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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Ukraine pressures retreating Russians

Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian troops piled pressure on retreating Russian forces Tuesday, pressing a counteroffensive that has produced major gains and a stunning blow to Moscow's military prestige.

As the advance continued, Ukraine's border guard services said the army took control of Vovchansk — a town just 2 miles from Russia seized on the first day of the war. Russia acknowledged that it has withdrawn troops from areas in the northeastern region of Kharkiv in recent days.

It was not yet clear if the Ukrainian blitz, which unfolded after months of little discernible movement, could signal a turning point in the nearly seven-month war.

But the country's officials were buoyant, releasing footage showing their forces burning Russian flags and inspecting abandoned, charred tanks. In one video, border guards tore down a poster that read, "We are one people with Russia."

Momentum has switched back and forth be-

fore, and Ukraine's American allies were careful not to declare a premature victory since Russian President Vladimir Putin still has troops and resources to tap.

In the face of Russia's largest defeat since its botched attempt to capture Kyiv early in the war, Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said troops were hitting back with "massive strikes" in all sectors. But there were no immediate reports of a sudden uptick in Russian attacks.

Late Monday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his troops had so far retaken more than 2,300 square miles — an area more than twice the size of Luxembourg — in a matter of weeks.

"The movement of our troops continues," he said.

Reports of chaos abounded as Russian troops pulled out — as well as claims that they were surrendering en masse.

The claims could not be immediately verified.

Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Defense Hanna Maliar said Kyiv is trying to persuade

even more Russian soldiers to give up, launching shells filled with flyers ahead of their advance.

"Russians use you as cannon fodder. Your life doesn't mean anything for them. You don't need this war. Surrender to Armed Forces of Ukraine," the flyers read.

While dozens of towns and villages were liberated, authorities moved into several areas to investigate alleged atrocities against civilians by Russian troops.

The Kharkiv regional prosecutor's office said four bodies bearing signs of torture were found in the village of Zaliznychne. It's not clear how many other places investigators have entered.

Oleksandr Shtupun, a spokesman for the Ukrainian military's general staff, accused Russian forces of committing hundreds of war crimes in territory they once held. He said the danger of minefields in liberated towns and villages remained high, and ammunition and high explosives have been strewn across 27,000 square miles.

US avoids victory dance in Ukraine combat advances

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. leaders from President Joe Biden on down are being careful not to declare a premature victory after a Ukrainian offensive forced Russian troops into a messy retreat in the north. Instead, military officials are looking toward the fights yet to come and laying out plans to provide Ukraine more weapons and expand training, while warily awaiting Russia's response to the sudden, stunning battlefield losses.

Although there was widespread celebration of Ukraine's gains over the weekend, U.S. officials know Russian President Vladimir Putin still has troops and resources to tap, and his forces still control large swaths of the east and south.

"I agree there should be no spiking of the ball because Russia still has cards it can play," said Philip Breedlove, a retired U.S. Air Force general who was NATO's top commander from 2013 to 2016. "Ukraine is now clearly making durable changes in its east and north and I believe that if the West properly equips Ukraine, they'll be able to hold on to their

gains."

Lawmakers particularly pointed to the precision weapons and rocket systems that the U.S. and Western nations have provided to Ukraine as key to the dramatic shift in momentum, including the precision-guided High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, and the High speed Anti-Radiation Missile, or HARM, which is designed to target and destroy radar-equipped air defense systems.

"They're there, they're in theater, and they're making the difference," Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the hands of highly motivated Ukrainian fighters who are making the most of weapons ranging from off-the-shelf drones and abandoned Russian arms to advanced weapons from the West, the HIMARS are enabling Ukrainians "to turn the tide, dramatically," Coons said.

Meanwhile, a senior defense official said the U.S. is looking at future needs, including discussions about providing more intensive combat training for larger Ukraine units, a

change from current training focused on smaller teams learning to handle specific weapons.

