

COVID death toll reaches 1,500 a day

The Washington Post

Brian Pierce, a coroner in Baldwin County, Ala., thought he had seen the last of the coronavirus months ago as the area's death count held steady at 318 for most of the spring and summer. But then in July and August, the fatalities began mounting and last week, things got so bad the state rolled a trailer into his parking lot as a temporary morgue.

"I think most people were thinking, 'We're good,'" he said. "Life was almost back to normal. Now I'm telling my kids again to please stay home."

Nationally, COVID-19 deaths have climbed steadily in recent weeks, hitting a seven-day average of about 1,500 a day Thursday, after falling to the low 200s in early July — the latest handiwork of a contagious variant that has exploited the return to everyday activities by tens of millions of Americans, many of them unvaccinated. The dead include two Texas teachers at a junior high, who died last week within days of each other; a 13-year-old middle school boy from Georgia; and a pregnant nurse, 37, in Southern California who left behind five children.

What is different about this fourth pandemic wave in the United States is that the

growing rates of vaccination and natural immunity have broken the relationship between infections and deaths in many areas.

The daily count of new infections is rising in almost every part of the country. But only some places — mostly southern states with lower vaccination rates — are seeing a parallel surge in deaths. The seven-day average of daily deaths is about a third of what it was in January, the pandemic's most deadly month, but is forecast to continue rising as high numbers of patients are hospitalized.

While most regions with increasing deaths have lower vaccination rates, that isn't the case for all of them.

Florida, for example, where more than 53% of the population is fully vaccinated, is the worst-hit state in terms of daily deaths which have averaged 325 over the past week, alongside almost 20,000 new daily infections on average. Despite resistance from local school boards, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has fought to enforce his ban on mask mandates and made good on a threat to withhold salaries from some of them this week even after a judge ruled the ban unconstitutional.

David Wesley Dowdy, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of

Public Health, said the situation underscores the unanswered questions about the virus 18 months out — and the limitations of mathematical forecasting to predict the daily choices of 330 million Americans.

"The driving factor in the current wave is human behavior — how people interact and how people respond to risk — and that is really very unpredictable," he said.

"We are in a perfect storm of viral changes and behavioral changes," agreed Lauren Ancel Meyers, director of the University of Texas Covid-19 Modeling Consortium.

Virtually every time that humans have underestimated the virus, and let down their guard, deaths surged.

Deborah Bix, coordinator of former president Donald Trump's coronavirus task force, suggested in March 2020, that mitigation measures might keep deaths at 100,000 to 240,000 under the most optimistic scenario. But by the end of 2020, when vaccines were first authorized for emergency use, the nation had long surpassed those numbers, and forecasters predicted U.S. COVID-19 deaths would top out at around 550,000.

As of Thursday, the country has logged more than 640,000 deaths — and many experts believe we are not yet at the peak.

Marine Corps halts waterborne operations for vehicle

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The Marine Corps on Friday halted waterborne operations for its new amphibious vehicle after identifying a problem with its towing mechanism.

Marine Corps spokesman Maj. Jim Stenger said the decision was made "out of an abundance of caution."

The Amphibious Combat Vehicle was obtained by the Marine Corps last year to replace the Vietnam-era Amphibious Assault Vehicle, or AAV, which suffered problems.

Last year, eight Marines and one sailor were killed off the coast of San Diego inside an AAV after becoming trapped inside the vehicle.

Marine Corps leaders after the July 2020

accident vowed to make safety a bigger priority.

The break in waterborne operations came a day after the families of the eight Marines and one sailor filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles against the manufacturer, BAE Systems.

"Realistic training is a vital component of readiness, and the Marine Corps is committed to ensuring Marines train under the safest conditions possible; this includes ensuring the functionality of vehicles and equipment," Stenger said in a statement Friday.

Lawyer Eric Dubin, who is representing the families, has said BAE Systems knew for a decade or more about a design defect that makes it nearly impossible for troops to

open the cargo hatches and escape the 26-ton amphibious vehicles when they sink.

The troops last summer were trapped inside for 45 minutes before the vehicle, known as an AAV, sank.

An investigation by the maritime branch found the accident off San Clemente Island was caused by inadequate training, shabby maintenance of the 35-year-old amphibious assault vehicles and poor judgment by commanders.

BAE Systems also was selected by the Marine Corps to make the new vehicles or ACVs, which the military started receiving last year.

BAE Systems has declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Taliban acquires US arms left behind

Los Angeles Times

KABUL, Afghanistan — When Taliban fighters rode triumphantly into Kabul airport early Tuesday, they did so on U.S.-supplied pickup trucks, wearing U.S.-supplied uniforms and brandishing U.S.-supplied M4 and M16 rifles. Then they spent hours examining the bonanza of materiel that American troops unintentionally bequeathed them in what had been the U.S.' last redoubt in Afghanistan.

"This is ghaneema," said one uniformed Taliban fighter: war booty. With a gloved hand, he snapped up the night-vision goggles on his ballistic helmet, looking like the very model of an Afghan soldier the U.S. had tried to help create to eliminate people like him. He walked inside a hangar and gawked with his squad mates at the U.S. Embassy helicopters gleaming under powerful overhead lights.

