

Troops' vaccine response scattershot

The Washington Post

Hundreds of thousands of U.S. service members remain unvaccinated or only partially vaccinated against the coronavirus as the Pentagon's first compliance deadlines near, with lopsided rates across the individual services and a spike in deaths among military reservists illustrating how political division over the shots has seeped into a nonpartisan force with unambiguous orders.

Overall, the military's vaccination rate has climbed since August, when Defense Department leaders, acting on a directive from President Joe Biden, informed the nation's 2.1 million troops that immunization would become mandatory, exemptions would be rare and those who refuse would be punished. Yet troops' response has been scattershot, according to

data assessed by The Washington Post.

For instance, 90% of the active-duty Navy is fully vaccinated, whereas just 72% of the Marine Corps is, the data show, even though both services share a Nov. 28 deadline. In the Air Force, more than 60,000 personnel have just three weeks to meet the Defense Department's most ambitious deadline.

Deaths attributed to COVID-19 have soared in parts of the force as some services struggle to inoculate their troops. In September, more military personnel died of coronavirus infections than in all of 2020. None of those who died were fully vaccinated, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Charlie Dietz said.

Military officials have explained the variance in vaccination rates, in part, by pointing to

the staggered deadlines each of the services set for personnel to comply while expressing optimism that, as those dates approach, a vast majority of troops will carry out their orders. Thousands of troops already have begun their two-shot regimens, like in the Navy, where 98% of active-duty sailors have received at least one dose, officials said.

But other services are not on such a steady path, and critics have said that the large gaps between vaccination deadlines jeopardize how ready the military can be in a moment of crisis. They point to the reserves and National Guard, which over the last two years have been called upon in numerous emergencies and yet large numbers of their personnel have refused to get vaccinated.

"The Army's policy is incentivizing inaction until the latest pos-

sible date," said Katherine L. Kuzminski, a military policy expert at the Washington think tank Center for a New American Security, citing plans that require Army Reserve and National Guard personnel to be fully vaccinated more than eight months from now.

"The way we've seen the virus evolve tells us looking out to June 30 may need to be reconsidered," Kuzminski said.

Combined, the Army Guard and Reserve comprise approximately 522,000 soldiers, roughly a quarter of the entire U.S. military, and they account for nearly 40% of the 62 service-member deaths due to COVID-19, according to the data assessed by The Post. Barely 40% are fully vaccinated. The active-duty Army, facing a Dec. 15 deadline, stands at 81%.

Army's 'modular scalable armor' accommodates all sizes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—Army Capt. Kim Pierre-Zamora remembers the protective vest she was issued when she went to basic training. It was a size medium that hung down too far and made it difficult for her to even bend over to pick up something.

"Whenever I tried to move or tried to shoulder my weapon or shoot on a pop-up range really quickly, I would have to physically pick up the vest and move it in order to shoulder my weapon," Pierre-Zamora said.

It's a common complaint from female soldiers and small-stature men who have struggled with the bulky armor they've worn over two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in recent weeks, the Army for the first time has be-

gun handing out armor in three additional sizes: extra small short, small short and small long. The armor can be adjusted in multiple ways to fit better and allow soldiers to move faster and more freely.

The "modular scalable vest" was distributed to more than 4,500 soldiers so far in the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., over the past few weeks. Female soldiers will also be able to get new versions of the combat shirt more tailored for a woman's shape. Those shirts are given out only when soldiers deploy.

Army researchers have been working on the changes for years, trying to come up with combat gear that is lighter and fits better.

Initially, the effort to add more sizes was in response to com-

plaints from female soldiers, who are increasingly moving into combat jobs that were previously open only to men. As more women deployed to a war zone, they often found that they were shorter and smaller than many of the men and needed armor that allows for narrower shoulders, a bust and hips.

Early on, however, the Army made the decision to make the vests unisex. The decision, said Lt. Col. Stephen Miller, was based on the belief that smaller male soldiers who might need a short or small sized vest would refuse to take anything that was "stamped female." Miller is the product manager for soldier protective equipment at PEO Soldier, an Army organization that coordinates the fielding of armor, weapons

and other equipment.

That move has proved to be a success.

Nearly 25% or 1,200, of the 82nd Airborne soldiers have gotten armor in the three new sizes so far, said Pierre-Zamora, who works as an assistant product manager at PEO Soldier. Of those 1,200, about 100 have been women.

There are five other regular sizes that have been available previously — extra small, small, medium, large and extra large.

Pierre-Zamora said the new short and long versions fit many soldiers better. As an example, she said she and another female soldier look to be about the same size. She said she wears an extra small, however, while the other soldier wears an extra small short.

Taliban: US will provide relief to Afghanistan

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — The United States has agreed to provide humanitarian aid to a desperately poor Afghanistan on the brink of an economic disaster, while refusing to give political recognition to the country's new Taliban rulers, the Taliban said Sunday.

The statement came at the end of the first direct talks between the former foes since the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of August.

