubt on U.S. assessments from earlier that day that the Ukrainians had agreed to a deal, barring some minor details. Zelenskyy had, in fact, reserved one of the most sensitive points, on potential Ukrainian territorial concessions, as a topic that only he can discuss at the leader level.

Trump's decision to send Witkoff to Moscow next week to meet with Putin will also carve out space for the Kremlin to reject the latest version of the plan — or get through to Trump before Kyiv can.

After the publication of the alleged phone call — in which Witkoff is heard advising a Russian official on how Putin should sell a plan to Trump involving Ukraine surrendering territory — the official involved said Wednesday that someone was listening in and releasing confidential phone conversations over the Ukrai-

nian peace process.

Asked by Kremlin reporter Pavel Zarubin whether the recording — first reported by Bloomberg — was fake, Putin aide Yuri Ushakov did not answer directly but said that he spoke to Witkoff often and that he would not comment on the substance of confidential conversations. However, he acknowledged that tapping and leaking was occurring.

Asked where the information came from, he said, "I don't know. Someone is listening in. Someone is leaking information. But it's not us." Ushakov said the object of the leaks was to obstruct the peace process and hamper U.S.-Russia relations.

U.S. Army Secretary Dan Driscoll, who joined the Ukraine plan negotiations on his visit to Kyiv last week, will continue meeting with the Ukrainian side, Trump said.

## Dems say FBI targeting them after video for troops

BY SVETLANA  
SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Democratic lawmakers who participated in a social media video urging service members to resist illegal orders said Tuesday that the FBI is seeking interviews with them in a possible inquiry into the matter.

The involvement of the FBI follows an announcement by the Pentagon on Monday that it is investigating Sen. Mark Kelly, of Arizona, a retired Navy captain, for potentially violating military law by appearing in the

video.

The FBI declined to comment Tuesday.

Four House lawmakers — Jason Crow, of Colorado; Maggie Goodlander, of New Hampshire; Chris Deluzio, of Pennsylvania; and Chrissy Houlahan, of Pennsylvania — said the FBI on Monday contacted the House and Senate Sergeants at Arms to request interviews with them.

Sen. Elissa Slotkin, of Michigan, said in a separate statement that it appeared the FBI's Counterterrorism Division had opened an inquiry into her in re-

sponse to a video "President [Donald] Trump did not like."

In the 90-second video, the six lawmakers — all former members of the military and intelligence community — remind troops that they swore an oath to the Constitution and can refuse to carry out orders that are unlawful.

"The President directing the FBI to target us is exactly why we made this video in the first place," Slotkin wrote on X. "He believes in weaponizing the federal government against his perceived enemies and does not believe laws apply to him or his

Cabinet."

The video sparked fury in the Trump administration, with Trump calling for the arrest of lawmakers he branded "traitors" and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth accusing the "Seditious Six" of encouraging troops to ignore their commanders' orders.

Hegseth has focused much of his ire on Kelly, who he said remains under the jurisdiction of the Pentagon as a retired veteran and could be recalled to active duty for court-martial proceedings or administrative measures.

# Hegseth, Caine visit key Caribbean leaders

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Top U.S. military officials are meeting leaders of Caribbean nations this week as the Trump administration has escalated its firepower in the region as part of what it calls a campaign against drug trafficking.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth will travel to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and meet Wednesday with the country's top leaders, including President Luis Abinader, Minister of Defense Lt. Gen. Carlos Antonio Fernández Onofre and other officials, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

The announcement came the same day that Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Donald Trump's primary military

adviser, met with Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

They "exchanged views on challenges affecting the Caribbean region, including the destabilizing effects of illicit narcotics, arms, and human trafficking, and transnational criminal organization activities," according to a summary released by Caine's office.

The U.S. military has built up its largest presence in the region in generations and has been attacking alleged drug-smuggling boats since early September. To date, the military, under Hegseth's command, has carried out 21 known strikes on vessels accused of carrying drugs, killing at least 83 people.

The actions are seen by many as a pressure tactic to get Vene-

zuelan President Nicolás Maduro to step down. The visits by Hegseth and Caine this week come as Trump evaluates whether to take military action against Venezuela, which he has not ruled out despite raising the possibility of talks with Maduro, who has been charged with narcoterrorism in the U.S.

The Trump administration added extra pressure by officially designating the Cartel de los Soles, or Cartel of the Suns, as a foreign terrorist organization on Monday, although the entity that the U.S. government alleges is led by Maduro is not a cartel per se.

While a majority of Caribbean leaders have been muted in their response to the strikes on alleged drug boats, urging peace and dialogue, Persad-Bissessar

has stood out for her public praise of the deadly attacks.

In early September, she said she had no sympathy for drug traffickers, adding that "the U.S. military should kill them all violently." Her remarks and support of the strikes have been condemned by some opposition leaders and regional officials.

According to the Pentagon, Hegseth's trip to the Dominican Republic will aim "to strengthen defense relationships and reaffirm America's commitment to defend the homeland."

Meanwhile, Caine also used his time in the region to visit American troops in Puerto Rico and on at least one U.S. Navy ship, thanking service members for their service and sacrifice over the Thanksgiving holiday, the Pentagon said.