The choppers were just part of the Taliban's haul. The group's blindingly fast sweep through most of Afghanistan netted it billions of dollars' worth of U.S. military equipment and weaponry given to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, which collapsed in the 11 days before the Taliban seized Kabul, the capital, on Aug. 15. Afghan soldiers who didn't surrender shed their uniforms and gear and turned tail, following many of their military and political leaders.

For their effort, Taliban fighters reaped almost 2,000 Humvees and trucks; more than 50 armored fighting vehicles, including Mine-Resistant Ambush Protection vehicles, or MRAPs; scores of artillery and mortar pieces; more than a dozen aging but working helicopters and attack aircraft; a dozen tanks; seven Boeing-manufac-

tured drones; and millions upon millions of bullets, according to a list compiled by the Oryx Blog, which tracks weapons used in conflicts.

Many of the items had been disabled by departing U.S. troops or are beyond the ken of Taliban fighters to operate. But a bitter irony of the chaotic Western withdrawal from Afghanistan is that the very group the U.S. ousted 20 years ago is not only back in power but better-equipped militarily than ever before to repel adversaries and enforce its brand of repressive rule.

Slightly less than one-third of the \$83 billion Washington spent on the Afghan defense forces went toward materiel, estimates say. That it now lies in the hands of the U.S.' erstwhile enemy is a source of embarrassment for the Biden administration, with former President Donald Trump inveighing in a statement Monday that "ALL EQUIPMENT should be demanded to be immediately returned to the United States," along with "every penny" of its cost.

The leftover U.S. gear is omnipresent in Kabul, where Taliban fighters wielding shiny black M4s on dark-green Ford Ranger trucks is a routine sight. Humvees protect bigger government buildings. (The U.S. gave the Afghan army almost 5,000 M4s and machine guns in 2017, according to reports from Washington's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.)

Less frequently seen — because they are not so easily usable — are the more lethal weapons, including the A-29 Super Tucano, a turboprop attack aircraft reminiscent of a World War II-era P-51 Mustang but with modern avionics, and hel-

icopters such as MD-530s and Black Hawks.

U.S. troops "demilitarized," or rendered inoperable, 73 aircraft left behind at Kabul airport, along with some 70 MRAP vehicles and 27 Humvees, U.S. Central Command said. The deliberate sabotage was evident Tuesday, when Taliban officials toured the airport grounds.

Although the A-29s were arranged neatly in their hangar, they stood amid a dump of sullied camo-patterned bags, socks, bullet boxes, grenades and discarded food packets. Their avionics bays were open, and electronic boxes that operate vital systems, including the starter for the motors, had been ripped out, their components bashed to bits. A C-17 transport plane parked outside squatted on one wheel, and the Black Hawks had their windows smashed and trash strewn inside bays that once carried vital supplies to Afghan soldiers or evacuated them, sometimes alive but often dead, back home.

Most ruined were the MD-530s. In flight, they were nimble helicopters, buzzing around and almost jousting with Taliban fighters assailing government outposts. Now they were smooshed together in the hangar, as if a giant child had flicked them into each other. Their joysticks were cut at the handle.

Some of the Afghan air force fleet had also been taken by their Afghan pilots to the Panjshir Valley in northern Afghanistan, where the anti-Taliban resistance is bunkered, or to neighboring Uzbekistan. Authorities in Uzbekistan confirmed last month that some 46 Afghan military aircraft landed in the country.

Although quips on social media about a "Taliban air

force" are overblown, the group has managed to operate a few helicopters snatched from Afghan forces before they could destroy them. Dozens of Afghan air force pilots, many of them trainees, are still stuck in Afghanistan; some have been coerced into flying them for the group, said pilots interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Videos posted on social media from the southern city of Kandahar show a Black Hawk flying the Taliban's white banner during a military parade last week. The occasional whump-whump of a Russian Mi-17 helicopter can still be heard over Kabul.

None of the aerial fleet left behind is cutting-edge, said a U.S. pilot and trainer who asked not to be named so as to comment freely. The aircraft, he said, were "stripped of every modern component."

"They were sliced-up trucks, because the environment didn't need the fancy stuff — they didn't even have the standard self-defense systems," he said, adding that the rules for selling the equipment to the Afghan air force required some demilitarization anyway.

Besides, whatever does fly now probably won't be doing so in a few months, said an Afghan air force colonel who spoke on condition of anonymity because he recently escaped the country and still has family in Afghanistan. Even when the Afghan army existed, he said, it had no way of maintaining the aircraft without contractors and a steady pipeline of spare parts; bigger repairs required the aircraft to be taken to U.S. bases in the United Arab Emirates or Qatar.

"These aircraft aren't flyable," he said. "I'm happy they'll try to fly them. They'll kill a lot of Taliban when they do."

