

DOD: Strike hit al-Qaida leader in Syria

The Washington Post

The U.S. military carried out an airstrike on a senior al-Qaida leader in Syria along the Turkish border in an operation that will disrupt the terrorist organization's ability to plot attacks against American interests, defense officials said.

The Pentagon disclosed the strike in a statement on Friday evening, saying it hit a leader named Abdul Hamid al-Matar. The strike was carried with an MQ-9

Reaper drone in the town of Suluk, north of Raqqa, Syria, said Army Maj. John Rigsbee, a U.S. military spokesman.

"Al-Qaida continues to present a threat to America and our allies," Rigsbee said. "Al-Qaida uses Syria as a safe haven to rebuild, coordinate with external affiliates, and plan external operations."

Suluk was among the towns that Turkish forces advanced into in 2019, as Ankara attempted to push out Kurdish forces. U.S. troops had been in the region but

withdrew at the order of President Donald Trump.

Rigsbee said that there was no initial indication that the strike caused any civilian casualties. In a phone interview, he said the strike had been planned for days and had nothing to do with an attack on U.S. troops on Wednesday in Tanf, where the U.S. has maintained a garrison with about 200 troops. That attack was carried out with both indirect fire and unmanned aircraft, U.S. military officials said.

FDA: Pfizer vaccine seems effective for children

Associated Press

Federal health regulators said late Friday that kid-size doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine appear highly effective at preventing symptomatic infections in elementary school children and caused no unexpected safety issues, as the U.S. weighs beginning vaccinations in youngsters.

The Food and Drug Administration posted its analysis of Pfizer's data ahead of a public meeting this week to debate whether the shots are ready for the nation's roughly 28 million children ages 5 to 11. The agency will ask a panel of outside vaccine experts to vote on that question.

In their analysis, FDA scientists concluded that in almost every scenario the vaccine's benefit for preventing hospitalizations and death from COVID-19 would outweigh any serious potential side effects in children. But agency reviewers stopped short of calling for Pfizer's shot to be authorized.

The agency will put that question to its panel of independent advisers Tuesday and weigh their advice be-

fore making its own decision.

If the FDA authorizes the shots, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will make additional recommendations on who should receive them the first week of November. Children could begin vaccinations early next month — with the first youngsters in line fully protected by Christmas.

Full-strength Pfizer shots already are recommended for anyone 12 or older, but pediatricians and many parents are anxiously awaiting protection for younger children to stem infections from the extra-contagious delta variant and help keep kids in school.

The FDA review affirmed results from Pfizer posted earlier in the day showing the two-dose shot was nearly 91% effective at preventing symptomatic infection in young children. Researchers calculated the figure based on 16 COVID-19 cases in youngsters given dummy shots versus three cases among vaccinated children. There were no severe illnesses reported among any of the youngsters,

but the vaccinated ones had much milder symptoms than their unvaccinated counterparts.

Most of the study data was collected in the U.S. during August and September, when the delta variant had become the dominant COVID-19 strain.

The FDA review found no new or unexpected side effects. Those that did occur mostly consisted of sore arms, fever or achiness.

However, FDA scientists noted that the study wasn't large enough to detect extremely rare side effects, including myocarditis, a type of heart inflammation that occasionally occurs after the second dose.

The agency used statistical modeling to try to predict how many hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 the vaccine would prevent versus the number of potential heart side effects it might cause. In four scenarios of the pandemic, the vaccine clearly prevented more hospitalizations than would be expected from the heart side effect. Only when virus cases

were extremely low could the vaccine cause more hospitalizations than it would prevent. But overall, regulators concluded that the vaccine's protective benefits "would clearly outweigh" its risks.

While children run a lower risk of severe illness or death than older people, COVID-19 has killed more than 630 Americans 18 and under, according to the CDC. Nearly 6.2 million children have been infected with the coronavirus, more than 1.1 million in the last six weeks as the delta variant surged, the American Academy of Pediatrics says.

The Biden administration has purchased enough kid-size doses — in special orange-capped vials to distinguish them from adult vaccine — for the nation's 5- to 11-year-olds. If the vaccine is cleared, millions of doses will be promptly shipped around the country, along with kid-size needles.

More than 25,000 pediatricians and primary care providers already have signed up to get the shots into little arms.

Baldwin was told gun was 'cold' prior to shooting

Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. — As a film crew and actors in Western garb prepared to rehearse a scene inside a wooden, chapel-like building on a desert movie ranch outside Santa Fe, assistant director Dave Halls stepped outside and grabbed a prop gun off a cart.

He walked back in and handed it to the film's star, Alec Baldwin, assuring him it was safe to use because it didn't have live ammo.

"Cold gun," Halls yelled.

It wasn't, according to court records made public Friday. Instead, when Baldwin pulled the trigger Thursday, he killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounded director Joel Souza, who was standing behind her.