## Navy sailor dies saving son in rough waters off Kauai

**By ALISON BATH**

*Stars and Stripes*

A Navy sailor died over the weekend after rescuing his young son who had been swept out to sea by strong surf off the Hawaiian island of Kauai, according to his family and police.

Petty Officer 1st Class Jeffrey Diaz was pulled from waters near Waiapua'a Bay on Saturday and taken to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead, the Kauai Police Department said in a statement Monday.

Diaz, 47, encountered trouble while rescuing two children, according to the statement. He was a master-at-arms serving at Pacific Missile Range Facility, Barking Sands, police said.

The Navy did not immediately respond to an email from Stars and Stripes seeking confirmation of Diaz's death.

Diaz was at a beach near base

housing when his sons began struggling in rough water, his partner, Keyonna Fairley, told the news station Hawaii News Now in an interview published online Wednesday.

Before swimming out to his 9-year-old younger son, Diaz told the older one to head back to shore, Fairley said. It wasn't clear Wednesday whether Fairley and the couple's third child were also at the beach at the time.

But while trying to bring his younger son to the beach, Diaz told the boy that he would have to go the rest of the way alone, Fairley said he told her.

Diaz had been swimming for some time with one arm while holding on to his son but moved the boy onto his back, she told Hawaii News Now.

An autopsy is pending to determine the cause of death, the police department said.

## Marine logistics unit head is fired; probe underway

**By BRIAN McELHINEY**

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Marine Corps has relieved the commander of the logistics unit responsible for providing parts and supplies to aviation units on Okinawa, less than a month after firing the command team of an MV-22B Osprey unit in Hawaii.

Lt. Col. Calischaran G. James was relieved of command Wednesday of Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 36, based at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing spokesman Maj. Joseph Butterfield wrote in an email that day.

Wing commander Maj. Gen. Marcus Annibale relieved James due to "loss of trust and confidence in his ability to command," Butterfield wrote.

"Commanders are held to the highest standards of conduct and

must consistently live above reproach," he said. "This decision reflects the Marine Corps' dedication to upholding the trust and confidence that are essential for effective leadership."

In a follow-up email, Butterfield said an active investigation is underway but declined to provide further details "out of respect for the investigatory process."

Lt. Col. Ryan Iden has assumed interim command of the unit "until the incoming commander arrives," Butterfield said. Iden, from Battle Creek, Mich., arrived on Okinawa in 2021, and served as deputy assistant chief of staff for the wing's Aviation Logistics Department, according to his official biography.

James assumed command of the Okinawa logistics squadron on May 16, 2024, according to wing photos of his change of command ceremony at Futenma.

# Wicked weather sweeps across many states

Associated Press

CYPRESS, Texas — Kenny Beck surveyed the damage Tuesday to his family's two-story home after at least two tornadoes tore through the Houston area, damaging over 100 homes at the start of a busy Thanksgiving travel week that has Americans closely eyeing the weather.

"Half my roof on the back is gone," Beck, 46, said as workers cleared large tree branches and other debris from around nearby houses in the suburb of Cypress. "We've lost a lot of ceiling because of the rain. Our garage door got sucked in."

No injuries were reported from Monday's storm, but it uprooted trees, downed power lines and scattered debris throughout some neighborhoods northwest of Houston. The National Weather Service on Tuesday had confirmed at least two tornadoes, one in Cypress with winds up to 105 mph

and another around the community of Klein with winds up to 115 mph.

Beck said that while repairs are being made, his family will have to move out of the home where they've lived and shared many moments and memories with family and friends over the past 20 years.

"I'm just hoping that here in a couple of months, we can get back in and we can start making more of those memories," Beck said.

Meanwhile, multiple rounds of storms and showers were expected in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.

The storm system was expected to move to the Northeast by Tuesday night, with another one in the forecast in the Pacific Northwest.

Even though the official start of winter is nearly a month away, a wintry storm was developing in the northern part of the country, with snow falling in

North Dakota.

"That's impacting North Dakota, Minnesota, including Minneapolis, and then portions of the northern Great Lakes," said weather service meteorologist Marc Chenard in College Park, Md. He said snowfall was expected into Wednesday.

As much as 8 inches of snow had fallen by late Tuesday afternoon in parts of North Dakota and South Dakota, according to the National Weather Service. In North Dakota, officials closed parts of Interstate 94 and Interstate 29 due to ice, low visibility and multiple accidents.

The holiday itself was shaping up to be dry, cold and breezy for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on Thursday in New York. But parts of western New York and northern Michigan are expected to see lake-effect snow Wednesday through Friday.

"It's pretty narrow bands, but they'll be some significant

snowfall accumulations," Chenard said. More winter weather could arrive in the central and northern parts of the country over the weekend.

In Texas, some people hunkered down in their homes and hid in closets during the storm earlier in the week. More than 20,000 customers were without power at one point Monday.

Beck said his 13-year-old son was home alone when the severe weather hit.

He said that his son hid in the closet and wasn't hurt but was still shaken up on Tuesday. The boy told his father he could feel the house shake and hear the wind howl as things fell and broke.