New Orleans mayor urges Ida evacuees to return

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — With power due back for almost all of New Orleans this week, Mayor LaToya Cantrell strongly encouraged residents who evacuated because of Hurricane Ida to begin returning home. But outside the city, the prospects of recovery appeared bleaker, with homes and businesses in tatters.

Six days after Hurricane Ida made landfall, hard-hit parts of Louisiana were still struggling to restore any sense of normalcy. Even around New Orleans, a continued lack of power for most residents made a sultry stretch of summer hard to bear and added to woes in the aftermath of Ida. Louisiana authorities searched Friday for a man they said shot another man to death after they both waited in a long line to fill up at a gas station in suburban New Orleans.

Cantrell said the city is offering transportation to any resident looking to leave the city and get to a public shelter. It already began moving some residents out of senior homes.

At the Renaissance Place senior home Friday, dozens of residents lined up to get on minibuses equipped with wheelchair lifts after city officials said they determined conditions at the facility were not safe and evacuated it.

But Cantrell also encouraged residents to return to the city as their power comes back, saying they could help the relief effort by taking in neighbors and family who were still in the dark. Only a small number of city residents had power back by Friday though almost all electricity should return by Wednesday, according to Entergy, the com-

pany that provides power to New Orleans and much of southeast Louisiana in the storm's path.

"We are saying, you can come home," Cantrell told a news conference.

The outlook was not as promising south and west of the city, where Ida's fury fully struck. The sheriff's office in Lafourche Parish cautioned returning residents about the difficult situation that awaited them — no power, no running water, little cellphone service and almost no gasoline.

Late Friday, Entergy said its damage assessments across southeast Louisiana were almost complete, and the company posted restoration times for most customers. Some parishes outside New Orleans were battered for hours by winds of 100 mph or more.

President Joe Biden arrived Friday to survey the damage in some of those spots, touring a neighborhood in LaPlace, a community between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain that suffered catastrophic wind and water damage that sheared off roofs and flooded homes.

"I promise we're going to have your back," Biden said at the outset of a briefing by officials.

The president has also promised full federal support to the Northeast, where Ida's remnants dumped record-breaking rain and killed at least 50 people from Virginia to Connecticut.

At least 14 deaths were blamed on the storm in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, including those of three nursing home residents who were evacuated along with hundreds of other seniors in Louisiana ahead of the hurricane.

No timeline for return of Lake Tahoe evacuees

Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. — Tens of thousands of South Lake Tahoe residents were watching hopefully during the weekend for a chance to return home as firefighters made progress against a threatening California blaze that has turned their thriving resort into a ghost town.

Lighter winds and higher humidity heading into the Labor Day weekend reduced the spread of flames and fire crews were quick to take advantage by doubling down on burning and cutting fire lines around the Caldor Fire.

Bulldozers with giant blades, crews armed with shovels and a fleet of aircraft dropping hundreds of thousands of gallons of water and fire retardant helped keep the fire's advance to a couple of thousand acres — a fraction of its explosive spread last month and the smallest increase in weeks.

"Things are clearly heading in the right direction for us," said Dean Gould, a supervisor with the U.S. Forest Service.

With the fire about one-third surrounded, authorities allowed more people back into their homes on the western and northern sides of the fires Friday afternoon.

But there was no timeline for allowing the return of 22,000 South Lake Tahoe residents and others across the state line in Douglas County, Nev., who were evacuated days ago. Authorities were taking that decision day by day.

"It's all based on fire behavior," said Jake Cagle, a fire operations section chief. "For now, things are looking good ... we're getting close."

Fire crews still had a lot of work to do in the grasslands, timber stands and granite outcroppings.

'QAnon Shaman' pleads guilty to felony in Capitol riot

Associated Press

PHOENIX — An Arizona man who sported face paint, no shirt and a furry hat with horns when he joined the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 pleaded guilty Friday to a felony charge and wants to be released from jail while he awaits sentencing.

Jacob Chansley, who was widely photographed in the Senate chamber with a flagpole topped with a spear, could face 41 to 51 months in prison under sentencing guidelines, a prosecutor said. The man who

called himself "QAnon Shaman" has been jailed for nearly eight months since his arrest.

Before entering the plea, Chansley was found by a judge to be mentally competent after having been transferred to a Colorado facility for a mental health evaluation. His lawyer Albert Watkins said the solitary confinement that Chansley faced for most of his time in jail has had an adverse effect on his mental health and that his time in Colorado helped him regain his sharpness.

Chansley acknowledged in a court record to being one of the first 30 pro-Trump rioters to stream into the Capitol building. He riled up the crowd with a bullhorn as officers tried to control them, posed for photos and profanely referred to then-Vice President Mike Pence as a traitor while in the Senate. He wrote a note to Pence saying, "It's only a matter of time, justice is coming." He also made a social media post in November in which he promoted hangings for traitors.

Taliban abruptly end women's protest

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Taliban special forces in camouflage fired their weapons into the air Saturday, bringing an abrupt and frightening end to the latest protest march in the capital by Afghan women demanding equal rights from the new rulers.

