

Migrant camp along border gets smaller

Associated Press

CIUDAD ACUÑA, Mexico — A camp where more than 14,000 migrants had waited along the Texas border just days ago was dramatically smaller Thursday, while across the river in Mexico, Haitian migrants in a growing camp awoke surrounded by security forces as a helicopter thundered overhead.

The number of migrants at the Texas camp had been reduced to around 4,000, Department of Homeland Security officials said Thursday, after authorities ramped up efforts in the last day or so to remove migrants.

Officials said about 1,400 had been expelled to Haiti and 3,200 transferred to other Border Patrol sectors to be processed either for expulsion or potential release, while several thousand have returned to Mexico. They also said the DHS is working with other countries to take some Haitians.

The United States and Mexico appeared eager to end the increasingly politicized humanitarian situation at the border, even as the U.S. expulsion of Haitians to their troubled homeland caused blowback for the administration of President Joe Biden.

The Biden administration's special envoy to Haiti, Daniel Foote, submitted a letter of resignation protesting the "inhumane" large-scale expulsions of Haitian migrants, U.S. officials said Thursday.

In Mexico, migrants who had camped in a park beside the river in Ciudad Acuña found state police trucks spaced every 30 feet or so between their tents and the water's edge. Still, after anxious minutes of indecision, dozens of families opted to hustle into the river and cross at a point where there was only one municipal police vehicle, calculating it was better to take their chances with U.S. authorities.

The entrance to the park was blocked and just outside, National Guard troops and immigration agents waited along with three buses. A helicopter flew overhead.

The camp's usual early morning hum was silenced as migrants tried to decide what to do.

Guileme Paterson, a 36-year-old from Haiti, appeared dazed. "It is a difficult moment," she said before beginning to cross the Rio Grande with her husband and their four children.

The Mexican authorities' operation appeared designed to drive the migrants back across the river into Texas. A fence line and the line of state police vehicles funneled the migrants back to the crossing point they had been using all week.

The buses that had been waiting left empty. The majority of the camp's migrants remained.

"Bad, bad, bad, things are going badly," said Michou Petion, carrying her 2-year-old son in her arms toward the river. Her husband carried bags of their belongings and had several pairs of sneakers dangling around his neck.

"The U.S. is deporting a lot to Haiti, now I don't know if I can enter or leave," Petion said.

"We're talking to a lot of people and they are nervous, they're afraid, they're desperate," said Christoph Jankhoefer of the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders, which is working in the Ciudad Acuña camp. "Two women were crying because they didn't want to be deported to Guatemala."

US, Philippines to restart work on shared facilities

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

Plans to build facilities for U.S. troops in the Philippines, which had stalled for years amid wrangling over rules for visiting forces, are back on track, officials from both countries said Thursday.

"We plan to move fairly quickly," Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose Manuel Romualdez said during an online conference sponsored by Pacific Forum. The Hawaii-based think tank organized the event to discuss the allies' 70-year-old Mutual Defense Treaty.

Facilities for U.S. forces at five bases were authorized by the Philippines government under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

The pact allows U.S. troops and contractors to operate at agreed-upon locations in the Philippines. Although the revised Philippine constitution bans permanent U.S. bases, the agreement hands U.S. forces operational

control of the shared facilities and allows them to stockpile defense equipment and supplies.

Doubts were raised about the program in February 2020 after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte began a process to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement that permits U.S. troops to train in the country. The maverick leader canceled the plan after meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in July.

One shared basing project, a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief warehouse at Cesar Basa Air Base on the Philippines' main island of Luzon, opened in January 2019.

However, the allies are looking at projects at all five sites specified under the shared basing agreement, according to Lindsey Ford, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia.

"We are working through various projects now," she said during Thursday's online conference.

Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana in January 2019 identified Palawan island as the site of another planned shared facility.

The Palawan site is significant because of its proximity to the South China Sea, Carl Baker, then executive director of the Pacific Forum, said at the time.

China has built its own military bases and placed missiles on artificial islands in the contested waters that are subject to claims by several neighboring states, including the Philippines.

The Palawan base includes a 9,000-foot World War II-era runway, Baker said.

"That warehouse could be used to store equipment for surveillance flights," he said.

The U.S. is also working with the Philippine government on projects at Fort Magsaysay Military Reservation, Lumbia Airfield and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base, according to a U.S. Embassy report posted online in 2019.

US, allies' Indo-Pacific moves cause strain

Associated Press

BANGKOK — With increasingly strong talk in support of Taiwan, a new deal to supply Australia with nuclear submarines and the launch of a European strategy for greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. and its allies are becoming more assertive in their approach toward a rising China.

China has bristled at the moves, and the growing tensions between Beijing and Washington prompted U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last weekend to implore President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping to repair their “completely dysfunctional” relationship, warning they risk dividing the world.

As the U.N. General Assembly opened Tuesday, both leaders chose calming language, with Biden insisting “we are not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs,” and Xi telling the forum that “China has never, and will never invade or bully others or seek hegemony.”