The tragedy came nearly three decades after Brandon Lee, the son of martial arts legend Bruce Lee, died in a similar case, and it prompted horrified questions about how it could have happened again. The executive producer of ABC's police drama "The Rookie" announced Friday the

show would no longer use "live" weapons because the "safety of our cast and crew is too important."

Details of the shooting at the ranch on Bonanza Creek Road were included in a search warrant application filed by the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office. Investigators were seeking to examine Baldwin's blood-stained costume for the film "Rust," as well as the weapon that was fired, other prop guns and ammunition, and any footage that might exist.

The gun was one of three that the film's armorer, Hannah Gutierrez, had set on a cart outside the building where a scene was being acted, according to the records. Halls grabbed the gun from the cart and brought it inside to Baldwin, unaware that it was loaded with live rounds, a detective wrote in the search warrant application.

It was unclear how many rounds were fired. Gutierrez removed a shell casing from the gun after the shooting, and she turned the weapon over to police when they arrived, the court records say.

Deal on Biden's \$2T plan edges closer to finish

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A deal within reach, President Joe Biden and Congress' top Democrats edged close to sealing their giant domestic legislation, though the informal deadline appeared to slip as they worked to scale back the measure and determine how to pay for it.

Negotiations were expected to continue into the weekend, all sides indicating just a few issues remained unsettled in the sweeping package of social services and climate change strategies.

Biden met at the White House on Friday with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer joined by video call from New York, trying to shore up details. The leaders have been working with party moderates and progressives to shrink the once-\$3.5 trillion, 10-year package to around \$2 trillion in child care, health care and clean energy programs.

Pelosi said a deal was "very possible."

She told reporters back at the Capitol that more than 90% of the package was agreed to: The climate change components of the bill "are resolved," but outstanding questions remained on health care provisions.

Vice President Kamala Harris sounded even more certain. On a visit to New York City, she said tensions often rise over final details but "I am confident, frankly — not only optimistic, but I am confident that we will reach a deal."

No agreement was announced by Friday's self-imposed deadline to at least agree on a basic outline. Biden wants a deal before he leaves next week for global summits in Europe.

Pelosi hoped the House could start voting as soon as next week, but no schedule was set.

Sticking points appear to include proposed corporate tax hikes to help finance the plan and an effort to lower prescription drug costs that has raised concerns from the pharmaceutical industry. Democrats are in search of a broad compromise between the party's progressives and moderates on the measure's price tag, revenue sources and basic components.

US budget deficit hits \$2.77T in 2021

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. budget deficit totaled \$2.77 trillion for 2021, the second highest on record but an improvement from the all-time high of \$3.13 trillion reached in 2020. The deficits in both years reflect trillions of dollars in government spending to counteract the devastating effects of a global pandemic.

The Biden administration said Friday that deficit for the budget year that ended Sept. 30 was \$360 billion lower than 2020, as a recovering economy boosted revenues, helping to offset government spending from pandemic relief efforts.

Before the deficit ballooned during two years of a global pandemic, the biggest deficit had been a shortfall of \$1.4 trillion in 2009. At that time, the U.S. was spending heavily to lift the country out of a severe recession following the 2008 financial crisis.

As a percentage of the overall economy, as measured by the gross domestic product, the 2021 deficit represents 12.4% of GDP, down from the 2020 deficit, which was 15% of GDP.

For 2021, the joint report from Treasury and the Office of Management and Budget said government spending increased 4.1% to \$6.82 trillion. This was offset by an increase of 18.3% in government revenues to \$4 trillion. The revenue gain reflected an improving economy as millions of people who had lost jobs at the start of the pandemic went back to work and corporate profits rebounded after a horrendous 2020.

The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office expects the deficit will fall to \$1.15 trillion in the current budget year, which began Oct. 1, and will dip below \$1 trillion for three years from 2023 through 2025 before rising again above \$1 trillion for each year through 2031.

Facebook faced own revolt amid riot

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As supporters of Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6th, battling police and forcing lawmakers into hiding, an insurrection of a different kind was taking place inside the world's largest social media company.

Thousands of miles away, in California, Facebook engineers were racing to tweak internal controls to slow the spread of misinformation and inciteful content. Emergency actions — some of which were rolled back after the 2020 election — included banning Trump, freezing comments in groups with a record for hate speech, filtering out the “Stop the Steal” rallying cry and empowering content moderators to act more assertively by labeling the U.S. a “Temporary High Risk Location” for political violence.

At the same time, frustration inside Facebook erupted over what some saw as the company's halting and inconsistent response to rising extremism in the U.S.

“Haven't we had enough time to figure out how to manage discourse without enabling violence?” one employee wrote on an internal message board at the height of the Jan. 6 turmoil. “We've been fueling this fire for a long time and we shouldn't be surprised it's now out of control.”

It's a question that still hangs over the company today, as Congress and regulators investigate Facebook's part in the Jan. 6 riots.

New internal documents provided by former Facebook employee-turned-whistleblower Frances Haugen provide a rare

glimpse into how the company appears to have simply stumbled into the Jan. 6 riot. It quickly became clear that even after years under the microscope for insufficiently policing its platform, the social network had missed how riot participants spent weeks vowing — on Facebook itself — to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's election victory.