The U.S. statement was less definitive, saying only that the two sides "discussed the United States' provision of robust humanitarian assistance, directly to the Afghan people."

The Taliban said the talks

held in Doha, Qatar, "went well," with Washington, freeing up humanitarian aid to Afghanistan after agreeing not to link such assistance to formal recognition of the Taliban.

The U.S. made it clear that the talks were in no way a preamble to recognition of the Taliban, who swept into power Aug. 15 after the U.S.-allied government collapsed.

State Department spokesman Ned Price called the discussions "candid and professional," with the U.S. side reiterating that the Taliban will be judged on their actions, not only their words.

"The U.S. delegation focused on security and terrorism concerns and safe passage for U.S. citizens, other foreign nationals

and our Afghan partners, as well as on human rights, including the meaningful participation of women and girls in all aspects of Afghan society," he said in a statement.

Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen also told The Associated Press that the movement's interim foreign minister assured the U.S. during the talks that the Taliban are committed to seeing that Afghan soil is not used by extremists to launch attacks against other countries.

On Saturday, however, the Taliban ruled out cooperation with Washington on containing the increasingly active Islamic State group in Afghanistan.

Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at

the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who tracks militant groups, agreed the Taliban do not need Washington's help to hunt down and destroy Afghanistan's ISIS affiliate, known as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISIS-K or ISKP.

The Taliban "fought 20 years to eject the U.S., and the last thing it needs is the return of the U.S. It also doesn't need U.S. help," said Roggio, who also produces the foundation's Long War Journal. "The Taliban has to conduct the difficult and time-consuming task of rooting out ISKP cells and its limited infrastructure. It has all the knowledge and tools it needs to do it."

Iraq says it arrested a top Islamic State leader

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraq said on Monday that it has detained a top leader of the Islamic State group and a longtime al-Qaida operative in a cross-border operation.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi tweeted the news, identifying the man as Sami Jasim, who oversees the Islamic State group's financial operations and served as the deputy leader of ISIS under the late Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Al-Kadhimi described it as "one of the most difficult" cross border intelligence operations ever conducted by Iraqi forces.

Jasim has a \$5 million bounty on his head from the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice program, which describes him as having been "instrumental in managing finances for ISIS terrorist operations."

"While serving as IS deputy in southern Mosul in 2014, Jasim

reportedly served as the equivalent of IS's finance minister, supervising the group's revenue-generating operations from illicit sales of oil, gas, antiquities and minerals," the website says.

Iraqi intelligence officials told The Associated Press that Jasim was detained in an identified foreign country and transported to Iraq few days ago. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak of the operation on the record.

Jasim worked with al-Qaida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq in 2006. He assumed various security positions in Iraq, and moved to Syria in 2015, after the Islamic State group, an al-Qaida offshoot, declared its caliphate in 2014 and became the deputy of al-Baghdadi, the extremist group's leader.

Sydney opens to vaccinated following months of lockdown

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — Sydney hairdressers, gyms, cafés and bars reopened to fully vaccinated customers Monday for the first time in more than 100 days after Australia's largest city achieved a vaccination benchmark.

Sydney planned to reopen on the Monday after 70% of the New South Wales state population aged 16 and older were fully vaccinated.

By Monday, 73.5% of the target population was fully vaccinated and more than 90% have received at least one dose.

Some businesses opened at midnight due to demand from people impatient to enjoy their freedom.

More pandemic restrictions will be removed at the 80% benchmark, and New South Wales residents will be free to travel overseas for the first time since March of last year.

New South Wales reported 496 new infections in the latest 24-hour period and eight COVID-19 deaths.

The infection rate will rise as Sydney residents return to work and become more mobile.

New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet said the infection rate and numbers of COVID-19 patients being admitted to hospitals were lower than modeling had predicted.

"So that's positive and gives hope and confidence as we open up in a measured way we're in a very good position to keep people safe," Perrottet said.

"There's still restrictions in place. It's not a free-for-all. It is opening up in a measured way and if everyone can look after each other and respect each other, we can get people back into work, we can get businesses open, while at the same time keeping people safe," he added.

Merck asks the FDA to approve anti-COVID pill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Drugmaker Merck asked U.S. regulators Monday to authorize its pill against COVID-19 in what would add an entirely new and easy-to-use weapon to the world's arsenal against the pandemic.

If cleared by the Food and Drug Administration — a decision that could come in a matter of weeks — it would be the first pill shown to treat COVID-19. All other FDA-backed treatments against the disease require an IV or injection.

An antiviral pill that people could take at home to reduce their symptoms and speed recovery could prove groundbreaking, easing the crushing caseload on U.S. hospitals and helping to curb outbreaks in poorer countries with weak health care systems. It would also bolster the two-pronged approach to the pandemic: treatment, by way of medication, and prevention, primarily through vaccinations.

The FDA will scrutinize company data on the safety and effectiveness of the drug, molnupiravir, before rendering a decision.