But the underlying issues have not changed, with China building up its military outposts as it presses its maritime claims over critical sea lanes, and the U.S. and its allies growing louder in their support of Taiwan, which China claims as part of its territory, and deepening military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

On Thursday, China sent 19 fighter jets toward Taiwan in a large display of force after the island announced its intention to join an 11-nation Pacific trade group, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, that China has also applied to join.

On Friday, Biden hosts the leaders of Japan, India and Australia for an in-person Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue for broad talks including the CO-

VID-19 pandemic and climate change, but also how to keep the Indo-Pacific, a vast region spanning from India to Australia, “free and open,” according to the White House.

It comes a week after the dramatic announcement that Australia would be dropping a contract for conventional French submarines in favor of an Anglo-American offer for nuclear-powered vessels, a bombshell that overshadowed the unveiling of the European Union’s strategy to boost political and defense ties in the Indo-Pacific.

“One thing is certain, that everyone is pivoting toward the Indo-Pacific,” said Garima Mohan, an Asia program fellow with the German Marshall Fund think tank.

As partners pursue moves that play to their own strengths and needs, however, the past week has underscored the lack of coordination as a networked security strategy develops, she said.

“Not everyone has the same threat assessment of China,” she said in a telephone interview from Berlin.

The EU policy emphasizes the need for dialogue with Beijing, to encourage “China to play its part in a peaceful and thriving Indo-Pacific region,” while at the same time proposing an “enhanced naval presence” and expanded security cooperation with regional partners.

It also notes China’s increased military buildup, and that “the display of force and increasing tensions in regional hotspots such as in the South and East China Sea, and in the Taiwan Strait, may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity.”

Germany, which has close economic ties to China, got a wake-up call last week when China rejected its request for a port call

for the frigate Bavaria, which is currently conducting maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific.

“China is telling them this inclusive approach is not going to work, so in a way it’s a rude awakening for Berlin,” Mohan said. “You have to take a position, you can’t have your cake and eat it too, and if you have an Indo-Pacific strategy ... you can’t make it neutral.”

Other EU countries, most notably France, have also sent naval assets for exercises in the Indo-Pacific, and Britain has had a whole carrier strike group conducting exercises for several months as London pursues the new tilt toward the region recommended by a recent British government review of defense and foreign policy.

China’s Foreign Ministry said after rejecting the Bavaria’s port call that it remained “willing to carry out friendly exchanges with Germany on the basis of mutual respect and mutual trust,” but made clear it was displeased with the increased naval presence in the region.

“Individual powers... have repeatedly dispatched military aircraft and warships to the South China Sea for some time in the name of exercising freedom of navigation to flex muscle, stir up trouble and deliberately provoke conflicts on maritime issues,” spokesman Zhao Lijian said. “China’s determination to safeguard national and territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests is unwavering, and will continue to properly handle differences with the countries concerned through consultations and negotiations.”

Beijing was less reserved in its reaction to the submarine deal with Australia, under which the U.S. and Britain will help Canberra construct nuclear-powered submarines, calling

it “highly irresponsible” and saying it would “seriously damage regional peace and stability.”

In signing the pact with the U.S. and Britain, Australia canceled a \$66 billion deal with France for diesel-powered submarines, infuriating Paris, which recalled its ambassadors to Washington and Canberra and suggested it calls into question the entire cooperative effort to blunt China’s growing influence.

While clearly irked by the surprise deal, many observers have suggested that the vociferous reaction from France may be more directed toward a domestic audience, where President Emmanuel Macron faces a reelection bid early next year.

But there was clear disappointment that the U.S. seemed to be ignoring France’s own engagement in the region by not informing them in advance, said Laurence Nardon, an expert at the French Institute for International Relations.

“There was a way to do this while keeping Europeans in the loop,” she said. “The Indo-Pacific is important for the EU too; it’s not one or the other.”

In a call with Macron late Wednesday, Biden reaffirmed “the strategic importance of French and European engagement in the Indo-Pacific region,” according to a joint statement.

More than just a decision to pursue nuclear submarines, the deal was a clear signal of Australia committing long term to being in the U.S. camp on China policy, said Euan Graham, an expert with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore.

The submarine deal seems likely to exacerbate the ongoing trade war between China and Australia.

DOD reveals plan to address sexual assaults

By **CAITLIN DOORNBOS**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department's plan to tackle sexual assault and harassment in the ranks represents the largest attempt ever to impose systemic changes to address the problem across the force, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks told reporters Wednesday at the Pentagon.

The "implementation roadmap" revealed Wednesday comes after an independent review commission established by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in February studied sexual assault and harassment in the military for 90 days. On June 21, the commission submitted a report with 82 recommended changes to

Austin, who then ordered July 2 that the road map be developed.

The Pentagon has already begun implementing its "foundation" that "consists of the most important elements in preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment, and holding offenders accountable," Hicks said.

Among those initiatives are "three of our highest priority recommendations" — establishing special-victim prosecutors, creating a full-time and specialized sexual-assault prevention workforce and hiring full-time, sexual-assault response coordinators and sexual-assault prevention and response victim-advocate positions, she said.