Taliban fighters quickly captured most of Afghanistan last month and celebrated the departure of the last U.S. forces after 20 years of war. The insurgent group must now govern a war-ravaged country that is heavily reliant on international aid.

The women's march — the second in as many days in Kabul — began peacefully. Demonstrators laid a wreath outside Af-

ghanistan's Defense Ministry to honor Afghan soldiers who died fighting the Taliban before marching on to the presidential palace.

"We are here to gain human rights in Afghanistan," said 20-year-old protester Maryam Naiby. "I love my country. I will always be here."

As the protesters' shouts grew louder, several Taliban officials waded into the crowd to ask what they wanted to say.

Flanked by fellow demonstrators, Sudaba Kabiri, a 24-year-old university student, told her Taliban interlocutor that Islam's prophet gave women rights and they wanted theirs. The Taliban official promised

women would be given their rights but the women, all in their early 20s, were skeptical.

As the demonstrators reached the presidential palace, a dozen Taliban special forces ran into the crowd, firing in the air and sending demonstrators fleeing. Kabiri, who spoke to The Associated Press, said they also fired tear gas.

The Taliban have promised an inclusive government and a more moderate form of Islamic rule than when they last ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. But many Afghans, especially women, are deeply skeptical and fear a roll back of rights gained over the last two decades.

Biden to declassify some 9/11 documents

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Friday directed the declassification of certain documents related to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a supportive gesture to victims' families who have long sought the records in hopes of implicating the Saudi government.

The order, coming less than a week before the 20th anniversary of the attacks, is a significant moment in a yearslong tussle between the government and the families over what classified information about the run-up to the

attacks could be made public. That conflict was on display last month when many relatives, survivors and first responders came out against Biden's participation in 9/11 memorial events if the documents remained classified.

Biden said Friday that he was making good on a campaign commitment by ordering the declassification review and pledged that his administration "will continue to engage respectfully with members of this community."

"The significant events in question occurred two decades ago or longer, and they concern a tragic

moment that continues to resonate in American history and in the lives of so many Americans," the executive order states. "It is therefore critical to ensure that the United States Government maximizes transparency, relying on classification only when narrowly tailored and necessary."

The order directs the Justice Department and other executive branch agencies to begin a declassification review, and requires that declassified documents be released over the next six months.

Brett Eagleson, whose father,

Bruce, was among the World Trade Center victims and who is an advocate for other victims' relatives, commended the action as a "critical first step." He said the families would be closely watching the process to make sure that the Justice Department follows through and acts "in good faith."

"The first test will be on 9/11, and the world will be watching. We look forward to thanking President Biden in person next week as he joins us at Ground Zero to honor those who died or were injured 20 years ago," Eagleson said.

Extremist freed before New Zealand attack

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand authorities imprisoned a man inspired by the Islamic State for three years after catching him with a hunting knife and extremist videos — but at a certain point, despite grave fears he would attack others, they say they could do nothing more to keep him behind bars.

So for 53 days from July, police tracked the man's every move, an operation that involved some 30 officers working around the clock. Their fears were borne out Friday when he walked into an Auckland supermarket, grabbed a kitchen knife from a store shelf and stabbed five people, critically injuring three.

Two more shoppers were injured in the melee. On Saturday, three of the victims remained hospitalized in critical condition and three more were in stable or moderate conditions. The seventh person was recovering at home.

Court documents named the man as Ahamed Aathil Mohamed Samsudeen, 32, a Tamil Muslim who arrived in New Zealand 10 years ago on a student visa seeking refugee status.

Undercover officers monitoring him from just outside the supermarket sprang into action when they saw shoppers running and heard shouting, police said, and shot him dead within a couple of minutes of him beginning

his attack.

The attack has highlighted deficiencies in New Zealand's anti-terror laws, which experts say are too focused on punishing actions and inadequate for dealing with plots before they are carried out. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said lawmakers were close to filling some of those legislative holes when the attack occurred.

Police Commissioner Andrew Coster said the law they were working under required a suspect to make the first move.

"We might have an understanding of intent, and ideology, and we might have high levels of concern," Coster said. "But that is not sufficient for us to take any enforcement action."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Misspelling of Moderna leads to tourist's arrest

HI HONOLULU — A Illinois woman submitted a fake COVID-19 vaccination card to visit Hawaii with a glaring spelling error that led to her arrest: Moderna was spelled “Maderna,” according to court documents.

In order to bypass Hawaii's 10-day traveler quarantine, she uploaded a vaccination card to the state's Safe Travels program and arrived in Honolulu Aug. 23 on a Southwest Airlines flight, the documents said.

“Airport screeners found suspicious errors ... such as Moderna was spelled wrong and that her home was in Illinois but her shot was taken at Delaware,” Wilson Lau, a special agent with the Hawaii attorney general's investigation division, wrote in an email to a Delaware official who confirmed there was no vaccination record for the woman, 24, under her name and birth date.

The email is included in documents filed in court. She was charged with two misdemeanor counts of violating Hawaii's emergency rules to control the spread of COVID-19.