It is also considering sending additional air defense systems, as well as lethal strike drones and more surveillance drones. The official was one of two who briefed reporters Monday on the condition of anonymity.

Ukraine's launch in recent days of a much-anticipated counteroffensive — in a different part of the country from where Russian troops occupying Ukraine had massed strength to meet it — has brought on the biggest territorial changes in months in the 200-day war, launched when Putin rolled Russian forces into the neighboring country, targeting its Western-oriented government.

The U.S. officials acknowledged that the U.S. provided information to help the Ukrainian counteroffensive, but declined to say how much or if Western officials helped strategize the idea to throw Russian forces off guard by calling attention to attack plans in the south, while actually plotting a more formidable campaign in the east.

N. Korea's nuke threat expected, South says

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

South Korea's military was not surprised by the North's latest threats and will take appropriate countermeasures if the communist regime conducts its first nuclear test since 2017, a Ministry of National Defense spokesman said Tuesday.

The ministry expected Pyongyang to announce new legislation that codified the development and use of nuclear weapons, acting spokesman Moon Hong Sik said during a press briefing in Seoul.

"[North Korea's] announcement ... shows off that [it] is a nuclear power at home and abroad, expressed it will not give up nuclear weapons and shifts the responsibility on the situation in the Korean Peninsula to South Korea and the [United States]," he said.

But the U.S. and South Korea, which remain "firm" on their goal of denuclearizing the North,

had "already anticipated" Pyongyang's desire to pursue its nuclear program, Moon added.

Pyongyang will not negotiate or discontinue its nuclear weapons program, state-run media announced Friday.

The regime will "automatically" attack hostile forces using nuclear weapons if its leaders are also attacked, according to the Korean Central News Agency.

The updated nuclear plans were codified into law Thursday during a Supreme People's Assembly session presided over by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, according to KCNA.

The North has conducted six nuclear tests and is preparing for its seventh, according to U.S. and South Korean officials.

Commercial satellite images have picked up activity around the sites where North Korea previously carried out its tests, according to recent reports by 38 North, a website devoted to analysis about North Korea, and the

Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

The growing evidence has prompted the International Atomic Energy Agency and other nuclear watchdog groups to warn against the threat throughout the year, including in June, when Director General Rafael Grossi said the "conduct of a nuclear test would contravene U.N. Security Council resolutions and would be a cause for serious concern."

The regime has conducted 18 rounds of weapons tests — more than 30 missiles launched — so far this year, which is a record.

North Korea's stance will only "further strengthen deterrence and reaction capabilities" from the U.S. and South Korea, and cause more suffering for the regime's people, Moon said.

"If North Korea tries to use nuclear weapons, the North will face overwhelming responses of the [South Korea]-U.S. alliance,

and we warn that the North Korean regime would walk into a path to self-destruction," he said.

Moon did not elaborate on what South Korea would do in response to a North Korean nuclear attack but said Seoul will work closely with Washington.

Minister of Defense Lee Jong-sup on Aug. 11 said a new North Korean nuclear test would evoke an "entirely different" response from South Korea.

The results of North Korea's parliamentary meeting basically rejects South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's self-proclaimed "audacious" offer last month. He offered North Korea significant economic assistance in exchange for denuclearization.

Kim Yo Jong, the North Korean leader's sister and a senior party official, described Yoon's offer as the "height of absurdity" and accused the leader of the democratic state of trying to score political points to boost his record-low approval ratings.

Okinawa reelects governor who opposes US base move

Associated Press

TOKYO — Okinawa's incumbent governor, who opposes an ongoing U.S. Marine base relocation forced by Japan's central government and calls for a further reduction of American troops on the southern island, secured his reelection on Sunday despite concerns of escalating tensions between China and nearby Taiwan.

Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki and his supporters declared his victory and celebrated with the chants of "banzai" soon after the exit poll results showed he beat two contenders — Atsushi Sakima, backed by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's governing bloc and who supports its base reloca-

tion plan, and another opposition-backed candidate, Mikio Shimoji.