Merck and its partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutic said they specifically asked the agency to grant emergency use for adults with mild-to-moderate COVID-19 who are at risk for severe disease or hospitalization. That is roughly the way COVID-19 infusion drugs are used.

"The value here is that it's a pill so you don't have to deal with the infusion centers and all the factors around that," said Dr. Nicholas Kartsonis, a senior vice president with Merck's infectious disease unit. "I

think it's a very powerful tool to add to the toolbox."

The company reported earlier this month that the pill cut hospitalizations and deaths by half among patients with early symptoms of COVID-19. The results were so strong that independent medical experts monitoring the trial recommended stopping it early.

Side effects were similar between patients who got the drug and those in a testing group who received a dummy pill. But Merck has not publicly detailed the types of problems reported, which will be a key part of the FDA's review.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, health experts have stressed the need for a convenient pill. The goal is for something similar to Tamiflu, the 20-year-old flu medication that shortens the illness by a day or two and blunts the severity of symptoms like fever, cough and stuffy nose.

Assuming FDA authorization, the U.S. government has agreed to buy enough of the pills to treat 1.7 million people, at a price of roughly \$700 for each course of treatment. That's less than half the price of the antibody drugs purchased by the U.S. government — over \$2,000 per infusion — but still more expensive than many antiviral pills for other conditions.

Merck's Kartsonis said in an interview that the \$700 figure does not represent the final price for the medication.

"Obviously we're going to be responsible about this and make this drug as accessible to as many people around the world as we can," Kartsonis said

Strong storms strike Oklahoma

Associated Press

COWETA, Okla. — Severe storms brought suspected tornadoes and baseball-sized hail to parts of Oklahoma, but there were no reports Monday of deaths or injuries.

The severe weather system that hit Oklahoma late Sunday also brought heavy rain, lightning and wind to parts of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Texas, and more stormy weather is predicted for later this week in parts of the central U.S.

Severe weather is not unusual in the Southern Plains in October, said Chuck Hodges, senior meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Tulsa. But Sunday's storm "was kind of more of a spring setup," he said.

"We had unusually high moisture and a very, very strong weather system that came through," he said.

Tornado warnings and reports of damage popped up across Oklahoma beginning Sunday afternoon, and survey crews with the weather service will head out Monday to determine how many tornadoes struck, Hodges said.

A possible tornado hit the Tulsa suburb of Coweta late Sunday causing significant damage to a high school, homes and a gas station, news outlets reported, and Coweta Public Schools classes were canceled Monday.

Earlier, baseball-sized hail shattered windows and dented cars in Norman, about 20 miles south of Oklahoma City.

On Monday, severe storms were possible in Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan while another round of storms is predicted Tuesday in Kansas and Oklahoma, the Storm Prediction Center said.

Poll finds cyberattacks concerning to most Americans

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Most Americans across party lines have serious concerns about cyberattacks on U.S. computer systems and view China and Russia as major threats, according to a new poll.

The poll by The Pearson Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that about 9 in 10 Americans are at least somewhat concerned about hacking that involves their personal information, financial institutions, government agencies or certain utilities. About

two-thirds say they are very or extremely concerned.

Roughly three-quarters say the Chinese and Russian governments are major threats to the cybersecurity of the U.S. government, and at least half also see the Iranian government and non-government bodies as threatening.

The broad consensus highlights the growing impacts of cyberattacks in an increasingly connected world and could boost efforts by President Joe Biden and lawmakers to force critical industries to boost their cyb-

er defenses and impose reporting requirements for companies that get hacked. The poll comes amid a wave of high-profile ransomware attacks and cyberespionage campaigns in the last year that have compromised sensitive government records and led to the shutdown of the operations of energy companies, hospitals, schools and others.

Biden has made cybersecurity a key issue in his young administration and federal lawmakers are considering legislation to strengthen both public and private cyber defenses.

3 US-based economists win Nobel prize

Associated Press

STOCKHOLM — Three U.S.-based economists won the 2021 Nobel prize for economics on Monday for pioneering research on the labor market impacts of minimum wage, immigration and education, and for creating the scientific framework to allow conclusions to be drawn from such studies that can't use traditional methodology.

Canadian-born David Card of the University of California at Berkeley was awarded one half of the prize, while the other half was shared by Joshua Angrist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Dutch-born Guido Imbens, 58, from Stanford University.

The Royal Swedish Academy

of Sciences said the three have “completely reshaped empirical work in the economic sciences.”

“Card’s studies of core questions for society and Angrist and Imbens’ methodological contributions have shown that natural experiments are a rich source of knowledge,” said Peter Fredriksson, chair of the Economic Sciences Committee. “Their research has substantially improved our ability to answer key causal questions, which has been of great benefit for society.”

Card worked on research that used restaurants in New Jersey and in eastern Pennsylvania to measure the effects of increasing the minimum wage. He and his late research partner, Alan

Krueger, found that an increase in the hourly minimum wage did not affect employment, challenging conventional wisdom which held that an increase in minimum wage will lead to less hiring.