"I think he's still kind of processing it," said Beck, who works as a teacher. "I think he understands the fact that him being safe was the most important thing and that he knows what to do in the moment, which is what makes me proud as a parent."

# Trump spares turkeys, dishes insults

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump didn't bring much holiday cheer Tuesday when bestowing ceremonial pardons on two Thanksgiving turkeys, dispensing more insults than goodwill at the traditional White House ritual.

He joked about sending the turkeys to an infamous prison in El Salvador that has been used to house migrants deported from the United States.

He also said that the birds should be named Chuck and Nancy — after Democratic stalwarts Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi — but that "I would never pardon those people."

Trump claimed that last year's turkey pardons, issued by President Joe Biden, were invalid because he used an autopen.

"Where's Hunter?" he said, suggesting that his predecessor's son could once again face legal jeopardy.

And all of that was before Trump turned his attention to Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat who has continually resisted the White House's plans to deploy the National Guard in Chicago.

Trump said he had a joke prepared about Pritzker, but "I refuse to talk about the fact that he's a fat slob. I don't mention it."

Scattered laughter rippled through the audience, which sat under cloudy skies and an intermittent drizzle on the Rose Garden patio.

Trump eventually got around to the business at hand, which was pardoning the turkeys Gobble and Waddle.

Both were spared the dinner table, but only one got the spotlight.

"Gobble, I just want to tell you this — very important — you are hereby unconditionally pardoned," Trump said. He reached over to run his hand over the feathers, saying, "Who would want to harm this beautiful bird?"

Waddle had previously been spotted in the White House briefing room.

"Waddle, want to give us a gobble?" White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt asked.

The turkey obliged.

"Very on message!" Leavitt said.

Trump used part of his ceremonial remarks to insist that the price of Thanksgiving meals was dropping under his leader-

ship, although his numbers are misleading.

Some research indicates that holiday dinners could actually cost more this year, a reminder of persistent frustration with inflation.

The president planned to fly south to his private Florida resort later Tuesday, a holiday interlude during what has been a turbulent and uncertain chapter of his second term.

Trump is struggling to advance a plan to end the Russian invasion of Ukraine after an earlier version faced swift criticism from European allies and even some Republicans.

The U.S. military is also poised to target Venezuela with military strikes, part of an anti-drug operation that could ultimately destabilize the country's leadership.



# Israel returns 15 more Palestinian bodies

*Associated Press*

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Israel handed over the bodies of 15 Palestinians on Wednesday, a day after Hamas returned the remains of an Israeli hostage. This is the latest swap as part of a U.S.-brokered ceasefire reached last month, whose first phase is coming to an end.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it helped transfer the bodies to Gaza.

The remains of two hostages, one Israeli and a Thai national, remain in Gaza. Hamas said Wednesday it was determined to uphold its side of the agreement and return them both.

Meanwhile, Turkish, Qatari and Egyptian mediators met in Cairo on Tuesday to discuss the second phase of the ceasefire, reached on Oct. 10.

The next phases will include deploying an armed International Stabilization Force, or ISF, and developing an international body to govern Gaza and oversee reconstruction. The ISF will be tasked with keeping security and ensuring the disarmament of Hamas, a key demand of Israel. Indonesian officials have said they plan to deploy 20,000 peacekeepers to the force.

Major questions hang over nearly every part of the plan and the time frame for implementation of the fragile ceasefire that has held despite accusations of violations by both sides.

In the meantime, nearly all Palestinians remain displaced and dependent on humanitarian aid, Hamas retains significant

control over nearly half of Gaza and the rebuilding of the territory has barely begun.

According to the ceasefire, Israel has agreed to return 15 Palestinian bodies for each hostage recovered. So far, 345 Palestinian bodies have been returned, said the Gaza Health Ministry.

The ministry said only 99 bodies have been identified. It says identifying the remains is complicated by a lack of DNA testing kits in Gaza.

Meanwhile, Israel mourned the latest hostage to be returned by the Palestinian militants, Dror Or. Israel's military said Or and his wife, Yonat Or, were killed by militants who overran their community of Kibbutz Be'eri on Oct. 7, 2023.

Before they were killed, the couple evacuated two of their

children from their burning house through a window, said the Hostages Families Forum. The decision ultimately saved the children, Alma and Noam, who were abducted by the militants and released in a hostage deal in November 2023.

The forum remembered Or as a devoted father and talented cheesemaker who spent years working at the Be'eri dairy, eventually managing it. The group said Or was also a chef and yoga teacher.

In total, Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people across southern Israel and abducted 251 to Gaza in their attack that kick-started the war in Gaza.

With the return of Or's remains, almost all of the hostages or their bodies have been recovered.

## Drop seen in jobless benefit applications

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits declined last week in a sign that overall layoffs remain low, even as several high-profile companies have announced job cuts.

U.S. applications for unemployment benefits in the week ending Nov. 22 dropped 6,000 from the previous week to 216,000, the Labor Department reported Wednesday. The figure is below the 230,000 forecast by economists, according to a survey by data provider FactSet.