Tamaki, who is backed by opposition parties, won 339,767 votes, or about 51% of the effective votes, over Sakima's 274,844 votes and Shimoji's 53,677, according to the final results released Monday by the Okinawa prefecture. Polls were held Sunday before his first four-year term is to end later this month.

The plan to move U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma from a crowded neighborhood to a less populated area on the island has already been delayed for years.

"My commitment to resolve the U.S. military base problem for the future of Okinawa has never been shaken," Tamaki said.

Plea deal could be in the works for 9/11 mastermind

Boston Herald

A possible plea deal with five remaining al-Qaida terrorists locked up in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has some in the 9/11 community reeling just as the anniversary of the terrorist attack marked its 21st year.

"This is not justice for the 3,000 people who died that day and the many more who have since. This is a joke," said Debra Burlingame, whose brother was one of the pilots killed on 9/11.

Burlingame, who is an attorney, has learned that the Biden administration could be negotiating potential plea deals to remove the death penalty against 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four other alleged

accomplices.

"Do they want to trade Khalid Sheikh Mohammed? I intend to fight this with everything I have," she said Monday.

Burlingame's brother was one of the pilots killed on Flight 77 that the terrorists slammed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, killing 64 people on the plane and 125 on the ground.

Eighteen months later, Mohammed was captured. He was al-Qaida's No. 3 leader at the time.

Mohammed's day in court — a military tribunal on Gitmo — has been plagued by endless delays and then the pandemic.

Pretrial hearings scheduled for early fall have now been canceled.

US inflation slows, yet still a heavy burden

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. inflation slowed for a second straight month on a sharp fall in gas prices, yet excluding energy most other items got more expensive in August, a sign that inflation remains a heavy burden for American households.

Consumer prices surged 8.3% in August compared with a year earlier, the government said Tuesday, down from an 8.5% jump in July and a four-decade high of 9.1% in June. On a monthly basis, prices rose 0.1%, after a flat reading in July.

But excluding the volatile food and energy categories, so-called core prices jumped 0.6% from July to August — up sharply from 0.3% the previous month and dashing hopes, for now, that core prices might be starting to moderate. In the 12 months ending in August, core prices jumped 6.3%, up from 5.9% in July. Rents, medical care services and new cars all grew more expensive in August.

Core prices typically provide a clearer read on where costs are headed than overall inflation does. Stock index futures tumbled

on the worse-than-expected core figures, with many investors fearful that the Federal Reserve will now raise interest rates even faster in its drive to curb inflation.

Inflation remains far higher than many Americans have ever experienced and is keeping pressure on the Fed. The central bank is expected to announce another big increase in its benchmark interest rate next week, which will lead to higher costs for many consumer and business loans.

Inflation has escalated families' grocery bills, rents and utility costs, among other expenses, inflicting hardships on many households and deepening gloom about the economy despite strong job growth and low unemployment. Groceries continue to rise rapidly, jumping 0.7% from July to August. In the past year, they have soared 13.5% — the biggest 12-month increase since 1979.

Even if inflation peaks, economists expect it could take two years or more to fall back to something close to the Fed's annual 2% target. The cost of rental apartments and other services, such as health care, are likely to keep rising in the months ahead.

Republicans have sought to make infla-

tion a central issue in the midterm congressional elections. They blame President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus package passed last year for much of the increase. Many economists generally agree, though they also say that snarled supply chains, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and widespread shortages of items like semiconductors have been factors in the inflation surge.

Yet the signs that inflation might have peaked — or will soon — could bolster Democrats' prospects in the midterm elections and may already have contributed to slightly higher public approval ratings for Biden. In his speeches, Biden has generally stopped referring to the impact of high prices on family budgets. He has instead highlighted his administration's recent legislative accomplishments, including a law enacted last month that's intended to reduce pharmaceutical prices and fight climate change.