Man swinging machete killed by deputies

MT MISSOULA — A man who was swinging a machete and making lethal threats was shot and killed as Missoula County law enforcement officers tried to deescalate the situation, the sheriff's office said.

The man did not comply with the verbal commands of officers

responding to a disturbance northwest of Missoula and deputies initially used a “less lethal option” to try to get him to comply, the sheriff's office said.

That failed and the man continued to pose a lethal threat, officials said.

At least one officer fired shots at the man, Sheriff TJ McDermott said. The suspect's name has not been released.

Fantasy Fest is on but no parade or street fair

FL KEY WEST — An annual celebration of debauchery and outrageous costumed parties in the Florida Keys is canceling its famous parade this year due to the state's surge in COVID-19 cases, but events connected to the 42-year-old festival are still being held, according to planners.

The Fantasy Fest parade and a street fair in Key Fest slated for the end of October have been canceled because of the pandemic, and a masquerade march through the city's Old Town section has been put on hold until organizers can determine that it's safe to hold, Nadene Grossman Orr, the festival's director said in a statement.

In pre-pandemic times, the 10-day festival attracted as many as 75,000 visitors each year around Halloween for dozens of adult parties, costumed marches, street fairs and balls.

Boy died of overdose at friend's home, cops say

MO WASHINGTON — A teenager died of a drug overdose during a sleepover at a friend's house in eastern Missouri, and three adults

at the house were arrested, police said.

Police were called to a home in Washington and found Zackary Foster dead in an upstairs bedroom, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

The boy's friend, 12, told investigators they had been experimenting with drugs they found in the house, police Sgt. Steve Sitzes said.

After securing a search warrant, officers found various prescription and some illegal drugs in the house, including methamphetamine and capsules possibly containing heroin or fentanyl, Sitzes said.

Vaccine dispute leads to slaying, police say

IL VIENNA — A southern Illinois man shot his half-brother to death following an argument over the COVID-19 vaccine, authorities said.

Larry D. Cavitt, 68, of Goreville, was charged in Johnson County Court with murder and aggravated battery with use of a firearm. The charges stem from the death of Cavitt's half-brother, Joseph E. Geyman, 51.

Johnson County Sheriff Pete Sopczak said the two men, who lived next door to each other, argued over the COVID-19 vaccine before Cavitt took out a handgun and fatally shot Geyman in the head.

Ex-FBI official accused of falsely claiming time

MD GREENBELT — A former section chief at the FBI's Quantico laboratory is facing federal charges, accused of claiming nearly

900 hours of work he didn't do over four years, according to court documents.

John Behun worked for the FBI for more than 28 years until his termination in February 2019.

He served as a laboratory division section chief, leading the section that supports human resources, finance, compliance/health and safety programs, according to charging documents.

Last month, Behun was charged in the U.S. District Court in Greenbelt with theft of government property.

An investigation by the Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General found that many times from 2015 to 2018, Behun worked significantly less than he claimed for a total of 876 falsely certified hours, according to charging documents.

Woman says concert attack paralyzed her

NH GILFORD — Police are investigating after a woman says she was knocked unconscious and became paralyzed from the waist down during a Pitbull concert in New Hampshire.

The woman, from Keene, said she was struck in the head by two adults on Aug. 29 after an argument about an alcoholic beverage at the Bank of NH Pavilion concert in Gilford. She was with friends attending the concert.

Doctors said she suffered blunt force trauma to the spinal cord, which resulted in paralysis from the waist down.

Gilford Deputy Chief Kristian Kelley said Thursday that a suspect has been identified.

— From Associated Press

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Osaka, Tsitsipas ousted in third round

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Naomi Osaka looked over at her agent and said she wanted to tell the world what the two of them had discussed privately in an Arthur Ashe Stadium hallway after her U.S. Open title defense ended with a racket-tossing, composure-missing, lead-evaporating defeat in the third round.

His reply: "Sure."

And then Osaka, pausing every so often as her voice got caught on her words and her eyes filled with tears, said Friday night she is thinking about taking another break from tennis "for a while."

"I feel like for me, recently, when I win, I don't feel happy, I feel more like a relief. And then when I lose, I feel very sad," Osaka said at her news conference following a 5-7, 7-6 (2), 6-4 loss at Flushing Meadows to Leylah Fernandez, an 18-year-old from Canada who is ranked 73rd and never had been this far in Grand Slam competition. "I don't think that's normal."

The moderator in charge of the session with reporters attempted to cut things off, but Osaka said she wanted to continue.

"This is very hard to articulate," she said, resting her left cheek in her hand. "Basically, I feel like I'm kind of at this point where I'm trying to figure out what I want to do, and I honestly don't know when I'm going to play

my next tennis match."

Crying, she lowered her black visor over her eyes and offered an apology, then patted her palms on both cheeks.

"Yeah," Osaka added as she rose to leave, "I think I'm going to take a break from playing for a while."

This was the first Slam tournament for the 23-year-old Osaka since she pulled out of the French Open before the second round to take a mental health break after having announced she would not participate in news conferences in Paris.

She also sat out Wimbledon, before participating in the Tokyo Olympics, where she lit the cauldron as one of Japan's most famous athletes.