"Our goal is to implement as rapidly as possible, while ensur-

ing we can deliver durable and meaningful outcomes," Hicks said.

The first implementation deadline for the road map is Oct. 13, when the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness must issue "enterprise-wide guidance for implementing all recommendations," Hicks said. Each service is also required to develop its own implementation plan and map out its resources before February.

To stay accountable, Austin also ordered the undersecretary to develop a way to evaluate metrics by May 1 and "formally assess the roadmap no fewer than twice per year."

One of the key changes is removing prosecuting authority

from the military chain of command in cases of sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse and retaliation. But that will take congressional action to complete, Hicks said.

The commission's report recommended creating an office of the special-victim prosecutor in the defense secretary's office, which would oversee "highly trained special-victim prosecutor (s) who [are] independent from the chain of command."

Unit commanding officers are now tasked with deciding whether a report of sexual assault should be sent to trial, but "only prosecutors have the technical training to make the purely legal decisions that affect victims' access to justice," the report stated.

Yokosuka holds memorial service for fallen sailors

By **ALEX WILSON**
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The names of more than 200 sailors who lost their lives over the past year, along with those who died in the destroyer collisions of 2017, were read aloud during a memorial service here on Thursday.

About 60 sailors and civilians gathered at Ombudsman Park to pay their respects. Part of the Navy Gold Star Program's Bells Across America for Fallen Service Members, the hourlong memorial was being mirrored at bases across the world.

"This ceremony is very important, as it sets time aside for us all to recognize the contributions that the fallen have made in our community and throughout our great Navy," said Yokosuka's commander, Capt. Rich Jarrett, during the ceremony.

After a prayer and Jarrett's remarks, sailors in dress whites gathered in front of the small crowd to read off the names of the sailors being remembered. A

ship's bell was rung as each finished reading their list of names.

The event also featured a display of dozens of pairs of boots, representing the sailors who lost their lives, along with photos of those sailors affiliated with Yokosuka.

This year marks the sixth annual Bells Across America service, but the first commemoration at Yokosuka. It honored not only those who died in the past year, but 17 sailors lost four years ago in two collisions involving the Yokosuka-based guided-missile destroyers USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S. McCain.

In June 2017, the Fitzgerald collided with a Philippine-flagged container vessel, killing seven sailors in Japanese waters. Just two months later, 10 sailors died aboard the McCain after the ship collided with a Liberian-flagged tanker near Singapore.

"We wanted to make sure we did that in this initial event, so that it could be recognized, at least for the first time," Jarrett told Stars and Stripes after the ceremony.

Woman thanks Marines who rescued her from Va. flood

By **CHAD GARLAND**
Stars and Stripes

A woman who shot a viral video of Marines in dress blue-white uniforms rescuing her from floodwaters on a northern Virginia road thanked two of the service members at their barracks this week.

Virginia Waller-Torres met Monday with two of the half-dozen Marines who waded through knee-high water in their ceremonial white trousers during a downpour to push her Mini Cooper on Columbia Pike in Arlington, near the Pentagon.

"Marine power! ... This is so cool," Waller-Torres says in the clip as the car is pushed past a parked Marine Corps bus emblazoned with the service's emblem. "Oh, my God, this is the most American thing ever."

The car was on a highway exit when it was hit by the flash flood, stalling the engine, she said in an online post. There was no safe way to exit as cars kept passing.

The Marines pushed the car to a spot under a nearby overpass,

where the driver and Waller-Torres could get out. Police arrived soon after and took over.

Cpls. Jared Tosner and Mitchell Wojtowicz met with Waller-Torres at the Marine Corps Barracks Washington, also known as 8th & I, where they presented her with a challenge coin.

Her Marine rescuers are members of the service's Body Bearer section, an elite unit of hand-picked service members who perform funerals for Marines, veterans and their family members, as well as presidents and other dignitaries.

They had done five funerals earlier that day at Arlington National Cemetery, 8th & I said on Facebook. Tosner told Fox 5 in Washington earlier this week that they'd just completed a 3 p.m. funeral and saw it as a "small task" to give the Mini a push.

"Definitely didn't do it for attention or views or anything like that," Tosner said. "Just trying to do the right thing when no one's watching. In this case, somebody was recording."

Biden wants Dems to fix split on \$3.5T plan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With a personal push, President Joe Biden pressed fellow Democrats to hasten work on his big “build back better” agenda, telling them to come up with a final framework and their best topline budget figure as the party labors to bridge its divisions in Congress ahead of crucial voting deadlines.

Biden and Democratic House and Senate lawmakers met for hours of back-to-back-to-back private White House sessions stretching into Wednesday evening, convened at a pivotal juncture for Biden’s \$3.5 trillion package as lawmakers struggle to draft details of the ambitious effort. With Republicans solidly op-

posed, Democratic leaders are counting on the president to galvanize consensus between progressives and centrists in their party.