Applications for unemployment aid are seen as a proxy for layoffs and are close to a real-time indicator of the health of the job market. The four-week average of claims, which softens some of the week-to-week volatility, dropped 1,000 to 223,750.

The number of Americans filing for jobless benefits for the week ending Nov. 15 rose 7,000 to 1.96 million, the U.S. government said. The increase is a sign that the unemployed are taking longer to find new work.

## US to charge international tourists higher fee to enter 11 national parks

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The National Park Service said Tuesday it is going to start charging the millions of international tourists who visit U.S. parks each year an extra \$100 to enter some of the most popular sites, while leaving them out of fee-free days that will be reserved for American residents.

The announcement declaring "America-first entry fee policies" comes as national parks deal with the strain of a major staff reduction and severe budget cuts, along with recovering from damage during the recent government shutdown and significant lost revenue due to fees not being collected during that time.

The fee change will impact 11 national parks, including the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Yosemite, according to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

As part of the changes, which are set to take effect Jan. 1, foreign tourists will also see their annual parks pass price jump to \$250, while U.S. residents will continue to be charged \$80, according to the department's statement.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum said in a post on the social platform X that the changes make sure U.S. taxpayers who support the park service "continue to enjoy affordable access, while international visitors contribute their fair

share to maintaining and improving our parks for future generations!"

A White House post on X laying out the increased fees ended with the phrase, "AMERICANS FIRST."

The announcement follows a July executive order in which President Donald Trump directed the parks to increase entry fees for foreign tourists.

"There's a lot to unpack in this announcement, including many questions on its implementation — all which NPSA will raise with the Department of Interior," Kati Schmidt, a spokesperson for National Parks Conservation Association, said in an email.

The U.S. Travel Association estimated that in 2018, national parks and monuments saw more than 14 million international visitors.

Yellowstone reported that in 2024, nearly 15% of its visitors were from outside the country, which was down from 30% in 2018.

The money made off the new fees will help support the national parks, including with upgrading facilities for visitors and maintenance, according to the statement.

The "resident-only patriotic fee-free days" next year include Veterans Day, which was one of the parks' eight free days open to everyone in 2025.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Contraband drugs soaked into 'Hillbilly Elegy'

**OH** COLUMBUS — Vice President JD Vance's memoir, "Hillbilly Elegy," has a storied history as a New York Times bestseller, as the then-31-year-old's introduction to the nation as a "Trump whisperer," as a divisive subject among Appalachian scholars, and, eventually, as a Ron Howard-directed movie.

Its latest role? Secretly transporting drugs into an Ohio prison.

The book was one of three items whose pages 30-year-old Austin Siebert, of Maumee, southwest of Toledo, has been convicted of spraying with narcotics and then shipping to Grafton Correctional Institution disguised as Amazon orders, according to court documents. On Nov. 18, U.S. District Judge Donald C. Nugent sentenced Siebert to more than a decade in prison for his role in the drug trafficking scheme.

### Owner to open barn as memorial to Emmett Till

**MS** DREW — The barn in Mississippi where 14-year-old Emmett Till was tortured and killed will open to the public as a "sacred" memorial site by 2030, the new owner announced.

The Emmett Till Interpretive Center disclosed late Sunday that it had purchased the barn located in a rural area outside the city of Drew, aided by a \$1.5 million donation from television producer and writer Shonda Rhimes. The center plans to open the barn as a memorial ahead of the 75th anniversary of Till's lynching in 1955.

Two white men publicly confessed to the killing after being acquitted by an all-white jury in Mississippi later that year, but a Justice Department report released in 2021 said at least one more, unnamed person was involved in Till's abduction. Experts who've studied the case believe others participated. Till was abducted from his great-uncle's home on Aug. 28, 1955, after the Chicago teenager was accused of whistling at a white woman in a rural Mississippi grocery store.

### Hydropower project gets final permit

**ME** PORTLAND — An energy company has received the final permit it needs from Maine to build a controversial hydropower transmission line project that promises to power hundreds of thousands of homes in Massachusetts.

The project is slated to supply up to 1,200 megawatts of Canadian hydropower to the New England power grid. Maine voters rejected the project in a 2021 referendum after opponents ran a campaign alleging it would destroy woodlands in the state.

A jury ruled in 2023 that developers had a constitutional right to proceed. Avangrid Inc., the power company behind the project, received the final permit it needs for the New England Clean Energy Connect corridor on Nov. 19.

The 145-mile transmission line stretches from Lewiston, Maine, to the Canadian border, following mostly established utility corridors. A new 53-mile section was the crux of the fight over the project.

### Gramma the Galapagos tortoise dies at about 141

**CA** LOS ANGELES — After more than a century of munching on her favorite foods of romaine lettuce and cactus fruit, beloved Galapagos tortoise Gramma, the oldest resident of the San Diego Zoo, has died.

Gramma was born in her native habitat and was estimated to be about 141 years old, zoo officials said. She died Nov. 20.