Card’s work also challenged another commonly held idea that immigrants depress wages for native-born workers. He found that incomes of the native-born can benefit from new immigration, while it is earlier immigrants who are at risk of being negatively affected.

Angrist and Imbens won their half of the award for working out the methodological issues that enable economists to draw solid conclusions about cause and effect even where they cannot car-

ry out studies according to strict scientific methods.

Speaking by phone from his home in Massachusetts, Imbens told reporters gathered for the announcement that he had been asleep when the call came.

“The whole house was asleep, we had a busy weekend,” said Imbens. “I was absolutely thrilled to hear the news.”

He said he was especially thrilled for Angrist, who was best man at his wedding.

Unlike the other Nobel prizes, the economics award wasn’t established in the will of Alfred Nobel but by the Swedish central bank in his memory in 1968, with the first winner selected a year later. It is the last prize announced each year.

Bosnian man built a home that rotates to please wife

Associated Press

SRBAC, Bosnia-Herzegovina — It’s not exactly on par with India’s Taj Mahal, but a family house in a small town in northern Bosnia is in its own way a monument to love.

The house in Srbac was designed and built by Vojin Kusic, 72. With a green facade and red metal roof, it can rotate a full circle to satisfy his wife Ljubica’s shifting desires as to what she would like to see when she looks out of its windows.

“After I reached an advanced age and after my children took over the family business, I finally had enough time to task myself with granting my wife her wish” to be able to change the position of rooms in her house whenever she wants, Kusic said.

Many years ago when they married, Kusic had built another, typical house for himself and his wife in which they raised their three children. At the time, his wife wanted their bedrooms to face the sun, so they did. But this meant their living room faced

away from the road. After a while, he says his wife complained that “she could not see people entering our front yard” and Kusic had to remodel everything.

“I had to tear down the wall between our two bedrooms to turn them into a living room and move all (electrical) installations. It was a very demanding task, it took a lot from me, but I did what she wanted,” he said.

Then six years ago, the only one of Kusic’s three children not to fly the nest, a son, got married and his parents let him live on the top floor of their family house while they moved to the ground floor.

“Once again, this time on the ground floor, I had to start tearing down some walls, at which point, to not wait for her to change her mind again, I decided to build a new, rotating house so that she can spin it as she pleases,” Kusic said.

“Now, our front door also rotates, so if she spots unwanted guests heading our way, she can spin the house and make them turn away,” he joked.

US security aide Hill’s book breaks down Trump, Putin

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vladimir Putin paid scant attention to Fiona Hill, a preeminent U.S. expert on Russia, when she was seated next to him at dinners. Putin’s people placed her there by design, choosing a “nondescript woman,” as she put it, so the Russian president would have no competition for attention.

Fluent in Russian, she often carefully took in the conversations of men who seemed to forget she was there and wrote it all down later, she recalled in an Associated Press interview. “Hey, if I was a guy, you wouldn’t be talking like this in front of me,” she remembered thinking. “But go ahead. I’m listening.”

Hill expected not to be similarly invisible when she later went to work for another world leader, Donald Trump, as his Russia adviser in the White House. She could see inside Putin’s head, had co-written an acclaimed book about him, but Trump did not want her counsel, either. He ignored her in meeting after meet-

ing, once mistaking her for a secretary and calling her “darlin’.”

Again, though, she was listening. She was reading Trump like she had read Putin.

The result is “There Is Nothing for You Here,” her book out last week. Much like her testimony in Trump’s first impeachment, the book offers a more sober, and thus perhaps more alarming, portrait of the 45th president. She describes a president so consumed with what others said about him that U.S. relations with other countries rose or fell according to how flattering foreign leaders were. Hill describes Putin manipulating Trump by offering or withholding compliments, a maneuver she said was more effective with Trump than blackmailing him would have been.

Yet in Trump she saw a rare if ultimately wasted talent.

“He clearly had a feel for what people wanted,” she told the AP. “He could talk the talk even if he couldn’t walk the walk in having their experiences. But he understood it.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Disease outbreak tied to seafood sickens 82

CO DENVER — A salmonella outbreak tied to seafood that Denver-based Northeast Seafood Products Inc. processed or manufactured has sickened at least 82 Coloradans in 14 counties.

Of 102 people in 14 states who got sick from salmonella, all but two live in Colorado or reported traveling to the state the week before they became ill, according to a food safety alert from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nineteen people have been hospitalized, The Denver Post reported.

The agency is investigating with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The FDA reported that samples collected from Northeast Seafood Products on Thursday were positive for Salmonella Thompson and matched the outbreak strain.

Northeast Seafood Products has temporarily halted production and has recalled a long list of fish that restaurants and grocery stores purchased and sold through Oct. 7, according to the alert.

Police: Teen tried to steal military Humvee

KS HUTCHINSON — A teen attempted to steal a military Humvee worth more than \$100,000 from the National Guard Armory in Hutchinson and swung a hatchet at an armory staff member who tried to stop him, police said.