Biden first conferred with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, then held separate sessions with both moderate and progressive senators and representatives. The president listened intently, lawmakers said, but also indicated strongly that he wanted progress soon, by next week.

“We’re in good shape,” Pelosi told reporters after returning to the Capitol.

The White House called the meetings “productive and candid” and said follow-up work

would be immediately underway. Earlier in the day, press secretary Jen Psaki said the White House realized that with time growing short, “there needs to be deeper engagement by the president.”

The intense focus on Biden’s big-money domestic proposal showcases how much is at stake politically for the president and his party in Congress. The administration has suffered setbacks elsewhere, notably with the Afghanistan withdrawal and prolonged COVID-19 crisis, and Democrats are running short of time, anxious to make good on campaign promises.

Congress is racing toward Monday’s deadline for a House vote on the first part of Biden’s

plan — a \$1 trillion public works measure — which now also serves as a deadline for producing a compromise framework for the broader package.

At one point, Biden told the lawmakers there were plenty of conference rooms at the White House they could use to hunker down this weekend as some suggested they roll up their sleeves and stay to get final details done.

Sen. Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, a key centrist who has balked at the \$3.5 trillion price tag, said the president told him to come up with a number he could live with.

“He just basically said, ‘Find it,’” Manchin said. “‘Just work on it, give me a number.’”

US jobless claims tick up from near a pandemic low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment aid rose last week for a second straight week to 351,000, a sign that the delta variant of the coronavirus may be disrupting the job market’s recovery, at least temporarily.

Thursday’s report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims rose by 16,000 from the previous week. As the job market has strengthened, unemployment aid applications, which generally track layoffs, have tumbled since topping 900,000 early this year, reflecting the economy’s reopening after the pandemic recession.

Still, jobless claims remain somewhat elevated: Before the pandemic tore through the economy in March 2020, they generally numbered about 220,000 a week.

America’s employers have rapidly increased their hiring since they slashed 22 million jobs in March and April 2020 as

the pandemic — and the shutdowns meant to contain it — brought economic activity to a near-standstill. Since then, the economy has recovered about 17 million jobs as the rollout of vaccines encouraged businesses to open and expand hours and Americans to go back out to shop, travel and dine out.

But hiring, which has averaged more than 585,000 jobs a month this year, slowed to just 235,000 in August as the delta variant disrupted the recovery.

Overall, 2.8 million Americans were receiving unemployment benefits during the week of Sept. 11, up by 131,000 from the week before.

Earlier this month, more than 8 million people lost all their unemployment benefits with the expiration of two federal programs that covered gig workers and people who have been jobless for more than six months. Those emergency programs had been created in March of last year to help ease the economic hardship caused by the pandemic.

After flooding in Northeast, insurance woes hit residents

Associated Press

NEW YORK — After being pummeled by two tropical storms that submerged basements, cracked home foundations and destroyed belongings, Northeastern U.S. residents still in the throes of recovery are being hit with another unexpected blow: Thousands of families are now swamped with financial losses because they didn’t have flood insurance.

Most of those caught off guard by the intense downpours from the remnants of Hurricane Ida and Tropical Storm Henri lived in areas outside of coastal floodplains, making flood insurance an afterthought for most of the working-class families whose neighborhoods were among the hardest hit.

“When we called the insurance company, the first thing they told us is that they don’t provide any assistance for anything that’s caused by a storm. And they left it at that,” Amit Shivprasad said, his rising voice echoing frustrations shared among his neighbors in the Ja-

maica section of Queens.

For weeks now, Shivprasad and his parents have been crammed into a relative’s apartment after New York City building inspectors declared their home uninhabitable.

Floodwaters from Ida, exacerbated by overflowing storm and sewer drains, ripped through an exterior wall and drowned two of the family’s tenants in a basement apartment. The storm killed about 50 people across the Northeast, many of whom drowned in basement apartments or in cars. It lashed the region less than two weeks after a drenching from Henri.

Residents in Shivprasad’s neighborhood have long complained about inadequate drainage that makes flooding a frequent worry.

“This is not a flood zone, which is something I was shocked at,” said Shivprasad, whose family home lies 4 miles inland from the nearest flood plain. If it were in a flood zone, the family’s mortgage company would have likely required flood insurance.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Inmate's baby born inside correctional institution

CT EAST LYME — An inmate gave birth inside a Connecticut prison after her labor proceeded too quickly to get her to a hospital, officials said.

The woman, who was not identified, was admitted to the York Correctional Institution on charges of violating a protective order, the state Department of Correction said in a news release.

A medical assessment determined that the woman, who is in her early 20s, was about eight months pregnant and was detoxing from opiates, the department said. She was assigned to the medical unit, where she could be closely monitored.

The woman went into labor the next day, and staff members called 911. The baby was delivered before the ambulance arrived, the Department of Correction said. The woman and the baby were later taken to a hospital.

Governor withdraws as option to coach team

WV LEWISBURG — West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice has withdrawn from consideration as the coach of a boys high school basketball team where he already is the girls coach.

In a letter to the Greenbrier Board of Education on Tuesday, Justice asked that a boys coach be named soon at Greenbrier East High School with practices for the 2021-22 season starting in a month.