It's not clear exactly when the tortoise arrived at the San Diego Zoo, but zoo officials said she came from the Bronx Zoo in either 1928 or 1931 as part of their first group of Galapagos tortoises. As the world changed around her, she delighted visitors with her sweet, shy personality. She lived through 20 U.S. presidents.

Her care specialists affectionately called her "the Queen of the Zoo." She was suffering from bone conditions related to her old age that progressed recently before she was euthanized, the zoo said.

### Reconstructed road offers grand park views

**ND** BISMARCK — Shut down for more than six years, part of a scenic road loop in North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park reopened Tuesday, giving visitors a better opportunity to see wildlife and panoramic views of the rugged Badlands.

The park's 21-mile loop encircles a stark landscape where the 26th president wandered as a young man in the 1880s. The area includes colorful bluffs, dramatic formations from erosion and petrified tree stumps. Vis-

itors enjoy encountering prairie dogs, bison and wild horses on the road.

Storms, the erosive landscape and aging infrastructure caused a 150-foot section of roadway to slump in spring 2019, with sinkholes and other problems occurring later on the road, the National Park Service said. Since then, visitors have had to turn around at a certain point, unable to see views such as Scoria Point Overlook, a vista of red rock and rolling hills.

The project cost about \$51 million, almost entirely funded from the Great American Outdoors Act, which supports national parks' and public lands' deferred maintenance needs.

### City transit upgrading railcars to prevent fires

**PA** HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro and leaders of Philadelphia's mass transit agency said Monday that the system is fully complying with federal orders to take measures to help prevent fires in an aging electric railcar model that is heavily used in its regional rail fleet.

The October order from the Federal Railroad Administration came after federal transportation authorities investigated five fires this year involving the Silverliner IV passenger railcars used by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, or SEPTA.

Shapiro, a Democrat, said he is sending an extra \$220 million in state aid to SEPTA to help it comply with the orders. All five fires forced everyone aboard to evacuate — in one case, as many as 350 passengers — with a few minor injuries reported.

— From wire reports

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# CFP flip-flops Oregon, Ole Miss at key spots

Associated Press

The College Football Playoff rankings placed the spotlight on, where else this year, “6-7” — flip-flopping Oregon and Ole Miss in those spots while keeping their top five teams the same in Tuesday night’s reveal.

Oregon’s impressive victory over Southern California in one of last week’s few games between ranked teams accounted for the biggest change, moving the Ducks ahead of Mississippi, which didn’t play.

The other meaningful shift was Miami’s move to No. 12, in a switch with Utah after the Utes gave up 472 yards rushing in a tight win over Kansas State.

There are two more rankings to be revealed — next Tuesday, then Dec. 7 when the final top 25 will set the bracket for the 12-team playoff to start Dec. 19.

Pitt’s return to the rankings — at No. 22 — after falling out for a week impacts the meaning of its key Atlantic Coast Conference game this week against the Hurricanes, who need a win and some help to make the conference title game but still have hopes of grabbing one of the playoff’s seven at-large berths.

“Miami is a team that it really appears is starting to look like the Miami team that started 5-0,” said Hunter Yurachek, the chair of the selection committee.

Following the Buckeyes for the fourth

time in four rankings were fellow undefeated teams Indiana and Texas A&M. Georgia stayed at No. 4, followed by Texas Tech. After Oregon and Mississippi came Oklahoma, Notre Dame, Alabama and BYU at No. 11 and first team out on this week’s proverbial bubble.

Ohio State and Indiana will play in what should be a 1 vs. 2 Big Ten title game if both win rivalry showdowns on the road over Thanksgiving weekend. Ohio State’s task is more difficult — against Michigan, which moved up three spots to No. 15. Indiana plays Purdue.

No. 10 Alabama plays at Auburn with a spot in the Southeastern Conference title game on the line. The Tide’s opponent would be Texas A&M if the Aggies win at No. 16 Texas.

## Kiffin’s job status

Among the factors the committee can consider is the availability of players and coaches, which has potential to bring Ole Miss coach Lane Kiffin’s job status into play.

Word from Oxford is that a decision will come on Kiffin’s potential move to LSU or Florida after this week’s game against Mississippi State. An Ole Miss team without one of the most sought-after coaches in the game wouldn’t seem as good as one with him.

Still, Yurachek wouldn’t tip his hand on

how that evaluation might go.

## Conference watch

**ACC** -- No. 18 Virginia and No. 21 SMU are the favorites to reach the title game, which means one of them has an inside edge to be in the playoff. The Hurricanes are likely in an at-large showdown with the likes of BYU, Vanderbilt and maybe Alabama.

**Big 12** -- BYU is angling for another crack at Texas Tech in the title game. Hard to see the Cougars getting there, losing to the Red Raiders again and still making the playoff.

**Big Ten** -- Ohio State, Indiana and Oregon are locks. Michigan’s move up three to No. 15 gives the Wolverines a chance at an at-large bid (or maybe the conference title) with a win this week over the Buckeyes.

**SEC** -- Texas A&M, Georgia, Mississippi and Oklahoma should all be in. Alabama can’t really afford a third loss, but what if that loss comes in the SEC title game? The Tide makes it by beating Auburn. Vanderbilt would strengthen its case with a win at No. 19 Tennessee this week.