Osaka owns four Grand Slam titles, including at the U.S. Open in 2018 — beating Serena Williams in a chaotic final — and a year ago, plus two more on the hard courts of the Australian Open. When she took a hiatus after Roland Garros, she revealed that she endures waves of anxiety before meeting with the media and has dealt with depression for three years.

The first sign Friday that things were not entirely OK with Osaka came when she smacked her racket against the court after dropping one point. Moments later, Osaka chucked her equipment, sending it bouncing

and skidding halfway to the net. Then came a full-on spike near the baseline.

Her game was off. Her game face was gone. By the end, the crowd was booing her for turning her back to the court and taking too much time between points.

This day had that sort of vibe: Earlier in Ashe, another 18-year-old new to this territory surprisingly eliminated a No. 3 seed when Carlos Alcaraz of Spain edged French Open runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (2), 0-6, 7-6 (5) to become the youngest man into the fourth round at Flushing Meadows since Michael Chang and Pete Sampras in 1989.

"He can be a contender for Grand Slam titles," said Tsitsipas, the runner-up at the French Open this year. "He has the game to be there."

In earlier action, three women with multiple major titles each — Garbiñe Muguruza, Simona Halep and Angelique Kerber — pulled out three-set victories to advance to Week 2.

Muguruza got past Victoria Azarenka, a three-time U.S. Open runner-up including a year ago, 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 and next faces French Open champion Barbora Krejčíková. Kerber, who won the title in New York in 2016, defeated 2017 champ Sloane Stephens 5-7, 6-2, 6-3. And Halep was a 7-6 (11), 4-6, 6-3 winner over Elena Rybakina.

US gold medalist Stevenson grappling with fame

Associated Press

Even an Olympic gold medalist has limits.

American wrestler Gable Steveson has been on the go since his dramatic last-second victory in the freestyle heavyweight final put him at the top of the podium in Tokyo. He blew the Gjal-larhorn at a Minnesota Vikings preseason game, attended a Bellator MMA event and showed up at World Wrestling Entertainment's SummerSlam, stepping into the ring to celebrate bringing home the gold in front of more than 50,000 adoring fans.

He's living it up as he contemplates his next move.

"It's very new and something different that I haven't experienced, but I think I'm taking it very well and I'm staying the

course how I should be," he said.

Even for a 21-year-old who seemingly has the world by the tail, being Gable Steveson can be overwhelming. Reality hit when he became so busy that he opted out of the World Championships in Oslo.

"It was actually really hard, to be honest, just because we planned on going way before we got to Tokyo," he said. "I was hoping that I was going to get a medal in Tokyo and I ended up with the gold. And so we planned on going and me and my coaches talked about it. And then when we won the gold and when I got home, it was just like I just got hit with a bunch of stuff that I had to do."

He also couldn't find time to meet with UFC president Dana

White while in Las Vegas for SummerSlam.

"This story came out where it was like me kind of ditching him," Steveson said. "When I got to Vegas for SummerSlam, I was just on the go all day and I had no time to see him. So I didn't ditch him. We'll connect soon. And I'm looking forward to that day."

Steveson walked to the ring at SummerSlam with another American Olympic gold medalist, Tamyra Mensah-Stock. Some fans were surprised that Steveson didn't seem awestruck as he walked down the aisle.

"People were like 'He didn't look like he wanted to be there,'" he said. "No. I was just comfortable in the ring and just, straight face and just doing a good job of being who I am. So it

was nice. I was happy to be there."

The WWE was happy to have him there, too. He was photographed that night with WWE chairman/CEO Vince McMahon and executive vice president Paul Levesque.

In the meantime, the reigning NCAA heavyweight wrestling champion said there's a good chance he will show up at the University of Minnesota when classes start. That would position him to benefit from name, image and likeness income while he figures things out.

He has most often been linked with WWE and UFC, but said he's open to everything, including Bellator. He said he'd be willing to listen to All Elite Wrestling, which has not reached out to him.

Virginia Tech knocks off North Carolina

Associated Press

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Virginia Tech didn't appear to get much consideration when the experts tabbed No. 10 North Carolina and No. 14 Miami as the teams to beat in the Atlantic Coast Conference's Coastal Division.

They will now.

Braxton Burmeister ran for a touchdown and threw for another and Virginia Tech made Sam Howell look pedestrian in a 17-10 victory over North Carolina on Friday night in the opener for both teams.

Burmeister scored on a 4-yard run and found James Mitchell for an 11-yard scoring strike as the Hokies built a 14-0 lead they took into halftime. The defense did the rest, sacking Howell six times and intercepting three passes.

"We kept putting them back out there in the second half," Hokies coach Justin Fuente said about the defense, which allowed 354 yards. "We couldn't put the game away but the defense continued to rise to the occasion."

They struggled to put the game away in the second half until the final minute when they chased Howell from the pocket at the Virginia Tech 40 and he tried to find a teammate while defensive end Jordan Williams held him by an ankle.