The documents also appear to bolster Haugen's claim that Facebook put its growth and profits ahead of public safety, opening the clearest window yet into how Facebook's conflicting impulses — to safeguard its business and protect democracy — clashed in the days and weeks leading up to the attempted Jan. 6 coup.

This story is based in part on disclosures Haugen made to the Securities and Exchange Commission and provided to Congress in redacted form by Haugen's legal counsel. The redacted versions received by Congress were obtained by a consortium of news organizations, including The Associated Press.

What Facebook called “Break the Glass” emergency measures put in place on Jan. 6 were essentially a toolkit of options designed to stem the spread of dangerous or violent content that the social network had first used in the run-up to the bitter 2020 election. As many as 22 of those measures were rolled back at some point after the election, according to an internal spreadsheet analyzing the company's response.

“As soon as the election was over, they

turned them back off or they changed the settings back to what they were before, to prioritize growth over safety,” Haugen said in an interview with “60 Minutes.”

An internal Facebook report following Jan. 6, previously reported by BuzzFeed, faulted the company for having a “piece-meal” approach to the rapid growth of “Stop the Steal” pages, related misinformation sources and violent and inciteful comments.

Facebook says the situation is more nuanced and that it carefully calibrates its controls to react quickly to spikes in hateful and violent content, as it did on Jan 6. The company said it's not responsible for the actions of the rioters and that having stricter controls in place prior to that day wouldn't have helped.

Facebook's decisions to phase certain safety measures in or out took into account signals from the Facebook platform as well as information from law enforcement, said spokeswoman Dani Lever. “When those signals changed, so did the measures.”

Lever said some of the measures stayed in place well into February and others remain active today.

Some employees were unhappy with Facebook's managing of problematic content even before the Jan. 6 riots. One employee who departed the company in 2020 left a long note charging that promising new tools, backed by strong research, were being constrained by Facebook for “fears of public and policy stakeholder responses” (translation: concerns about negative reactions from Trump allies and investors).

Report: Sexual assaults on Lyft rides up from '17 to '19

New York Daily News

Sexual assault became an even more prominent issue at Lyft in recent years, according to the company's community safety report released Thursday.

Although reported sexual assaults made up less than 1% of the ride-share giant's completed U.S. trips in 2019, the latest year for which the report accounts, there was a significant uptick between 2017 and 2019.

“Most serious safety incidents ... are statistically very rare,” the report noted, adding, “Behind every number, there is a person who experienced that incident. Put simply, even one of these incidents is too many. That is what drives our relentless work to continuously improve safety for riders and drivers.”

“From 2017 to 2019, over 99% of trips occurred without any reported safety incident,” read the report. “The safety incidents referenced in this report account for 0.00002% of all trips.”

In 2019, the company received 1,807 reports of sexual assaults during Lyft trips, compared to 1,255 in 2018 and 1,096 in 2017.

All numbers recorded came from reports made directly to the company, brought to its attention via law enforcement, or found through “proactive investigation,” like monitoring social media.

The company also broke down types of sexual assault reports, such as nonconsensual kissing of a nonsexual body part, nonconsensual touching of a sexual body part, nonconsensual kissing of a sexual body

part, attempted nonconsensual sexual penetration and nonconsensual sexual penetration.

Most of the reported assaults fell under the category of nonconsensual touching of a sexual body part. Lyft received 1,041 such reports in 2019 — making up 0.00014% of all completed U.S. trips, up from 661 in 2018 and 598 in 2017.

The company's report also detailed statistics for motor vehicle fatalities, per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, and fatal physical assaults — which stood at 4 in 2019, up from 3 in 2017 and 2018.

The company in early 2020 formed the Safety Advisory Council, which it says it consults about background check processes, ride verification technology and more.

Russian, Tajik troops hold joint exercises near Afghan border

Associated Press

MOMIRAK FIRING RANGE, Tajikistan — Russian and Tajik troops conducted joint drills Friday near Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, as part of efforts to prepare for possible security threats issuing from Afghanistan.

The exercises at the Momirak firing range about 12 miles north of the Afghan border involved armored vehicles and helicopter gunships. It was part of weeklong war games that brought together about 5,000 troops and over 700 armored vehicles from Russia, Tajikistan and several other ex-Soviet nations, which are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-dominated security pact.

Tajik Defense Minister Sherali Mirzo said the drills were decided amid the "catastrophic changes after the withdrawal of the interna-

tional coalition" from Afghanistan.

"Terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan ... have obtained many modern weapons, significantly improved their positions and using the current situation create conditions for its transformation into a foothold for further destructive actions in the region," Mirzo added.

Russian officials said they trusted the Taliban's pledge that they wouldn't threaten neighboring countries, but noted that the Islamic State, al-Qaida and other militants in northern Afghanistan could try to destabilize the neighboring ex-Soviet Central Asian nations. They also said drug trafficking from Afghanistan will continue to present a challenge.