**Group of 5** -- No. 24 Tulane of the American is still the only team from a non-power conference in the rankings. One problem. BetMGM Sportsbook has North Texas as the favorite to win the league title. That, in turn, could bring someone like James Madison back into the conversation.

# Lakers win 5th straight, clinch first in Cup group

Associated Press nba

LOS ANGELES — Luka Dončić had 43 points, 13 assists and nine rebounds, and LeBron James added 25 points in the Los Angeles Lakers’ fifth consecutive victory, 135-118 over the Los Angeles Clippers on Tuesday night.

Dončić matched his season high with 32 points in the first half on the way to his 51st career 40-point game.

He fell just short of his 10th career 40-point triple-double, but the Lakers clinched their group with their third straight win in NBA Cup play.

Austin Reaves had 31 points and nine rebounds for the Lakers, who have won 11 of 13 overall.

The 40-year-old James also

looked more like his old self in the third game of his unprecedented 23rd NBA season, scoring 16 points in the second half while the Lakers steadily pulled away.

James Harden continued his scoring surge with 29 points and nine assists for the Clippers, who have lost 11 of 13. Kawhi Leonard scored 19 in his second game back from a 10-game injury absence.

**Magic 144, 76ers 103:** Anthony Black scored 27 of his career-high 31 points in the first half, Franz Wagner added 21 points and visiting Orlando routed injury-depleted Philadelphia in an NBA Cup game.

Orlando’s Jalen Suggs was ejected with 27 seconds left in the first half after receiving two

technicals during a heated altercation between the teams.

Orlando improved to 3-0 in the Cup and the 76ers dropped to 0-3.

The game was tied at 35-all after the first quarter before the Magic took control in the second period. Philadelphia fans started showering boos on the court when Orlando went up 17 points with 5½ minutes left.

The Magic dominated the second quarter, outscoring Philadelphia by 26 points in the period to take an 86-60 lead at halftime.

**Wizards 132, Hawks 113:** CJ McCollum posted season highs with 46 points and 10 made 3-pointers, and Washington never trailed en route to a home win over Atlanta.

McCollum missed only three times from beyond the arc and

finished one 3 shy of his career high and a franchise record. Washington opened with a 45-point first quarter and 77-point first half, both season bests.

Alex Sarr added 27 points and 11 rebounds for the Wizards (2-15), who snapped a 14-game losing streak — two shy of a franchise record. They earned their first home win since a 116-111 victory over Sacramento on April 2. Washington’s Corey Kispert had 19 points before leaving midway through the third quarter with an apparent wrist injury.

Kristaps Porzingis scored 22 points and Onyeka Okongwu had 20 for Atlanta, which had a two-game win streak snapped in its worst loss since a 138-118 defeat to Toronto in an Oct. 22 season opener.



# Gillespie, Tennessee top No. 3 Houston

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Ja’Kobi Gillespie scored 22 points and made all six of his free throws in the final 35 seconds to lift No. 17 Tennessee to a 76-73 victory over No. 3 Houston in the Players Era Championship on Tuesday.

Jaylen Carey added 13 points for the Volunteers (7-0) and Bishop Boswell scored 10, including two free throws with 25 seconds left.

Kingston Flemings led Houston (6-1) with 25 points, and Milos Uzan had 17. Uzan, playing in his hometown, missed a half-court shot at the buzzer that would have sent the game into overtime.

Houston guard Emanuel Sharp, who averages 17.7 points per game, was limited to 21 minutes because of foul trouble. He finished with eight points.

Sharp, who scored 26 in Monday’s 78-74 overtime victory against Syracuse, picked up two fouls in the first five minutes and sat the rest of the half.

These teams met in last season’s NCAA Tournament with a Final Four trip on the line. Houston won the Elite Eight game 69-50, eventually advancing to the championship before losing in the final minute to Florida.

The rematch was quite different.

Houston couldn’t get much to go down in the second half, enabling Tennessee to go on a 10-point run for a 51-46 lead with 9:42 left. The Cougars went 7:24 between points and 7:42 between field goals, and they missed 11 straight shots and 16 of 18.

**No. 7 Michigan 102, No. 21 Auburn 72:** Roddy Gayle Jr. and Yaxel Lendeborg both scored 17 points as visiting Michigan routed Auburn in the second round of the Players Era Championship.

It was the second time Michigan (6-0) topped the century

mark this season. The Wolverines improved to 2-0 in this event, following a 94-54 win over San Diego State on Monday.

Nimari Burnett and Morez Johnson Jr. added 15 points apiece. Trey McKenney finished with 11 and L.J. Cason had 10 for the Wolverines, who shot 51.5% from the field — including 14-for-35 (40%) from 3-point range.

Auburn (5-2) was led by Tahaad Pettiford, who scored 16 points. Keyshawn Hall had 15, Filip Jovic added 13 and KeShawn Murphy chipped in with 12.

**No. 8 Alabama 115, UNLV 76:** Aden Holloway scored 26 points, including five 3-pointers, as visiting Alabama rebounded from its loss Monday to Gonzaga to rout UNLV, in the second round of the Players Era Championship.