Nationally, the average cost of a gallon of gas has dropped to \$3.71, down from just above \$5 in mid-June. Many businesses are also reporting signs that supply backlogs and inflation are beginning to fade.

Biden hopes ending cancer can be a 'national purpose'

Associated Press

BOSTON — President Joe Biden on Monday urged Americans to come together for a new "national purpose" — his administration's effort to end cancer "as we know it."

At the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Biden channeled JFK's famed moonshot speech 60 years ago, likening the space race to his own effort and hoping it, too, would galvanize Americans.

Biden hopes to move the U.S. closer to the goal he set in February of cutting U.S. cancer fatalities by 50% over the next 25 years and dramatically improving the lives of caregivers and those suffering from cancer. Experts say the objective is attainable.

In his speech, Biden called on the private sector to make drugs more affordable, and data more

regularly available. He ticked off medical advancements possible with focused research, funding and data.

And he spoke of a new federally backed study that seeks evidence for using blood tests to screen against multiple cancers.

Danielle Carnival, the White House coordinator for the effort, told The Associated Press that the administration sees huge potential in the commencement of the blood diagnostic study on identifying cancers.

"One of the most promising technologies has been the development of blood tests that offer the promise of detecting multiple cancers in a single blood test and really imagining the impact that could have on our ability to detect cancer early and in a more equitable way," Carnival said.

Justice lawyers OK with Trump's pick for arbiter

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department said Monday that it was willing to accept one of Donald Trump's picks for an independent arbiter to review documents seized during an FBI search of the former president's Florida home last month.

The accommodation could help accelerate the selection process and shorten any delays caused by the appointment of the so-called special master. The judge in the case, granting a request from the Trump team, said last week that she would appoint a neutral arbiter to go through the records and weed out any that may be covered by executive privilege or attorney-client privilege.

Department lawyers said in a filing Monday night that, in addition to the two retired judges whom they earlier recommend-

ed, they would also be satisfied with one of the Trump team selections — Raymond Dearie, the former chief judge of the federal court in the Eastern District of New York.

The back-and-forth over the special master came as Trump's lawyers in a 21-page filing Monday dismissed the former president's retention of top-secret documents at Mar-a-Lago as a "storage dispute" and urged Cannon to keep in place a directive that temporarily halted key aspects of the Justice Department's criminal probe.

The filing underscores the significant factual and legal disagreements between lawyers for Trump and the U.S. government as the Justice Department looks to move forward with its criminal investigation into the retention of national defense information at Mar-a-Lago.

Heavy rains unleash mudslides, prompt California evacuations

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Heavy rains Monday unleashed mudslides in a mountain area east of Los Angeles that burned two years ago, sending boulders and other debris across roads and prompting evacuation and shelter-in-place orders for thousands of residents.

Firefighters went street by street in the community of Forest Falls to make sure no residents were trapped. Eric Sherwin, spokesperson for the San Bernardino County Fire Department, said crews hadn't found anyone who needed to be rescued and no one was reported missing.

Many structures in the area had varying levels of damage, Sherwin said, including a commercial building where the mud was so high it collapsed the roof.

The rains were the remnants of a tropical storm that brought high winds and some badly needed rainfall to drought-stricken Southern California

last week, helping firefighters largely corral a wildfire that had been burning out of control about 20 miles south of the mudslides.

The mud flows and flash flooding occurred in parts of the San Bernardino Mountains where there are burn scars — areas where there's little vegetation to hold the soil — from the 2020 wildfires.

"All of that dirt turns to mud and starts slipping down the mountain," Sherwin said.

One of the wildfires, the El Dorado Fire, was sparked by a smoke device used by a couple to reveal their baby's gender. A firefighter died and the couple was criminally charged in a pending case.

Concerns about additional mud and debris flows Monday night prompted authorities to put 2,000 homes in the San Bernardino Mountain communities of Oak Glen and Forest Falls under evacuation orders after nearly 2 inches of rain fell on Yucaipa Ridge.