Moscow has vowed to provide military assistance to its ex-Soviet allies in Central Asia to help counter possible threats and held a series of joint drills in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which neighbor Afghanistan.

Russia has a military base in Tajikistan, its largest military outpost in the former Soviet Union. It also maintains an air base in Kyrgyzstan, and jets based there took part in this week's war games.

Lt. Gen. Yevgeniy Poplavsky, deputy commander of the Russian armed forces' Central Military District who oversaw the drills, described them as part of training to counter possible security challenges.

The fighting between the Taliban and ISIS in northern Afghanistan raised fears of ISIS fighters and other militants flowing into Central Asian nations.

"(The Taliban) will try to push all pro-ISIS military groups out its territory or to destroy them and to become the only one (in power)," Poplavsky said. "That's why we don't exclude the option that they will push them to Tajikistan's territory."

Police: Man who shot gunman likely saved lives

Associated Press

SUPERIOR, Neb. — An employee who returned fire after a gunman killed two people at a Nebraska grain elevator likely prevented more deaths, a Nebraska State Patrol official said Friday.

The employee, who was not named, retrieved a weapon and shot Max Hoskinson, 61, after Hoskinson began shooting at the Agrex Elevator in Superior, Neb., on Thursday. Hoskinson, of Superior, was pro-

nounced dead at a hospital.

Authorities said Hoskinson had been fired earlier Thursday and returned that afternoon with a gun and began shooting in an office area.

The victims were identified as Sandra Nelson, 60, of Formoso, Kan., and 53-year-old Darin Koepke, of Hadar, Neb. The third person shot by Hoskinson was treated at a hospital and released.

Patrol Sgt. Jeff Roby said during the news

conference that authorities do not anticipate filing any charges against the employee who shot Hoskinson.

"In fact, it's likely that the employee's actions may have prevented much further loss of life in this tragedy," Roby said.

Roby said he could not comment on whether Hoskinson targeted the victims, who were all Agrex employees. He said several other Agrex employees were on site when the shooting occurred.

Aromatherapy spray associated with deaths recalled

Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. health officials may have solved the mystery of how four people in different states came down with a serious tropical disease even though none had traveled internationally: an aromatherapy spray imported from India.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday that investigators found

the same type of bacteria that causes the disease, melioidosis, in a spray bottle found in one of the patients' homes.

The four people were from Georgia, Kansas, Minnesota and Texas. Two of them, one a child in Georgia, died.

The agency said it was testing to confirm the bacteria in the bottle is the same strain as that seen in the four patients. It previously said lab analyses

showed all four infections were closely related.

The spray found in the Georgia patient's home was made in India. The genetic profile of the bacteria in the bottle is similar to that of strains usually found in South Asia, the agency said.

The contaminated product is labeled "Better Homes & Gardens Lavender & Chamomile Essential Oil Infused Aromath-

erapy Room Spray with Gemstones," the CDC said. It was sold for \$4 in 55 Walmart stores and on Walmart's website starting in February and until Thursday.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission and Walmart issued a recall Friday for 3,900 bottles of the spray in six scents. Officials are investigating whether other scents and brands may pose a risk.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

College president to be disciplined for speeches

WV WEST LIBERTY — The board of a small college in West Virginia decided to take unspecified discipline against its president on allegations that he plagiarized some speeches.

West Liberty University's Board of Governors unanimously approved the disciplinary approach after a vote to fire President W. Franklin Evans narrowly failed.

The university said in a statement that the board will meet and decide all disciplinary actions.

Evans was accused of using quotes from sources without attributing them during several speeches.

Evans apologized in a letter to the university.

Professors asked to help in dining halls

MI EAST LANSING — Hey, professor, hold the mayo! Short of help, Michigan State University is making an urgent plea to staff to volunteer in campus dining halls.

MSU's residential services department has already asked 132 full-time employees to work eight hours a week, the Lansing State Journal reported, but it's apparently not enough.

About 4,000 students typically work in the dining halls, but only 1,200 were employed at the end of September, the State Journal reported.

Starting pay was recently raised from \$12 to \$15 an hour. Gore said MSU is competing with local businesses for workers.

Popular snapping turtle dies at botanical garden

FL ST. PETERSBURG — Mac, an alligator snapping turtle that lived at a botanical garden in Florida for more than 50 years, has died.

The turtle died unexpectedly, according to Dave Biggs, supervisor of Sunken Gardens in St. Petersburg.

A necropsy will determine the cause of Mac's death, Biggs said. It is being conducted by a team of veterinarians at Sunken Gardens.

No one knows Mac's exact age, but Biggs said the turtle arrived in St. Petersburg sometime in the 1960s. Mac was popular with guests who often referred to him as the giant turtle, Biggs said.

Lawyers admit torching of police vehicle

NY NEW YORK — A pair of activist lawyers pleaded guilty to charges they torched an empty New York City police vehicle last year amid the unrest over the police killing of George Floyd.