Howell, who'd thrown eight touchdown passes in two prior games against Virginia Tech, whirled to get away, then threw right to Chamarrri Conner.

The play was reviewed, and when the officials announced that it was an interception, the sellout crowd at Lane Stadium erupted with relief.

Many fans joined the team in celebration on the field after the game, which marked the first time since 2019 that fan attendance was not limited.

The Tar Heels, who arrived with their highest preseason ranking since 1997, had the ball for just 9:11 in the first half and only avoided being down by more because Keshawn King fumbled the ball away at the Tar Heels 9.

"Obviously, now the shine's off and the rating sure doesn't matter tonight," Tar Heels coach Mack Brown said. "We were overrated with the way we played."

The Hokies dominated the clock in the first half, slowing things down to avoid the kind of shootout they had with UNC last season. In that one, the Tar Heels rolled up 656 yards and beat a virus and injury-decimated defense 56-45.

"When the clock was running, we just wanted it to keep running," Fuente said.

Howell did become the Tar Heels' career touchdown passing leader with 69 when Josh Downs took a screen pass 37 yards for a score in the third quarter, but he was unable to find his usual magic late.

Fuente said he thought Burmeister was trying to hit Tayvion Robinson in the back of the end zone on the touchdown pass, but Mitchell cut it off.

"I saw both of them," Burmeister said, "and I was like one of them is going to catch it."

Sources say Big 12 ready to add new members

Associated Press

The Big 12 is moving quickly on an expansion plan that could have the conference at 12 schools after Texas and Oklahoma leave, with BYU, Central Florida, Cincinnati and Houston as the "most intriguing" candidates.

Three people familiar with the Big 12's talks said Friday the eight schools being left behind by the Longhorns and Sooners are working to rebuild by adding four new members.

Two of the people said there were regularly scheduled meetings planned for Big 12 university presidents and athletic directors in the coming days to discuss next steps, and another meeting of presidents was expected to take place late next week.

One person said invitations to new members could go out as soon as next week.

The people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the Big 12 was not making its internal dis-

cussions public.

Sports Illustrated first reported on Friday, citing unidentified sources, that BYU, Cincinnati, Houston and UCF were expected to apply for membership to the Big 12 early next week. The Athletic was first to report earlier this week the Big 12 was focused on those four schools.

Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby declined to comment Friday in a text message to AP.

The Southeastern Conference invited Texas and Oklahoma to leave the Big 12 and join that powerhouse league in late July, a move that rocked college sports and put the Big 12's future in doubt.

The Longhorns and Sooners have said they will honor their current contracts with the Big 12 and do not plan to join the SEC until 2025, when the conference's current television rights contracts with ESPN and Fox run out.

One of the people said Big 12 leaders believe it would benefit

the conference to move quickly on a long-term plan to show stability and not allow speculation about the league's uncertain future to linger throughout the football season.

After the Pac-12 announced it was not planning to expand last week, it quickly became apparent to the remaining eight Big 12 schools — Kansas, Kansas State, Iowa State, Baylor, TCU, Oklahoma State, Texas Tech and West Virginia — that they had no other Power Five conference options. Their best move was to stick together and add new members, one of the people said.

The first question was how big should the Big 12 be?

"I think 12 is the magic number," one of the people said.

How soon new members could join is to be determined.

BYU is an independent that already has a television contract with ESPN, one of the Big 12's current broadcast rights holders, and could likely join as soon as next football season.

Cincinnati, UCF and Houston are in the American Athletic Conference. AAC bylaws require 27 months' notice if members plan to leave the conference.

One person said the Big 12 has been focused on schools with substantial fanbases, located in growing markets, and with a history of football success under multiple coaches.

Conceivably, new members could join the Big 12 before Texas and Oklahoma depart. If Texas and Oklahoma wanted to leave the Big 12 before 2025, it could cost the schools tens of millions of dollars to buy out the grant of media rights agreements members have with the conference.

But people who spoke to AP said the Big 12 did not need to finalize a divorce with the Sooners and Longhorns to implement a rebuild plan.

"There are two separate tracks," one person said. "You're going to expand regardless."

Posey helps Giants down Dodgers in 11

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Buster Posey could exhale at last, his teammates knowing better than to dog pile on their 34-year-old catcher celebrating a wild, 4½-hour game that put San Francisco atop the NL West.

“They know they need to be careful with me,” Posey cracked.

Second baseman Trea Turner threw wildly on Posey’s bases-loaded, two-out grounder in the 11th inning and a lengthy video review upheld the safe call as the Giants beat the Los Angeles Dodgers 3-2 on Friday night to grab first place.

“From my vantage point it looked like he was off. I knew it was really close,” Posey said. “I was hoping that it held up on replay.”

The rivals began the night

for the division lead. The Giants nearly won in the ninth, but Posey missed a defensive play on the bases and the Dodgers rallied to tie it at 1.

After both teams scored in the 10th, San Francisco loaded the bases in the 11th against Evan Phillips (1-1), the Dodgers’ 11th pitcher.