For some homes in Forest Falls it was too late to evacuate and residents were told to shelter in place through the night because it was safer than venturing out.

"The roads are compromised or they're covered in debris," Sherwin said, adding that crews planned to work all night using heavy equipment to clear routes.

The mudslides came after a week that saw California endure a record-long heatwave, where temperatures in many parts of the state rocketed past 100 degrees and pushed the state's electrical grid to the breaking point as air conditioners sucked up power.

The Fairview Fire and the Mosquito Fire burning east of Sacramento broke out and raged out of control.

The tropical storm aided crews battling the Fairview Fire about 75 miles southeast of Los Angeles.

The 44-square-mile blaze was 56% contained by late Monday.

Ex-official: Taliban is 'gender apartheid'

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — A former member of Afghanistan's parliament urged the world on Monday to label the Taliban a "gender apartheid" regime because of its crackdown on human rights, saying the apartheid label was a catalyst for change in South Africa and can be a catalyst for change in Afghanistan.

Naheed Farid, a women's rights activist who was the youngest-ever politician elected to parliament in 2010, told a U.N. news conference that as a result of severe restrictions on women's movements, an end to secondary-school education for girls, and ban on jobs for women, "I'm hearing more and more stories from Afghan women choosing to take their life out of hopelessness and despair."

"This is the ultimate indicator on how bad the situation is for Afghan women and girls — that they are choosing death, and that this is preferred for them than living under the Taliban regime," she said.

Farid, now at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs, said she isn't the first person to call the Taliban a "gender apartheid" regime but she said "the inaction of the international community and decision-makers at large makes it important for all of us to repeat this" so the voices of women in Afghanistan who can't speak out aren't forgotten.

She expressed hope that world leaders meeting next week would make time to listen to Afghan women living in exile, and start grasping that "gender apartheid" is happening in Afghanistan as women are being "used and misused," she said.

Monkeypox death confirmed in Calif.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A Los Angeles County resident with a compromised immune system has died from monkeypox, local health officials announced Monday. It's believed to be the first U.S. fatality from the disease.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health announced the cause of death, and a spokesperson said it was confirmed by an autopsy. The patient was severely immunocompromised and had been hospitalized. No other information on the person was released.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks cases and has not confirmed any U.S. deaths from the disease. LA County officials say they worked with the CDC on their case.

A CDC spokesperson confirmed the cooperation but did not immediately respond when asked if this was the first U.S. death.

Texas public health officials on Aug. 30 reported the death of a person who had been diagnosed with monkeypox. The person was severely immunocompromised and their case is under investigation to determine what role monkeypox may have played in their death.

Monkeypox is spread through close skin-to-skin contact and prolonged exposure to respiratory droplets. It can cause a rash, fever, body aches and chills. Relatively few people require hospitalizations and only a handful of deaths worldwide have been directly linked to the disease.

The CDC recommends the monkeypox vaccine for people who are a close contact of someone who has disease; people who know a sexual partner was diagnosed in the past two weeks; and gay or bisexual men who had multiple sexual partners in the last two weeks in an area with known virus spread.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Sword wielding man fatally shot by police

AZ PHOENIX — A man armed with a samurai sword was fatally shot by police in north Phoenix, authorities said.

Police said officers responded to a call that a man with a sword was striking the fence at the Cactus Park police substation.

The man — later identified as 40-year-old Aaron Baughman — was at the employee gate of the precinct. Police said officers ordered Baughman to drop the weapon, but he allegedly moved toward them with the sword raised and was shot.

Baughman was taken to a hospital where he died from his injuries, according to police.

'Cruel prank' led to panic, lockdown at high school

FL DAYTONA BEACH — A shooting scare at a central Florida high school was a "cruel prank" carried out by two groups of students who now face criminal charges and possible expulsion, police said.