Urooj Rahman, 32, and Colinford Mattis, 34, could get up to 10 years in prison at sentencing next year on a charge of possessing or making a destructive device. They had faced a mandatory-minimum sentence of 45 years in prison if convicted at trial on seven counts, including six that will be dropped as a result of the plea. Along with a prison term, both could be disbarred.

Federal prosecutors in Brooklyn had accused Rahman of throwing a bottle containing

gasoline into an empty police vehicle, trying to distribute Molotov cocktails to other people and then fleeing in a minivan driven by Mattis.

Man pleads guilty in series of church fires

TN NASHVILLE — A Tennessee man pleaded guilty to civil rights violations for setting fires at four churches, prosecutors said.

Alan Douglas Fox, 28, of Nashville, admitted during the plea hearing that he intentionally set the fires because of the churches' religious character, the U.S. attorney's office said in a news release.

The fires were set at the Crieve-wood United Methodist Church on June 17, 2019; the Crieve-wood Baptist Church on June 25, 2019; the Saint Ignatius of Antioch Catholic Church on June 25, 2019; and the Priest Lake Community Baptist Church on June 26, 2019. He also pleaded guilty to carrying and using a firearm during the fire at the Crieve-wood Baptist Church.

Fox will be sentenced t on Feb. 11. He faces up to 20 years in prison for each fire and a consecutive five-year sentence for the firearms violation.

Colleges investigate alleged sex competition

MN COLLEGEVILLE, Minn. — The College of St. Benedict and St. John's University are investigating allegations that some male students started a competition this fall to see who could have more sexual encounters with female students.

The allegations were first reported by The Record, the student newspaper for both colleges, which are Roman Catholic schools.

Katie Alvino, a spokeswoman for the partner schools, said the administration has been investigating since they learned about the allegations in late September.

It was not immediately clear whether any of the allegations involved criminal acts, such as sexual assault.

The College of St. Benedict and St. John's University are in the central Minnesota city of Collegeville. Men attend St. John's and women attend St. Benedict's.

Store worker started fire that killed him

IN LEBANON — A fire at a central Indiana convenience store that fatally injured a store employee was intentionally set by that worker, authorities said.

Fire and police investigators in Lebanon said they determined that Karmbir Singh started the Oct. 13 fire at a BP Fuel station in the city about 25 miles northwest of Indianapolis.

Singh suffered severe burns in the fire and he died from his injuries at a hospital before police could interview him, the Lebanon Police Department said in a news release.

Investigators were "clearly able to observe" Singh soaking several items in gasoline on surveillance video footage. Those items were then used to light the fire and Singh was alone at the store when the fire started, officials said.

— From Associated Press



STARS AND STRIPES

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

**Reporting
World, National
and Military News**

Astros top Red Sox in Game 6, advance

Associated Press

Two of the youngest Houston Astros stars helped one of baseball's oldest managers get another shot at a most elusive title.

Rookie Luis García showed the poise of an October ace, MVP Yordan Alvarez did more damage at the plate and the Astros earned yet another trip to the World Series, beating the Boston Red Sox 5-0 Friday night in Game 6 of the AL Championship Series.

García and Alvarez, both 24 and ascending, and 72-year-old manager Dusty Baker will open the World Series on Tuesday night, either at Dodger Stadium or home against Atlanta. The Braves lead Los Angeles 3-2 in the NL Championship Series going into Game 6 Saturday night.

"There's four more wins on the board out there," Baker said. "There's four more wins you've got to get."

The Astros advanced to the World Series for the third time in five seasons. They won the championship in 2017, a crown tainted by the team's sign-stealing scandal, before losing to the Washington Nationals in seven games in 2019.

García pitched no-hit ball into the sixth inning, leaving to a huge ovation with two outs after a triple by Kiké Hernández. It was an impressive bounce-back performance for García, who started Game 2 and gave up a grand slam in the first inning before leaving with no outs in the second because of discomfort in his right knee.

"I know I'm a rookie but I know what I can do and that's what I did tonight," García said.

Alvarez continued his scorching streak, a year after watching at home after surgery to both knees as the Astros came one game shy

of reaching the World Series. The slugging designated hitter went 4-for-4, including a triple and two doubles. He led a Game 5 win with three hits and three RBIs.

Álvarez hit an ALCS-record .522 (12-for-23) with one homer, three doubles, the triple and six RBIs in Houston's six-game victory. He got nine hits in his last 13 at-bats.

Catcher Martín Maldonado made the defensive play of the game on a strikeout-thrown double play to end the seventh with Houston ahead 2-0.

It will be Baker's second trip to the Fall Classic as a manager and first since leading the San Francisco Giants to the NL pennant in 2002. As a player, he went three times with the Dodgers, winning it all in 1981.

"Hey, I'm going back to the World Series!" Baker told a cheering crowd at Minute Maid Park.

For Houston, it was a team victory featuring all facets of the game it used in taking the AL West title and beating the Chicago White Sox in the AL Division Series. The Astros won the clincher, too, without a hit from stars Jose Altuve and Carlos Correa — Alex Bregman got two hits and scored a run.