The Hutchinson News reported that prosecutors charged the 16-year-old from Nickerson in Reno County District Court with

aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, felony theft and criminal trespass. He remains in juvenile detention.

Hutchinson Police Lt. Dustin Loepp said the teen jumped a fence Wednesday at the Armory and broke into at least three Humvees.

Loepp said that once the third vehicle moved, military personnel ran out and opened the door. Loepp said the teen then used an ax he'd taken from the second Humvee and attempted to hit one of the armory employees with it, but missed.

Charging hoverboard leads to house fire

MA WAREHAM — A house blaze in Massachusetts that forced a woman and baby to escape through a window is being blamed on a charging hoverboard.

Authorities said the woman called 911 from the Wareham house early Saturday and said she was trapped in the house with the baby. The operator instructed her to climb out of the window with the infant, officials said.

Firefighters went to the scene and found that the mother and baby had made it safely out of the house. The woman threw pillows out of the first-floor window, put the baby on the pillows and climbed out, officials said.

Authorities said the fire was started by the charging hoverboard in the kitchen. Firefighters were able to keep the fire contained to the kitchen, officials said.

Woman charged with false shooting report

SD SIOUX FALLS — A Sioux Falls woman has been charged with false re-

porting after calling in a fake report of a person with a gunshot wound in the chest because she wanted to get in contact with a police detective.

The Argus Leader reported the 48-year-old woman first called 911 on Thursday afternoon, asking to be put in contact with the detective, police spokesman Sam Clemens said. Dispatch told her they couldn't give the number.

She later called 911 twice to report someone had been shot in the chest, but police quickly figured out no one had been shot and that there were no threats. Instead, they found the woman who still wanted to speak with the detective.

It's unknown why the woman wanted to speak with the detective, Clemens said. The detective didn't respond to the call.

2 days in tree ends with trip to hospital for man

NY NEW YORK — A domestic dispute that led a Queens man to flee to a tree ended after two days when the man agreed to go to a hospital, authorities said.

It was always the aim of police to get the man to a hospital for an evaluation after he went into the tree on Wednesday, said Detective Sophia Mason, a police spokesperson.

She said the 44-year-old man, who was taken to the hospital Friday, was wanted in connection with a past assault when they arrived after noon on Wednesday following an emergency call regarding a dispute in his home.

Mason said in a release that the man fled to the tree in the Springfield Gardens neighborhood to escape officers. She added that the first consideration was not to do anything that would further

endanger the man. Any pending criminal matters will eventually have to be resolved, though, she said.

Contractor fined after workers fell from bridge

ME BREWER — A company that employs two people who fell 20 feet off a bridge last year faces a \$25,000 fine.

The workers for Richmond-based contractor Wyman & Simpson were building a new I-395 overpass in Brewer when the wooden structure on which they were standing collapsed.

Occupational Health and Safety Administration cited the company for violations of four standards.

No cars were on the interstate when the workers landed in a heap. They were treated at a local hospital. The bridge opened in July.

Man arrested after fatal shooting, wounding dog

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A man charged with fatally shooting an Albuquerque man after first wounding the man's service dog has been arrested in Gallup, Albuquerque police said Saturday.

Gallup police aided by state police arrested Xavier Marquez, 22, on Friday on a homicide warrant in the Sept. 22 shooting of Shawn Lynch, 34, police said.

According to police, Marquez was sitting in a vehicle in front of his house when Lynch walked by with his dog.

Police said there was an encounter that involved an exchange of shouts and resulted in the shooting of Lynch's dog and then Lynch.

— From wire reports

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NHL ready for full slate of 82 games

Associated Press

Drew Doughty needs a refresher going into his 13th NHL season.

When he ran into Patrick Kane before training camps opened, it was the first time he had seen the Chicago star around a rink in almost two years.

"I don't even know who plays for what team anymore," Doughty said, half-jokingly.

After two pandemic-shortened seasons, including one limited to divisional play to keep the coronavirus at bay, the NHL is set to drop the puck on a full 82-game slate and stage the traditional 16-team playoff for the Stanley Cup. Now at 32 teams with the addition of the expansion Seattle Kraken and fans back in every building, hockey is ready to get back to normal.

Opening night is Tuesday.

"Can't wait," Doughty said. "Really just can't wait."

Even Calgary's Matthew Tkachuk agrees with his longtime nemesis.

"Normal's great," Tkachuk said. "You don't realize how much you miss it. ... I'm excited to get back to the playing in front of fans. There's nothing like it. That was so different. And as much as people

say it's just hockey at the end of the day, it is, but it's a whole different world when you're playing in front of a sold-out rink."

The Tampa Bay Lightning won the Cup for

the second time in 10 months at home in front of a sellout crowd, but some players — like reigning MVP Connor McDavid — haven't played in front of fans since March 2020.

The Lightning celebrated with another boat parade and then said goodbye to several key contributors because of a salary cap squeeze and expansion. A three-peat hasn't been done since the New York Islanders dynasty of the early 1980s.