Last month the board rejected a motion to hire Justice as boys coach. The board is looking to replace former NBA player Bimbo Coles, who resigned in July.

Justice served as the boys coach from 2010 to 2017, his first year as governor. He has coached the girls team since 2000, winning a state championship in 2012.

Fugitive from state prison captured

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — An escapee from a southeastern Oklahoma state prison is back in custody, according to the Oklahoma State Department of Corrections.

Rodney Williams, 38, was captured without incident Monday night in Oklahoma City, about 170 miles northwest of the Jim E. Hamilton Correctional Center in Hodgen from which he was reported missing Saturday.

Williams is serving a 15-year sentence for a drug trafficking conviction in Tulsa County, according to prisons spokesperson Justin Wolf.

Wolf said Williams disappeared from the minimum-security prison after fashioning a makeshift dummy on his bed and covering it with a blanket.

Info sought on bighorn sheep ram poaching

AZ BUCKEYE — Officials with the Arizona Game and Fish Department are still seeking information about the poaching of a mature desert bighorn sheep ram south of Buckeye.

The incident occurred July 10 in the Buckeye Hills at Gillespie Dam.

Department officials said they have reason to believe a group of five men seen leaving the scene in two vehicles may have been involved.

The Game and Fish Department's Operation Game Thief

program has offered \$2,500 for information leading to a conviction. The Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society has offered an additional \$2,500.

City drops citations against protesters

NV RENO — A lawyer for five advocates for Reno's homeless who were cited for remaining in a park after hours to protest a sweep of homeless encampments said city prosecutors have dropped the case against them.

The five advocates who earlier pleaded not guilty to the charges accusing them of the after-hours violation were scheduled to go to trial Monday. But Kenneth Stover, their lawyer, told the Reno Gazette Journal a prosecutor called the judge at the last minute and offered to drop the case if the advocates agreed not to sue the city.

The advocates were among those who occupied the downtown Reno City Plaza in the first week of June to protest the city's efforts to remove homeless camps in May.

Man arrested after killing fellow hunter

CO DURANGO — Two hunters from Pennsylvania were trying to lure an elk in southwestern Colorado when one of them mistook a bow hunter for prey and fatally shot him, according to an arrest affidavit.

Gregory Gabrisch, 31, of Houston, died from a gunshot wound in the San Juan National Forest north of Rico, and one of the Pennsylvania hunters was arrested on suspicion of criminally negligent homicide, a felony.

The man who was arrested was hunting with a .50-caliber black powder rifle as his partner used a calling device to lure elk into range, The Durango Herald reported. The device mimics the sound a bull elk would make when challenging other bulls or when trying to find a cow elk.

Gabrisch was wearing dark brown camouflage when he was shot. Bow hunters in Colorado are not required to wear daylight fluorescent orange, which breaks up the camouflage pattern needed to get close to game.

Investigators say the 67-year-old hunter from Elizabeth, Pa., who killed Gabrisch should have identified his target before shooting.

Hydroelectric plant construction done

KY BERE A — Berea College has completed work on a hydroelectric plant that will supply renewable power generated from the Kentucky River.

The college in eastern Kentucky near the Daniel Boone National Forest said the small-scale plant can generate 2.64 megawatts, or about half the electricity the campus uses in a year.

"The hydroelectric generating plant shows that local green initiatives like this one can be financially feasible and create reliable sources of income and acceptable rates of return on investment," Berea College President Lyle Roelofs said in a media release from the college.

The \$10 million hydroelectric station will provide energy to Jackson Energy Cooperative customers, and revenue generated will go to the college's general fund.

— From wire reports

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Rams' Kupp has connection with Stafford

Associated Press

Cooper Kupp realizes he isn't in charge of where he sits on the NFL's receiving charts, so he isn't terribly impressed by his lofty perch early this season.

When Kupp isn't getting many targets, the Los Angeles Rams receiver focuses on blocking, acting as a decoy or doing anything else to create space and time for his offense.

And when a quarterback is getting the ball to him with the frequency of Matthew Stafford for the unbeaten Rams this season, Kupp doesn't track his stats or respond to his mentions on Twitter, even though he's getting love for the thousands of fantasy football victories he's delivering.

"I try to keep a clear mind, stay off of all the social media stuff," Kupp said with a grin Wednesday. "When I get home, I've got a couple of hours to spend with my kids, so I try to stay off the TV, too. The clearer the mind, the better it is for me."

Another thing that's increasingly clear is Kupp's status as an elite NFL receiver. The fifth-year pro is tied for the NFL lead with 16 catches, and his 271 yards are third in the league, as are his three touchdown receptions.

His receiving partnership with Robert Woods has been one of the NFL's best for

five years now, but Kupp is on center stage as the Rams (2-0) host the defending Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers (2-0) on Sunday in a marquee early season matchup.

Kupp and Woods tore up the Bucs last year during Los Angeles' 27-24 win at Tampa Bay. Kupp had 11 catches for 145 yards, while Woods went off for 12 catches, 130 yards and a touchdown.