"We have a little bit of everything," Altuve said.

Boston's best shot to score came in the seventh. The wild-card Red Sox had runners at first and third with one out in after a single by Alex Verdugo. But Kendall Graveman struck out pinch-hitter Travis Shaw and Maldonado made a perfect throw to Correa, who was covering second, to beat Verdugo there and end the inning.

Maldonado beat his chest with glee as Graveman and Correa both pumped their

fists in celebration to roars from the crowd of 42,718.

Kyle Tucker broke it open with a three-run homer with two outs in the eighth. Television cameras flashed to Houston's Hall of Fame duo of Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell, who stood together and cheered as Tucker rounded the bases.

Asked to describe these Astros, Biggio, who led the team to its first World Series said simply: "They're just good."

Ryan Pressly closed it out in the ninth. The Red Sox, who looked so formidable at the plate at the start of the season, were held to two hits in their final game.

"I think we're definitely disappointed right now," Red Sox starter Nathan Eovaldi said. "We obviously wanted to win this game and win the series and go on to the World Series. No one expected us to be here. We proved a lot of people wrong."

Bregman singled with two outs in the first before the double by Alvarez put the Astros up 1-0. Hernández was in position to make the catch, but it hit off his arm below his glove and dropped in for the hit.

Consecutive romps by Boston and its bashers made it appear that the Red Sox were in complete control of the series after Game 3, but as the long fly by Alvarez proved, they didn't have a firm grip on things.

The Astros, buoyed by their young pitchers and rediscovered offense, won the next two games by a combined 18-3 to return home a win away from a World Series.

"It's a relentless team," Correa said. "We stick together. We're a family. We fight back and we never give up."

Alvarez returns from surgery to win ALCS MVP

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Two years after winning an AL Rookie of the Year Award, Yordan Alvarez has an AL Championship Series MVP to add to his trophy case.

The 24-year-old Cuban was 4-for-4 with two doubles and a triple for the Houston Astros in Friday night's pennant-winning 5-0 victory over the Boston Red Sox. He drove in the go-ahead run and scored the second.

"It means everything," Alvarez said through a translator. "I think there's a lot of things that I could say that's behind that tro-

phy, but all I can say is it just means everything."

Alvarez reached the major leagues in 2019, two years after the Astros won a title later tainted by the team's sign stealing,

"Ever since the news came out, the bad news that we've had to deal with about what happened in 2017, I think we've all wanted to prove what kind of class of players that we are and team that we are," Alvarez said. "I wasn't here with the team in 2017, but I've gotten booed just as equal as anybody else. So I think we all have the same men-

tality that we really want to win a World Series to demonstrate that we are just a great team."

After missing last year's postseason while recovering from double knee surgery, Alvarez hit an ALCS-record .522 (12-for-23) with one homer, three doubles, the triple and six RBIs in Houston's six-game victory. He scored seven runs against the Red Sox and got nine hits in his last 13 at-bats, raising his postseason average to .441 with two homers and nine RBIs.

"I didn't really imagine myself being able to come out of

that surgery on both knees and be able to do this as quickly as I did," Alvarez said. "So it was really unbelievable for me to be able to come back and do what I did."

Alvarez had a hit every game. "I was just focused on doing the job," he said.

Alvarez batted .277 during the season and set career bests with 33 homers and 104 RBIs, both team highs. He became the second-youngest Astros player to reach 100 RBIs behind César Cedeño in 1974 and the youngest to hit 30 home runs.

Cup contenders want traffic to pull aside

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kansas — Daniel Suarez refused to get out of Martin Truex Jr.'s way and it ultimately ruined Truex's race. Tyler Reddick did the same to William Byron, and Chase Briscoe held firm to his right to race hard when battling with Denny Hamlin.

A conversation on driver code and on-track etiquette is raging right now in NASCAR, and with it comes a heated debate on the expectations of non-playoff drivers. If a title contender is trying to gain track position, should another driver clear the lane for an easy pass?

It's been a touchy topic since the playoff format was introduced in 2004. NASCAR, unlike any stick-and-ball sports, permits everyone to race in the postseason even if they aren't in title contention. It puts a mix of

slow cars and mediocre drivers on the same track as the superstars racing for the final trophy.

With two races remaining to lock in the championship field, conversation has turned to how non-playoff drivers should be expected to race Sunday at Kansas Speedway. It's the middle race of the third round of the playoffs and only Kyle Larson has earned a slot in the Nov. 7 winner-take-all finale at Phoenix.

Seven others are vying for the remaining three berths in the championship round — at minimum Truex and Joey Logano are in must-win situations — and there's a high probability of desperate racing come Sunday.

Especially when they encounter stubborn drivers who won't heed way on the race-track.

When Briscoe raced Hamlin

hard for position late in last week's race at Texas, Hamlin fumed about a lack of situational awareness.

"There's cars racing for a championship," Hamlin wrote to Briscoe on Instagram. "Perhaps when you learn give and take you will start to finish better."