"I certainly don't think Tampa is out," said McDavid, whose Oilers were swept in the first round of the playoffs. "They got a great core there, they got one of the best goalies in the world and some unbelievable defensemen, so they're going to be a good team no matter what they put together there. But, yeah I think in this league everyone feels like they've got a shot."

The best shot belongs to Colorado, the pre-season Cup favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

After a second-round loss to Vegas, it could be the Avalanche's year behind Nathan MacKinnon.

"It felt like we could win it last year, too, and the year before that," MacKinnon said. "We're in the mix, for sure. I think a lot of teams are."

In the East, that includes the Lightning, Toronto and the Islanders, who were ousted by Tampa Bay in the semifinals the past two

years. Out West, the Golden Knights and Avalanche could be on a collision course of two contenders poised to get over the hump and win it all.

Vegas reached the final as an expansion team in 2018, setting the bar unreasonably high for Seattle. But the Kraken certainly have the goaltender to get there in Philipp Grubauer, who was the backup when Washington beat the Golden Knights to hoist the Cup and Colorado's starter the past three seasons.

"You can establish something that has never been there before," Grubauer said. "You can be the rock and the pillar for a team that's never played a game. You're making history by playing those games."

The NHL would like to get back on track by playing every game when it's scheduled; 51 were postponed last season for virus-related reasons. COVID-19 is still a concern, but there's reason for hope given that roughly 98% of players — and all coaches and staff — are fully vaccinated.

"We're hoping it's normal," MacKinnon said. "Hopefully we get through it: 82 games, no pauses."

That would allow hockey's best to go to Beijing in February for the first Olympics with NHL players since 2014. Only pandemic conditions worsening would stop that.

Larson wins as Elliott, Harvick continue their feud

Associated Press

CONCORD, N.C. — Rick Hendrick first began to worry when Kyle Larson and Alex Bowman had electrical issues at nearly the same time.

By the time reigning Cup champion Chase Elliott was deliberately crashed by Kevin Harvick and nearly knocked out of the playoffs, Hendrick had seen enough destruction on The Roval at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

"I was upset. I was ready to go home. It was time to get the helicopter and get out of here," Hendrick said. "We wrecked everything we had down there."

Good thing the boss stuck around: Larson rallied from his early electrical issues Sunday to win for the seventh time this season and storm into the third

round of NASCAR's playoffs. It ended a topsy-turvy day for Hendrick Motorsports in which Larson and Elliott advanced, Bowman and William Byron were eliminated, and Elliott was nearly sabotaged by a vengeful Harvick.

Harvick laid in wait to deliver payback on Elliott for Elliott costing him a win at Bristol three weeks ago and the retaliation came at about the halfway mark. Harvick sent Elliott into the wall and on the verge of playoff elimination.

Just as the crews for Larson and Bowman had done earlier to salvage their races, Elliott's No. 9 team went to work and got the driver back into contention. And even with his bumper flapping in the wind off the back of his Chevrolet, Elliott drove

through the field and into position to ruin another day for Harvick.

The team said on their radio Elliott should wreck Harvick if given the chance and maybe that caused Harvick to worry. As Elliott closed on Harvick as they hurtled into the first turn with 10 laps remaining, Harvick botched the entry almost as if he was defensively driving in his rearview mirror.

Harvick drove directly into the wall, crumpled the front of his Ford and the crowd erupted as Elliott cruised through the crash scene. Just like that, Harvick's title run came to its earliest end since the elimination format began in 2014.

Harvick had advanced to the third round the past seven years and all the way to the title race

five times. He didn't admit to wrecking Elliott as payback for Bristol, but he didn't deny it, either.

"You remember Bristol," Harvick said the first time he was asked about his intentions. The second time he was asked he responded "sometimes real life teaches you good lessons."

On the day he made his 750th career start, he finished 33rd and was eliminated along with Christopher Bell, Byron and Bowman.

When asked if the two are now even, Harvick simply walked away.

Elliott subtly masked his pleasure.

"As far as Kevin goes, I just want to wish them a merry off-season and a happy Christmas," Elliott said.

Allen and Bills reign over Chiefs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Bills quarterback Josh Allen scrambled to the left on the mushy turf in Arrowhead Stadium, saw the Chiefs defensive back go low for the tackle and made like an Olympian by leaping over him for a first down.

Apropos as Buffalo finally cleared one of its biggest hurdles in the AFC on Sunday night.

Allen threw for 315 yards and three touchdowns while running for another score. Micah Hyde returned a rare pick by Patrick Mahomes 26 yards for a TD of his own and the Bills rolled to a 38-20 victory over Kansas City in a conference title game rematch that was delayed more than an hour by lightning.

“I think this is going to be made a bigger deal than it is. We’re in Week 5,” Allen said. “Four wins doesn’t get you to the playoffs. We ended up with a win. That’s our goal each and every week, to come out and be resilient through lightning delays. I’m proud of how our team handled the situation.”