Holloway was one of six Crimson Tide players to reach double figures, including Houston Mallette (19 points), London Jemison (18), Labron Pilon (13), Amari Allen (13) and Taylor Bowen (12).

Alabama (4-2) had a 38-9 advantage in bench points and outrebounded the Rebels 48-28.

**No. 11 Michigan St. 89, East Carolina 56:** Jaxon Kohler and Divine Ugochukwu each scored 16 points to lead host Michigan State’s balanced attack as the Spartans beat East Carolina in the Fort Myers Tip-Off.

Michigan State, which entered the game with four players averaging double-figure points, also got 13 from Coen Carr and 10 from Carson Cooper.

The Spartans (6-0) had 36 points in the paint, 35 points from its reserves and 31 points off 24 East Carolina turnovers.

**No. 12 Gonzaga 100, Maryland 61:** Braden Huff scored 20 points on 9-for-10 shooting as host Gonzaga shredded Maryland’s defense in a blowout at the Players Era Championship.

Emmanuel Innocenti added

15 points off the bench on five 3-pointers for the Bulldogs (7-0). Steele Venters had 14 points, including four 3s, and Graham Ike scored 13.

Mario Saint-Supery racked up nine of Gonzaga’s 30 assists on 37 baskets.

Pharrel Payne paced Maryland (5-2) with 14 points. Darius Adams added 13 and Andre Mills scored 11, but the Terrapins committed 18 turnovers and got outrebounded 39-29.

**No. 14 St. John’s 96, Baylor 81:** Bryce Hopkins scored 26 points, Oziyah Sellers added 22 and host St. John’s beat Baylor in the second round of the Players Era Championship.

St. John’s shot a blistering 57.4% from the field, including 11 of 22 on 3-pointers. Sellers went 5 for 7 from beyond the arc, and Hopkins was 9 of 12 from the floor while adding five rebounds and five assists.

Baylor (4-1) shot a season-low 37.2%, hitting just 29 of 78 from the field. The Bears hadn’t finished below 43.1% in any of their first four games.

**No. 15 Iowa St. 78, Creighton 60:** Freshman Killyan Toure scored a career-high 20 points and visiting Iowa State beat Creighton in the second round of the Players Era Championship.

Despite missing co-leading scorer Tamin Lipsey, who injured his groin in Monday’s 83-82 win over St. John’s, the Cyclones kept Creighton at arm’s length for most of the game.

Joshua Jefferson had 18 points and 10 rebounds. Blake Buchanan has 12 points and nine rebounds, and Milan Momcilovic finished with 10 points for the Cyclones (6-0).

**No. 16 North Carolina 85, St. Bonaventure 70:** Henri Veesaar scored 24 points and Caleb Wilson added 20 as host North Carolina pulled away in the second half for a victory over St. Bonaventure in the Fort Myers Tip-Off.

The Tar Heels jumped to a 15-5 lead with a combination of 3-pointers and three-point plays. But St. Bonaventure kept rallying in the first half and took a 30-28 lead on Andrew Osasuyi’s dunk to cap a 16-4 run.

The 7-foot Veesaar asserted himself more in the paint in the second half as North Carolina went up 47-38, 63-50 and 69-52. He had 16 of his points in the second half while adding 13 rebounds. Wilson had 12 rebounds and Tar Heels scored 36 points in the paint.

**California 80, No. 18 UCLA 72:** Chris Bell had 22 points and six rebounds and was named Most Outstanding Player, Dai Dai Ames hit two late 3-pointers on the way to 14 points, and host California beat UCLA in the Empire Classic championship game.

Trent Perry scored 19 points and Eric Dailey Jr. added 17, but UCLA cost itself by shooting just 13 for 23 on free throws in a matchup of the longtime Pac-12 Conference opponents.

**No. 23 NC State 81, Boise St.:** Darrion Williams scored 16 points and visiting N.C. State beat Boise State in a Maui Invitational consolation game.

The Wolfpack (5-1) bounced back from an 11-point loss to Seton Hall one day prior to hand the Broncos (4-3) their second loss in as many days.

Ven-Allen Lubin had 11 points and 12 rebounds, while Terrance Arceneaux also scored 11 and Paul McNeil Jr. added 10 points.

Dylan Andrews made five of Boise State’s 11 3-pointers and finished with 26 points.

**No. 25 Indiana 86, Kansas State 69:** Reed Bailey scored 21 points and Indiana limited the nation’s leading scorer, P.J. Haggerty, to 12 below his average in a home win over Kansas State.

Indiana jumped out to a 20-4 lead with five different shooters hitting 3s.

# Rams QB Stafford playing season of bests

Associated Press

Matthew Stafford is having one of the best statistical seasons in NFL history.

The 37-year-old quarterback has thrown 27 touchdowns since his most recent interception in Week 3. Overall, he has 2,830 yards passing, 30 TDs, 2 interceptions and a 113.7 passer rating while leading the Los Angeles Rams to a 9-2 record and the current No. 1 seed in the NFC.

Stafford is playing at an MVP level despite missing one month in training camp and the entire preseason because of a back injury.