But Briscoe, a rookie driving for Stewart-Haas Racing, held his ground.

"I get paid to race, just because you guys are racing in the playoffs doesn't mean I'm just gonna wave you by," Briscoe wrote back to Hamlin. "One of the best cars we've had all year and I was trying to take advantage of it. I understand you guys are racing for a championship which is awesome for you guys but I'm racing for a job and results let me keep that job."

Suarez had a similar attitude

after his contact with Truex knocked Truex out of the race.

"I have a lot of respect for the guys in the playoffs, but one thing is respect and (another) is taking advantage of the situation," Suarez said.

The schism is widening between today's veterans — many of whom were browbeaten in their early years about driver etiquette by Hall of Famers Dale Jarrett, Rusty Wallace, Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart, to name a few — and a younger crop of drivers who don't really seem to care about tearing up race cars or playing by an unwritten set of rules.

"There's a complete lack of respect everywhere, all over the place, so it doesn't matter if it's a playoff driver or a non-playoff driver," Kyle Busch said.

Paul hits 20,000 points in Suns' win over Lakers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Chris Paul scored his 20,000th career point on the way to 23 points and 14 assists, and Devin Booker added 14 points in the Phoenix Suns' 115-105 victory over the winless Los Angeles Lakers on Friday night.

Paul became the first player in NBA history to pair 20,000 points with 10,000 assists while the defending Western Conference champions carved up the Lakers.

LeBron James scored 25 points and Russell Westbrook had 22 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists as Los Angeles dropped to 0-2, playing decently in the first and final quarters.

Nets 114, 76ers 109: Kevin Durant had 29 points, 15 rebounds and 12 assists, James Harden scored 20 points and visiting Brooklyn closed with a 16-1 run to beat Philadelphia as each team played without a much-discussed star guard.

The Nets were missing Kyrie Irving, who isn't with the team due to his refusal to get a COVID-19 vaccine. Ben Simmons sat out the home opener for personal reasons and the Sixers do not know when the three-time All-Star will return.

Philadelphia's Joel Embiid scored 19 points on a sore right knee suffered against

New Orleans in the opener.

Knicks 121, Magic 96: Julius Randle had 21 points and 10 rebounds and New York improved to 2-0 for the first time since the 2012-13 season, beating host Orlando.

Evan Fournier added 18 points for the Knicks. They opened with a double-overtime victory over Boston at home Wednesday night.

Raptors 115, Celtics 83: Scottie Barnes had 25 points and 13 rebounds, Gary Trent Jr. scored 12 of his 20 points in the third quarter and Toronto spoiled Boston's home opener.

In new Boston coach Ime Udoka's home debut, Jayson Tatum scored 18 points and Al Horford returned for a second stint with the Celtics to add 11 points and 11 rebounds.

Wizards 135, Pacers 134 (OT): Davis Bertans made a tiebreaking three-pointer with 34.4 seconds left in overtime, and host Washington overcame Bradley Beal's absence to beat Indiana.

With Beal out because of hip problems, Spencer Dinwiddie scored 34 points in his home debut for the Wizards, including a three-pointer to tie it with 33.6 seconds left in the fourth quarter. Kyle Kuzma had 26 points for Washington.

Nuggets 102, Spurs 96: Nikola Jokic had 28 points and 16 rebounds and overcame six turnovers to lead host Denver past San Antonio.

Jokic followed up his 27-point, 13-rebound effort in Phoenix on Wednesday with another strong game. He added seven assists and three steals for Denver.

Hornets 123, Cavaliers 112: Miles Bridges scored 30 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 25 and visiting Charlotte took advantage of Cleveland's sloppiness to open the fourth quarter.

Rockets 124, Thunder 91: Christian Wood had 31 points and 14 rebounds and Houston beat Oklahoma City in its home opener.

Jazz 110, Kings 101: Donovan Mitchell scored 27 points, Rudy Gobert had 17 points and 20 rebounds and visiting Utah beat Sacramento.

Bulls 128, Pelicans 112: Zach LaVine scored 32 points, DeMar DeRozan added 26 and host Chicago beat New Orleans in its home opener.

Chicago's Lonzo Ball added a triple-double against his former team with 17 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists.

Brandon Ingram scored 26 for New Orleans.

Sharks stay perfect with win over Leafs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Logan Couture had two goals and an assist and Adin Hill made 30 saves in San Jose's 5-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Friday night, keeping the Sharks perfect in the young season.

Timo Meier, Jonathan Dahlen and Erik Karlsson provided the rest of the offense for San Jose (4-0-0), which played for the third time in four nights, including a 2-1 victory Thursday over the Ottawa Senators.

"It was another team win," Meier said. "We're finding our identity."

Jason Spezza, Ondrej Kase and John Tavares scored for Toronto (2-2-1). Michael Hutchinson stopped 26 shots for the Leafs, who have scored just 11 times in the first five games.

The Leafs' Auston Matthews, who returned from offseason wrist surgery in Monday's 2-1 overtime loss to the New York Rangers, is without a point through two outings.