Posey hit a grounder to Turner, who had plenty of time but zipped a throw that pulled first baseman Will Smith off the bag — normally a catcher, Smith had never played the position in college or as a pro before entering in the 10th.

Smith desperately tried to reach back to tag first base as Posey crossed and Brandon Belt raced home from third. With fans chanting “Safe! Safe!” and players on both sides watching and waiting, the safe call was confirmed.

“It was a little bit higher throw, I was stretched out fully for it, I thought I kept my foot on, umpire thought otherwise, then went back and looked at replay,” Smith said. “It’s pretty close, couldn’t overturn it I guess.”

Jarlin García (6-3) earned the win.

San Francisco (86-49) holds a one-game lead over LA (85-50) after the rivals came into the opener of this key weekend series tied for the division lead in September for the first time since Sept. 18, 1997.

The Giants took a 1-0 lead into the ninth, but Justin Turner singled and took third on Corey Seager’s one-out double.

Smith then hit a grounder to second baseman Thairo Estrada, who fired home to Posey. The All-Star catcher chased Turner back to third, where

Seager was already standing. Posey tagged both of them, and umpire Nestor Ceja signaled Seager out.

Seager and Turner then both wandered off the bag. Posey went to tag Seager again, while Turner scrambled back to the bag. Chris Taylor followed with a single to make it 1-all.

“I messed that up. In my mind Seage, was standing on the bag so I had him occupying the bag,” Posey said. “Running Turner back, I thought that he was the one that was going to be out, but obviously the rule states that Turner gets to occupy that bag and then the back runner is the one that’s out.”

Trea Turner hit a sacrifice fly in the 10th that scored pinch-runner Walker Buehler for a 2-1 lead. Brandon Crawford hit a tying single in the bottom half.

Semien’s home run lifts Athletics over Blue Jays

Associated Press

TORONTO — Marcus Semien hit a game-ending three-run homer in the ninth inning after Lourdes Gurriel Jr. hit a tying grand slam in the eighth, and the Toronto Blue Jays rallied three times to stun the Oakland Athletics 11-10 Friday night.

“We just woke up,” Semien said.

Semien connected off Sergio Romo (1-1) for his career-best 34th home run of the season, sparking a wild celebration at home plate.

“It’s huge,” said Semien, who delivered against the club that let him leave as a free agent last offseason. “Every win is so important right now. Biggest at-bat of the year for me, obviously.”

Oakland dropped three games behind Boston in the AL wild-card race. Toronto remains five games back of Boston, which beat Cleveland 8-4 Friday.

The Blue Jays have won nine of the past 11 meetings with Oakland, dating to 2019.

Angels 3, Rangers 2: Shohei Ohtani (9-1) allowed two runs, struck out eight and threw a stateside career-high 117 pitches in seven innings, and host Los Angeles beat Texas.

Yankees 4, Orioles 3 (11): Giancarlo

Stanton led off the 11th inning with an RBI single and host New York came back to edge Baltimore.

Stanton also homered as the Yankees remained 1½ games ahead of Boston in the race for the first AL wild card.

Red Sox 8, Indians 5: Kyle Schwarber hit a leadoff homer in the first inning, then delivered a tiebreaking, two-run double in the seventh that sent host Boston past Cleveland.

Astros 6, Padres 3: Kyle Tucker hit a tiebreaking two-run home run in the eighth inning and Carlos Correa’s three-run shot in the fourth ended a 22-inning scoreless streak for visiting Houston, which beat scuffling San Diego.

Cardinals 15, Brewers 4: Nolan Arenado homered twice in the first three innings to help visiting St. Louis rout Milwaukee.

Mets 6, Nationals 2 (10): Kevin Pillar drove in two with a 10th-inning double and visiting New York recovered after blowing a late lead to beat Washington for its fifth straight victory.

Mariners 6, Diamondbacks 5: Rookie Jarred Kelenic hit a go-ahead single in the 10th inning after earlier launching a two-run homer to lead visiting Seattle past Ari-

zona.

Royals 7, White Sox 2: Dallas Keuchel (8-8) had another rocky outing for AL Central-leading Chicago, allowing six runs in three innings in a loss to host Kansas City.

Cubs 6, Pirates 5: Manager David Ross and president of baseball operations Jed Hoyer missed host Chicago’s victory over Pittsburgh after testing positive for COVID-19.

Rays 5, Twins 3: Michael Wacha (3-4) struck out seven over six innings, Kevin Kiermaier had an RBI triple during a three-run second and host Tampa Bay beat Minnesota.

Marlins 10, Phillies 3: Miguel Rojas had two hits and three RBIs during during a seven-run sixth inning and host Miami ended Philadelphia’s six-game winning streak.

Tigers 15, Reds 5: Dustin Garneau hit a two-run homer and a solo shot, Robbie Grossman had a three-run blast and visiting Detroit routed Cincinnati.

Rockies 4, Braves 3: Antonio Senzatela (4-9) overcame a leadoff home run by Ozzie Albies, pitching seven strong innings in host Colorado’s victory over Atlanta.

The Braves maintained a two-game lead in the NL East over Philadelphia.