Emmanuel Sanders had two TD catches for Buffalo. Dawson Knox had 117 yards re-

ceiving and the other one.

“We’re going to enjoy it on the plane back. You can tell I’m enjoying it out there; I lost my voice screaming,” Sanders said, “but at the same time, it’s not like we won the Super Bowl. It’s Week 5. We have to get back to work.”

Mahomes finished with 272 yards passing and two touchdowns to go with two interceptions and a lost fumble — three of his team’s four turnovers in all. Mahomes also wound up being the leading rusher for the Chiefs (2-3) with 61 yards as they struggled to get going offensively against a brutally difficult Bills defense.

It didn’t help that running back Clyde Edwards-Helaire left with a knee injury early in the second half. Travis Kelce also left in the closing minutes after taking a blow to the head on an incomplete pass.

Kansas City had closed to 31-20 early in the fourth quarter when Rashad Fenton picked off Allen’s pass on a third-down jump ball near midfield. But Chiefs defensive end Frank Clark was called for roughing the passer, giving Buffalo the ball and a fresh set of downs, and the Bills marched downfield for the clinching touchdown.

“We know we have what it takes to be great. We have a lot of great players that have been really good other places,” Mahomes said. “We know we have what it takes.”

The game had been hotly anticipated since January, when Kansas City romped past Buffalo on its way to the Super Bowl, largely because the game promised to once again showcase two of the AFC’s best offenses in prime time.

The problem for the Chiefs? It also has one of the worst defenses.

That was clear long before L’Jarius Sneed blew coverage on a 35-yard touchdown pass to Emmanuel Sanders that gave the Bills a 14-10 lead. Or Daniel Sorensen blew coverage on a 61-yard pass to Stefon Diggs that led to a field goal, or when the safety blew coverage on tight end Dawson Knox that resulted in a 53-yard touchdown reception.

Allen only completed seven passes in the first half. They went for 219 yards and two scores.

“They’re embarrassed by it,” Kansas City coach Andy Reid said of the defensive performance. “We have to do better.”

Brady’s 5 TD passes pace Bucs

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Antonio Brown is 33 years old and no longer the top playmaker on his team. With Tom Brady’s help on and off the field, though, the oft-troubled receiver is making the most of an opportunity to revive his career with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Brady threw for 411 yards and five touchdowns, while Brown showed no signs of slowing down as a playmaker, becoming the fastest NFL player to 900 receptions as the defending Super Bowl champions rolled to a 45-17 rout of the Miami Dolphins on Sunday.

“I take so much inspiration from Tom. As a professional, as a leader, making sure that I’m doing my job, making sure that all the other 10 guys are doing their job,” said Brown, who had seven catches for 124 yards and two TDs. “He just continues to up the standard and raise the bar.”

Brady threw for more 400 yards with five TDs in the same game for the first time in his 22-year career.

Brown, who joined the Bucs at midseason

a year ago after serving an eight-game suspension for violating the NFL personal conduct policy, scored on receptions of 62 and 4 yards in the first half.

Brown, who has stayed out of trouble since signing with Tampa Bay and helping them win the Super Bowl, joined Julio Jones, Jerry Rice, Torry Holt and Andre Johnson as the only players in league history with 12,000 career receiving yards in fewer than 150 games.

The 11th-year pro was Ben Roethlisberger’s No. 1 option for much of his career. After a brief stay in training camp with the Raiders, Brown played one game with Brady in New England before being released by the Patriots two years ago.

“I’ve played with some great quarterbacks. Roethlisberger. Tom Brady. It’s a blessing,” said Brown, one of a slew of dynamic targets on a Bucs roster also featuring Mike Evans, Chris Godwin, Rob Gronkowski and Leonard Fournette.

“When you got Chris and Mike, and AB’s the third guy, it’s ain’t a fair fight,” Tampa Bay coach Bruce Arians said.

Cards’ Hopkins, defense lead in win over 49ers

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Zach Allen surely enjoyed his postgame trip to Shake Shack after an exhausting, physical win over the San Francisco 49ers. He and the rest of the Arizona Cardinals’ defense certainly deserved a burger or two.

The Cardinals improved to 5-0 for the first time since 1974, riding a stellar defensive performance to a 17-10 victory over the Niners on Sunday.

Arizona came in averaging 35 points per game, which led the NFL. This time, it was the defense that delivered, stopping San Francisco and rookie quarterback Trey Lance four times on fourth down.

Allen said Arizona’s defense was ready to stop the 49ers as many times as needed, though he conceded it was nice to watch quarterback Kyler Murray and the offense close it out with a couple first downs.

García, Grandal star as White Sox rout Astros

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Two big swings by pint-sized Leury García. A rule-testing run by Yasmani Grandal. Solid relief work from Liam Hendriks and company.

Right when the Chicago White Sox got in big trouble, they found a way.