"I think we could be a really dominant line," he said. "We're still a work in progress chemistry-wise. It's not going to happen overnight."

After a sleepy opening period, the offensive floodgates opened in the second period. Couture scored his second goal of the season at 2:31 after winning an offensive zone draw when he sent home a Marc-Edouard Vlasic wraparound attempt.

Spezza, who lost the faceoff on Couture's icebreaker, replied with his second of the year 56 seconds later on a scramble in front of Hill.

But the Sharks responded in just 17 seconds, with Meier firing a shot that found its way through Hutchinson (who got the call with Jack Campbell scheduled to start Saturday and Petr Mrazek out with a groin in-

jury).

Stars 3, Kings 2 (OT): Denis Gurianov scored on a rushing backhand with 45 seconds left in overtime, leading Dallas to a win in its home opener over Los Angeles.

Braden Holtby kept Dallas in the game by stopping 43 shots. Of the Stars' three wins, two were in overtime and one in a shootout.

For the Kings, Anze Kopitar scored his sixth goal in the season's first four games and Gabriel Valardi scored on a five-minute major penalty.

Valardi's first goal of the season happened from the right circle with just under 3 minutes left in second period, and just after veteran Kings defenseman Drew Doughty was helped off the ice with a right-knee injury and didn't return. Stars rookie defenseman Jani Hakanpaa was given the major for kneeing and a game misconduct.

Jonathan Quick made 19 saves for the Kings.

Bruins 4, Sabres 1: Charlie Coyle had a goal and two assists and Linus Ullmark made 35 saves against his former team as host Boston beat Buffalo.

Taylor Hall added a goal and an assist and Brad Marchand tallied two assists to help the Bruins salvage a split on its first road trip of the season. David Pastrnak and Thomas Nosek also scored for Boston.

Oilers 5, Golden Knights 3: Zack Kassian scored a tiebreaking goal in the third period and visiting Edmonton beat Vegas to extend its season-opening win streak to five games.

Vegas (1-3-0) lost its third straight.

Zach Hyman scored twice and Leon Draisaitl added a goal for the Oilers. Mikko Koskinen made 36 saves.

Southern Miss accepts invite to join Sun Belt

Associated Press

Southern Mississippi accepted an invitation to join the Sun Belt Conference on Friday, dealing another blow to Conference USA, which already had six members announce their departures last week.

Two people familiar with the decision told The Associated Press that Southern Miss had agreed to leave a conference it helped found in 1995 and join the Sun Belt at a date to be determined.

The people spoke on the condition of anonymity because the Sun Belt was not yet prepared to make an announcement and was still working on more expansion moves that it did not want to address publicly.

Sun Belt Commissioner Keith Gill did not immediately return a message left by The AP.

Yahoo! Sports first reported Southern Miss had agreed to join the Sun Belt.

The Southern Miss news comes a day after the American Athletic Conference announced the additions of six C-USA schools — UAB, Charlotte, Rice, Florida Atlantic, North Texas and UTSA — also at a date to be determined.

Conference USA is down to seven schools committed to the league long-term — Western Kentucky, Middle Tennessee, Old Dominion, Florida International, Marshall, Louisiana Tech and UTEP — and that could be dwindling as the Sun Belt continues to grow.

Various media outlets have reported the Sun Belt has interest in adding Marshall and Old Dominion, and has also discussed inviting Football Championship Subdivision powerhouse James Madison.

The chairman of Marshall's board of governors said in a tweet the university's decision on conference affiliation will come after a new school president is in place this week.

In a statement released Fri-

day that did not mention Southern Miss' departure, C-USA Commissioner Judy MacLeod said the conference had a "strong core to build around."

"There are several institutions interested in joining Conference USA, both across FBS and FCS, some of whom we've already met with in person," MacLeod said. "Every step we take will be deliberate, strategically sound, and intentional. We will take the necessary time to add future members that will be the best fit from an athletic and academic standpoint and allow prospective institutions time to complete their process. We continue to believe in the regional concept and will look to incorporate that into our structure and scheduling. There are certainly many questions out there, but a great deal is happening behind the scenes. When appropriate, we will release more information, though out of respect for those involved, we will continue to operate outside of the public space."

Earlier this month, MacLeod sent a letter to AAC Commissioner Mike Aresco proposing a merger of sorts between the two far-flung conferences. The AAC had no interest and instead poached nearly half of C-USA.

Southern Miss, located in Hattiesburg, Miss., fits perfectly in the Sun Belt's smaller footprint, between Alabama-based schools Troy and South Alabama to the east and Louisiana-Monroe and Louisiana-Lafayette to the west.

USM's football has a history of success that dates back decades, including Brett Favre leading the Golden Eagles to upsets of Florida State, Alabama and Auburn during his career from 1987-90. Southern Miss won four C-USA titles early in the conference's existence.

The Sun Belt offers a chance for Southern Miss to decrease travel costs and build new regional rivalries.