Kupp hopes to make a similar impact on Sunday's game, even if it's not borne out in numbers.

"Everyone expects to go out there and produce, and sometimes that production looks differently," Kupp said. "Sometimes it shows up in the box score, sometimes it doesn't. The goal is to always be a positive, whatever you're asked to do. If it's getting someone else open, if it's drawing coverage, if it's blocking, everyone wants to be a positive, moving our offense forward. These last couple of weeks, and last year against the Bucs, it showed up in the box score."

Kupp has been a steady, productive wideout when healthy for his entire career, exceeding most expectations for a third-round pick out of Eastern Washington. He has been a mainstay of the Rams' offense under coach Sean McVay, who arrived in Los Angeles a few months before Kupp and imme-

diately identified multiple ways to maximize Kupp's strengths.

But even McVay is struck by how prolific Kupp has been in his first two games with Stafford, the veteran quarterback who replaced Kupp's good friend, Jared Goff.

"I think Cooper has done a great job maximizing his opportunities," McVay said. "Matthew has done a really good job of getting the ball where the coverage dictates ... (but) Cooper has demonstrated why he's a special player in this league the last couple of weeks."

Kupp was a monster last weekend in Indianapolis, racking up nine catches for 163 yards and two touchdowns. He has begun his partnership with Stafford by posting his first back-to-back 100-yard receiving games since early in the 2019 season, which he finished with a career-best 94 catches for 1,161 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Kupp plays in the slot, but not exclusively — nobody does the same thing on every play in McVay's offensive schemes, and Kupp frequently lines up within touching distance of the offensive line, among other roles. He excels at making tacklers miss after getting the ball in space: He is third in the NFL in yards after the catch (146) this season after finishing fifth in 2020 and 11th in 2019.

Carr's aggressive play drives unbeaten Raiders

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Las Vegas coach Jon Gruden wants no part of negativity, and he doesn't want it anywhere near his Raiders.

"There's enough of it in politics, in our social world right now, and we're here to try to create a positive Las Vegas vibe and have some fun here," Gruden said Wednesday.

And there might not be anything more synonymous in the NFL, with a Las Vegas vibe, than big plays that electrify a sellout crowd.

The Raiders are 2-0, in large part because of an improved defense that is making timely plays and putting the football back in the hands of quarterback Derek Carr.

Carr is equally responsible for Las Vegas being one of two undefeated teams in the AFC, along with Denver. The eight-year veteran QB is tied with Tampa Bay's Tom Brady for the most pass plays covering 20 or more yards, with 12 apiece.

And, seven of Carr's dozen passes were

actually thrown 20 or more yards, which ranks second only to Arizona's Kyler Murray (8).

In 2020, Carr finished with 16 completions of 20 yards.

"We still have plenty of areas to clean up, but yeah, I mean when you call a play that works, whether it's a short-yardage conversion or a goal-line conversion or a long, big play, you have to get excited about something," Gruden said. "There's enough negativity out there to kill any rat right now. So I do get excited when we make a good play, especially a big play in an explosive game."

Carr's 817 yards passing leads the NFL, well ahead of Murray, who is second with 689 yards.

Even more impressive, Carr's numbers come from playing behind a patchwork offensive line that has been short-handed since the season started. Carr has been under pressure and blitzed 29 times — second-highest in the league — by two of the more stringent defensive units in the league from Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

Carr, who was better known for check-downs earlier in his career, has played with more confidence while making a concerted effort to get the ball downfield.

"I just try and execute it the best possible way I can, and the way coach Gruden designs the play," Carr said. "We've been fortunate that our defense has been playing at such a high level. We've been able to take some shots, take some chances, and it's been nice that some of those have worked out for us."

It worked out well, in fact.

Per SportRadar, Carr's average pass has traveled a career-high 8.9 yards beyond the line of scrimmage, more than 2 yards from his average in 2019, when he ranked near the bottom of the league.

"There is a lot to work on with the variety of offense that we have," Carr said. "If one thing maybe isn't going the way we wanted to, then maybe we go to this, or we have this, we can tap into that, and I still feel there are some things that we haven't been able to do yet that I'm excited to show."

College Football Playoff expansion stalls

Associated Press

A plan to expand the College Football Playoff stalled Wednesday when the college sports administrators who oversee the postseason system were unable to reach consensus on whether to grow the postseason format from four to 12 teams.

The 10 major college conference commissioners and Notre Dame's athletic director who make up the CFP management committee met to share feedback from their members and address concerns about the expansion proposal that was unveiled in June.

"There's still issues that need to be discussed," CFP Executive Director Bill Hancock told AP.

Among the issues: the number of teams. Hancock said an eight-team format was part of the discussions Wednesday.

The meeting in the Dallas area, which was attended in person by some of the participants

and virtually by others, was a prelude to a session in Chicago next week that was supposed to include the CFP board of managers.

The board is comprised of university presidents and chancellors representing each conference. The board has final say in all matters related to the playoff and there was hope the management committee would bring the presidents a recommendation to approve a format change.