"I feel like he's in total command. I think he's got a lot of trust in the teammates that he's playing with," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "There's a true ownership. I think he's just totally and completely present and he's really just enjoying the opportunity to compete week in

and week out. Even when he does the breakdown with the team, he loves being a part of this team. You can feel that. He instills a belief every time that we go out on the field. We feel like good things are going to happen because he's leading the way. I think he's getting more and more comfortable with the skill players. ... He's playing great. We'll just continue to stay in the moment, but I'm loving every second of this."

Stafford is on pace to finish with 4,374 yards passing, 46 TDs and three picks. That would rank among the greatest seasons ever.

Here's a look at five of the best:

**Lamar Jackson — 2024:** The two-time NFL MVP threw for 4,172 yards, 41 TDs and only four interceptions while also running for 915 yards and four scores, helping the Baltimore Ravens go 12-5. Jackson com-

pleted 66.7% of his passes and his passer rating of 119.6 was the fourth best in league history. Jackson earned first-team All-Pro honors and was runner-up for MVP.

**Peyton Manning — 2013:** The five-time NFL MVP and two-time Super Bowl champion set NFL records with 5,477 yards passing and 55 TDs. He completed 68.3% of his passes and had a passer rating of 115.1 and ran in for one score, leading the Denver Broncos to a 13-3 finish. Manning had a 121.1 passer rating with Indianapolis in 2004 when he threw for 4,557 yards, 49 TDs and 10 interceptions.

**Tom Brady — 2007:** The seven-time Super Bowl champ led the New England Patriots to a perfect 16-0 regular season, throwing for 4,806 yards, 50 TDs and eight picks. He completed 68.9% of his passes, had a 117.2 passer rating and had two rushing TDs. Brady threw for

5,235 yards in 2011 and a career-best 5,316 yards along with 43 TDs at age 44 with Tampa Bay in 2021.

**Aaron Rodgers — 2020:** The four-time NFL MVP and one-time Super Bowl MVP threw for 4,299 yards, 48 TDs and only five interceptions, posting a 121.5 passer rating. Rodgers completed 70.7% of his passes and led the Green Bay Packers to a 13-3 mark. This season edges Rodgers' 2011 campaign when he set an NFL record with a 122.5 passer rating, throwing for 4,643 yards, 45 TDs and six picks in 15 games.

**Patrick Mahomes — 2018:** In his first season as the Kansas City Chiefs starter, Mahomes threw for 5,097 yards, 50 TDs and had a passer rating of 113.8. He also ran for 272 yards, 17 first downs and two scores. The three-time Super Bowl MVP and two-time NFL MVP had 12 picks but still cracks the top five.

## Packers' Love won't let an injury slow him down

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Jordan Love says he's "not going to sugarcoat" the fact he's dealing with an injury to his non-throwing shoulder, but the Green Bay Packers quarterback says it isn't something that should prevent him from playing effectively.

Love hurt his left shoulder and missed part of one series before rallying the Packers to a 27-20 victory over the New York Giants on Nov. 16. He returned to start Green Bay's 23-6 triumph over the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday but was only handing off with his right hand.

"It's one of those where I'm able to play through it," Love said Tuesday. "Obviously, anytime you take a hit, fall on it, you feel it. But nothing that it is holding me back or nothing that I can't play through."

Love is dealing with this injury as the Packers prepare to play their second game in a five-day stretch. The Packers (7-3-1) visit the Detroit Lions (7-4) on Thursday.

Packers coach Matt LaFleur said Love's ability to continue playing is a testament to the quarterback's toughness.

"It takes a lot of physical and mental toughness to play the quarterback position, to be able to stand in there, especially when you are injured, knowing that you're probably going to get hit at some point," LaFleur said. "I thought he exuded that. I thought there were some moments where I was kind of holding my breath at times where he's getting hit and releasing the ball."

This is the second time this season that Love has dealt with an injury to his non-throwing hand or arm. He un-

derwent surgery on his left thumb in August, an injury that gave him some experience at using only his right hand on handoffs.

"I think early on when I had my thumb surgery, I was doing a lot with just (my) right hand, and I think I just kind of subconsciously started doing that in this game," Love said.

Love's latest injury occurred when he took a big hit from Demetrius Flannigan-Fowles at the end of a scramble late in the first quarter of the Giants game. Malik Willis came in and led the Packers into the end zone before Love returned for the next series.

The injury didn't stop him from throwing two touchdown passes later in that game and leading the Packers to another victory the following week.

Love had season lows in pass attempts (21) and passing

yards (139) against the Vikings, but LaFleur said the Packers stayed conservative on offense by design because their defense was dominating the game so thoroughly.

Love said the Packers have taken steps to help protect his shoulder as much as possible, though he didn't offer specifics.

"There's things that you are able to do, and we've done those things," Love said. "So we'll continue to do them but I'm not going to continue to get into detail and talk through it, but there's definitely some things that we've done to help out and be able to play and hopefully put myself in the best foot forward. But at the end of the day, anytime you're injured, playing through things, there's always a chance of risking more injuries, things like that."