García and Grandal homered, and Grandal's borderline baserunning helped the White Sox top the Houston Astros 12-6 on Sunday night to stay alive in their AL Division Series.

Backed by a boisterous crowd of 40,288, the AL Central champions erased a 5-1 deficit in the franchise's first home playoff game in 13 years, trimming Houston's series edge to 2-1. Tim Anderson collected three more hits, and Ryan Tepera started a stellar finish for Chicago's bullpen after Dylan Cease and Michael Kopech (1-0) struggled.

"It's a real tough-minded bunch," White Sox manager Tony La Russa said, "and sometimes you get rewarded with a comeback like that."

The Astros were hoping to sweep their way into their fifth consecutive appearance in the AL Championship Series. The AL West champions got off to a fast start behind Kyle Tucker, but they went down in order in the last five innings.

The game was tied at 6 when the White Sox went ahead to stay with three runs in the fourth — highlighted by a memorable run by Grandal that rankled Astros manager Dusty Baker and his team.

After José Abreu's tiebreaking RBI single put runners on the corners with no outs, Grandal hit a bouncer to Yuli Gurriel at first. Gurriel tried to come home, but his throw went off Grandal as the catcher sprinted up the line in the infield grass.

"I wish I could tell you it was a heads-up play," Grandal said. "I was just trying to get to first."

Luis Robert scored, taking out umpire Tom Hallion in the process, and Gurriel was charged with an error. The Astros lobbied for an interference call on Grandal, but the umpires huddled and left the play in place.

White Sox's Tepera implies Astros may be stealing signs

Associated Press

CHICAGO — White Sox reliever Ryan Tepera implied that Houston may have been stealing signs in Games 1 and 2 of their AL Division Series after Chicago won the third game Sunday night.

Houston was going for a sweep after it rolled to a pair of impressive victories at home. But it struck out 16 times in a 12-6 loss at Chicago after it struck out a total of 16 times in the first two games. The AL West champions went down in order in each of the last five innings.

Tepera, who worked two perfect innings, noted the difference between the As-

trots at home and on the road.

"Yeah. It is what it is. They've obviously had a reputation of doing some sketchy stuff over there," he said. "It's just, we can say that it's a little bit of a difference. I think you saw the swings and misses tonight compared to, you know, the first two games at Minute Maid. But that's not really the story, you know? We come here to play. We're going to compete. We're not going to worry about what they're going to do."

"All we have to do is execute pitches and they can't hit them anyways."

Game 4 of the best-of-five

series was scheduled for Monday afternoon in Chicago, but there was rain in the forecast.

The Astros were disciplined by Major League Baseball after it found the team used electronics to steal signs during their run to the 2017 World Series title and again in the 2018 season.

MLB's investigation found Houston used a video feed from a center-field camera to see and decode the opposing catcher's signs during home games. Players banged on a trash can to signal to batters what was coming, believing it would improve the batter's odds of getting a hit.

Red Sox defeat Rays in 13 with help from call

Associated Press

BOSTON — Kevin Kiermaier's line drive sailed over right fielder Hunter Renfroe's head and bounced off the short wall in front of the Boston bullpen and back onto the warning track. It ricocheted off Renfroe and into the air.

The Red Sox right fielder waved at it desperately — and unsuccessfully — to keep it from going out of play.

It's a good thing he couldn't.

Saved by an obscure rule and a bounce that was weird even for quirky Fenway Park, the Red Sox staggered Tampa Bay 6-4 Sunday night on Christian Vázquez's 13th-inning walk-off homer to move one victory from eliminating the 100-win Rays from the AL Division Series.

"I was speechless," said center fielder Kiké Hernández, who had come over to back up Renfroe. "I don't know if you guys have seen that before. I've never seen that before in my life."

"I wasn't sure what was going to get called. I wasn't sure if the runners had to return. ... Like, I had no idea," he said. "Luckily, it went our way. And you call it home-field advantage if you want — call it whatever you want — but we won."

The wild-card Red Sox took a 2-1 edge in the best-of-five matchup. Game 4 is Monday at Fenway — Marathon Day in Boston — with Game 5 in St. Petersburg, Fla., on Wednesday, if necessary.

Tampa Bay rallied from a 4-2 deficit to tie it in the eighth inning and it was still 4-all when Yandy Diaz singled with one out in the 13th.

Then came the play that had the umpires scurrying for the rulebook and the Rays scratching their heads.

Diaz was halfway from second to third when Kiermaier's ball bounced over the 5-foot-high wall, and he easily would have scored had it remained in play. But the umpires conferred and went to the headsets before awarding Kiermaier a double and sending Diaz back to third.

Baseball Rule 5.05(a)(8) states: "Any bounding fair ball is deflected by the fielder into the stands, or over or under a fence on fair or foul territory, in which case the batter and all runners shall be entitled to advance two bases."

"If I stayed at second, that's fine," Kiermaier said. "But I was hoping to see that Yandy scored, because he would have scored obviously. ... It's incredible that it worked out to their advantage just like that."