Instead, the management committee will reconvene Tuesday, with the presidents joining via Zoom.

"There won't be a vote next week," Hancock said. "Next week will be, I'll call it an informational meeting. It's complicated."

Hancock added: "We have time."

When the process first began, the 2023 season seemed like the soonest an expansion plan could be implemented.

After the latest meeting, Hancock talked about 2024.

"I can't say what the timetable might be, but I would say if we want to expand beginning in the 2024 season, we have a few months," he said. "But if we want to change the format beginning in 2026, after the 12-year contract (with ESPN) is over, we have a couple of years."

The management committee and presidents routinely meet at the site of the College Football Playoff national championship game to discuss the state of the CFP. This season's game will be held on Jan. 10 in Indianapolis.

Since the public rollout of the 12-team playoff plan, there have been concerns raised about components of the format, including the possibility of increasing the number of games in a season required to play for a championship to as many as 17.

There were also questions

about the impact subsequent conference realignment could have on a new version of the CFP.

In July, the Southeastern Conference invited Texas and Oklahoma to leave the Big 12 and join the powerhouse league in 2025 after the Big 12's current television contracts expire.

The Big 12 responded by inviting American Athletic Conference members Houston, Cincinnati and Central Florida to join the league along with BYU, which is a football independent that also competes in the West Coast Conference.

The 12-team plan was developed over two years by four members of the management committee: SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey, Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby, Mountain West Commissioner Craig Thompson and Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick. The group studied various formats, including six, eight and 16 teams.

Irish QB Coan ready for rugged reunion vs. Badgers

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Jack Coan admits it is going to be a little strange this Saturday when No. 12 Notre Dame takes on his old team, No. 18 Wisconsin, at Chicago's Soldier Field.

"It's definitely going to be weird," the 22-year-old grad transfer quarterback said. "It's going to be a lot of my friends I'm going to be playing against, guys I still talk to today. But at the end of the day, it's just another football game and I like to think I won't get more excited for one game than the next."

Both his current coach, Brian Kelly, and his old coach, Paul Chryst, said they believe Coan will handle his emotions well.

"Jack is a competitor — he loved his time at Wisconsin," Kelly said. "But it's a new chapter for him. He's very mature, level-

headed. He wants to beat Wisconsin."

Said Chryst: "Obviously we have respect for Jack and appreciate who he is as a person and player here. But it's Wisconsin versus Notre Dame."

And it's a big game for both teams. The Badgers (1-1, 0-1 Big Ten) have one of the nation's stingiest defenses but could use a Top 25 win after their season-opening loss at home to Penn State. The Fighting Irish, meanwhile, have won all three of their games but hardly in dominating fashion.

The 6-foot-3 $\frac{3}{4}$, 223-pound Coan, a standout athlete at Sayville (N.Y.) High School, turned down a lacrosse scholarship at Notre Dame to play quarterback at Wisconsin where in 25 games, he completed nearly 68% of his passes for 3,278 yards and 23 touchdowns against eight inter-

ceptions and went 12-6 as a starter.

Prior to last season, Coan suffered a broken foot that required season-ending surgery. The Badgers went 4-3 behind quarterback Graham Mertz and elected to go forward with him. So Coan entered the transfer portal after receiving his degree and moved to South Bend last January.

With the Fighting Irish replacing their all-time winningest quarterback Ian Book, Coan beat out sophomore Drew Pyne and freshman Tyler Buchner. Coan has competed nearly 63% of his passes for 828 yards and eight touchdowns, with four of those coming in an overtime win at Florida State.

Two weeks ago, Coan drove Notre Dame 75 yards in 26 seconds and threw the game-winning touchdown pass to Michael

Mayer with a dislocated middle finger on his throwing hand to beat Toledo. Last week, he overcame a sluggish start to finish 15-for-31 passing for 223 yards and two TDs against Purdue.

There have been some down moments as well. Coan has turned the ball over three times, including two interceptions, and he has been sacked 14 times behind the Irish's rebuilding offensive line — an ominous sign against the fearsome Wisconsin defense. Coan has shared some playing time the last two games with the more mobile Buchner.

"I think my timing was off a little bit (against Purdue) and I need to be a little more accurate," said Coan, who will be facing a Badgers defense that is first nationally against the run (33 yards allowed per game) and second in total defense (194.5 yards).

Rays down Jays, clinch playoff berth

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Austin Meadows hit a three-run homer in a six-run third inning, and the Tampa Bay Rays clinched a postseason berth with a 7-1 victory Wednesday over the Toronto Blue Jays.

The AL East-leading Rays (94-59) secured a postseason berth for the third season in a row and the seventh time since 2008. The defending AL champions lost the World Series to the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games last year.

Giants 8, Padres 6: Buster Posey had four hits and scored three times, Kris Bryant hit a bases-clearing double and reliever Camilo Doval (4-1) got San Francisco out of a big jam in a win at free-falling San Diego.

The Giants got some help in their push for their first division title since 2012 when the defending World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers lost 10-5 at Colorado. The Dodgers have won the division eight straight seasons.

Yankees 7, Rangers 3: Gleyber Torres doubled home Joey Gallo for the tiebreaking run in the eighth inning, Gary Sánchez followed with a two-run homer and host New York rallied past Texas for a three-game sweep heading into a divisional stretch that will decide its postseason fate.

The Yankees made two errors, allowed two stolen bases, had a baserunner sprint

through a stop sign but scored easily and another thrown out at home plate.

Phillies 4, Orioles 3: Bryce Harper threw out the tying run at the plate in the eighth inning and Andrew McCutchen hit a two-run home run to keep host Philadelphia in the hunt in the NL East race.

The Phillies took two of three against 104-loss Baltimore. Next up is a four-game series against the Pirates.

Rockies 10, Dodgers 5: Sam Hilliard lined a three-run homer, C.J. Cron had four hits and Colorado snapped a five-game skid at Coors Field by beating NL West title-chasing Los Angeles. The Dodgers slipped to two games behind division-leading San Francisco, which beat San Diego.

Red Sox 12, Mets 5: Kyle Schwarber homered twice and scored four times, and Chris Sale struck out eight in five innings as host Boston won its seventh straight.

The Red Sox scored in each of the first six innings and have not lost since Sept. 13.

Braves 9, Diamondbacks 2: Adam Duval lost a home run to a baserunning miscue, but Atlanta rebounded with homers by Austin Riley, Ozzie Albies and Freddie Freeman in winning at Arizona.

Ian Anderson pitched two-hit ball in six-plus innings as the Braves (80-70) won their fifth straight and maintained a three-game lead over Philadelphia in the NL East.

Astros 9, Angels 5 (12): Jose Altuve hit a two-run double in the 12th inning and Houston, after throwing out Shohei Ohtani at the plate to preserve a tie, broke away to win at Los Angeles.

The Astros, who have won four straight and seven of eight, reduced their magic number to three for clinching their fourth AL West title in five seasons.

Mariners 4, Athletics 1: Kyle Seager hit his 35th home run, Ty France also connected and Seattle moved up in the playoff race, winning at Oakland for its fourth straight victory.

The Mariners topped the A's for the third day in row to pull within 2 ½ games of the Yankees for the second AL wild card. The Athletics fell 3 ½ back of New York.

Twins 5, Cubs 4: Max Kepler homered twice, rookie Joe Ryan struck out a season-high 11 and Minnesota dealt host Chicago its ninth loss in 10 games.

Cardinals 11, Brewers 2: Paul Goldschmidt and Tyler O'Neill homered as St. Louis won its 11th straight game and extended its lead for the second NL wild-card spot with a win at NL Central-leading Milwaukee, which dropped its fourth straight.

Nationals 7, Marlins 5: Juan Soto took over the NL batting lead, getting three hits and three RBIs in Washington's win at Miami.

Spieth-Thomas pairing crucial to U.S. Ryder Cup plan

Associated Press

SHEBOYGAN, Wis. — The buzz around Whistling Straits is about big drives, huge throngs of people and a U.S. team so talented it will have to search for ways to throw away this Ryder Cup.

But the Americans' chances of reclaiming the Cup will likely revolve around a pair of young stars who became fast friends long before they became household names.

Jordan Spieth and Justin Thomas will almost surely be paired together in both foursomes and fourballs beginning Friday on the shore of Lake Michigan. What they deliver will go a long way toward deciding the Americans' chances of reversing their fortunes in a team event that has

not gone their way in recent years.

They won big together outside Paris three years ago, going 3-1 in the team matches. That wasn't enough to make up for teammates collapsing around them, but it was a pretty good indication Spieth and Thomas would be forces for years to come in the Ryder Cup.

While U.S. captain Steve Stricker has some decisions to make in most pairings, the Spieth-Thomas combination isn't one of them.

"We've had a pretty good game plan from a while back, and we're putting that into play," Stricker said. "We're putting that in place."

But if there was ever a natural

pairing on an American squad focused increasingly on team camaraderie, it's Spieth and Thomas, who first met when they were 13 and Thomas was so short he was hitting fairway woods into most par 4s.

Composed beyond his years even then, Spieth came up and introduced himself to Thomas on the driving range at a junior tournament in Dallas when they were paired together in the final round.

Spieth would win that week in his first major junior event, and the two traded top finishes over the summer until both were picked to represent the U.S. in the Evian Masters Junior Cup in France. They bonded even more on the trip, and when Thomas

won a spot in the Evian Masters pro-am with Juli Inkster, it was Spieth who carried his clubs.

Eleven years later, they were both major championship winners, and their pairing together at Le Golf National in the last Ryder Cup was as natural as a plate of steak and frites.

What wasn't so natural was the experience of standing on the first tee for Thomas, who was playing in his first Ryder Cup.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," Thomas said. "Fourball is pretty kind of lenient on who goes first, who doesn't, but he was just like, do you want to go first or me? He knew it was going to take a couple holes for me to settle in, and I rode my horse until I finally got comfortable."