Rumors, lies and conspiracy theories have been "floating around" on social media since the lockdown at Mainland High School, Daytona Beach police said in a lengthy Facebook post.

Officials at the school became aware of a threat written on a bathroom stall. It was determined that no threat existed, police said.

On Friday, two groups of students in the cafeteria were seen on video "getting into specific positions and locations within the cafeteria, timing their actions" and several female students told an administrator someone had a gun.

At the same time, a male student ran from the building "causing a large crowd to follow him."

Video showed that no one appeared to have a gun, police said.

8 injured, 3 seriously, when 2 firetrucks collide

NJ PATERSON — A pair of firetrucks collided while responding to a blaze in New Jersey, injuring eight firefighters, three of them seriously, authorities said.

Officials in Paterson said the firetrucks were responding to a blaze at a Targets Closeout store when they collided at an intersection. The crash sent one firetruck into a tree and the other into a supermarket.

Eight firefighters were taken to St. Joseph's University Medical Center. Chief Brian McDermott of the Paterson fire department told NorthJersey.com that the three most seriously injured were in stable condition with "non-life-threatening" injuries.

Jerry Speziale, the city's public safety director, said no one in the supermarket was injured. The fire at the store was brought under control.

Loud thunder from small storm shakes big city

OR PORTLAND — A single strike of lightning from a small Oregon storm and the ensuing thunder shook the city of Portland on Sunday afternoon, the National Weather Service said.

The flash and bang was an unexpected "one-hit wonder" that came from a small storm cell, meteorologist Tyler Kranz said.

The boom at 2:13 p.m. led to social media posts questioning whether it was thunder or pos-

sibly a meteorite.

A lightning detector registered a single strike of lightning at the same time the thunder was reported, Kranz said. It was a positive charged cloud-to-ground flash with strong current, causing the unexpected boom.

Woman, son face charges over fake parking fees

NM HATCH — A woman and her son are facing fraud charges for an alleged parking scheme outside the annual Hatch Chile Festival, according to authorities.

Hatch Police said Celeste Zimmerman, 68, and Raymond Swingle, 31, allegedly collected more than \$4,000 in fake parking fees from festival-goers.

Both have been arrested.

According to Albuquerque TV station KOB, court documents showed the committee that organizes the festival decided against parking fees.

KOB said Swingle allegedly was seen demanding \$10 from people to park and reportedly blocked cars until they paid up.

The station said Zimmerman allegedly posted a message on the festival's website saying there would be a \$10 contribution fee to help keep the event running.

Woman sentenced for altercation aboard plane

AZ PHOENIX — A New York woman has been sentenced to four months in prison for interfering with crew members aboard a flight from Dallas to Los Angeles last year that had to be diverted to Phoenix, according to federal prosecutors.

They said Kelly Pichardo and another first-class passenger

engaged in intimidating behavior on the flight and both women had to be removed from the plane after it landed at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport on Feb. 24, 2021. Authorities said the women each assaulted a passenger during the flight and used racial slurs when a male passenger asked them to stop.

Prosecutors said Pichardo, a 32-year-old resident of the Bronx, has been ordered to pay nearly \$9,200 restitution to American Airlines. They said Pichardo also will serve three years of supervised release.

The other female passenger has pleaded guilty and will be sentenced in November.

Tribes buy land at site of Wounded Knee massacre

SD SIOUX FALLS — Two American Indian tribes in South Dakota have agreed to purchase 40 acres of land near the Wounded Knee National Historic Landmark on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

The Oglala Sioux tribe will pay \$255,000 and the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe will pay \$245,000 for the site, and agree to petition the U.S. Department of the Interior to take the land into trust on behalf of both tribes, Indian Country Today reported. The title to the land will be held in the name of the Oglala Sioux tribe.

The agreement ends a decades-long dispute over land that is the site of the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 in which hundreds of Lakota men, women and children were killed by U.S. soldiers in an attempt to suppress the Ghost Dance, a Lakota religious movement.

— From wire reports

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Albert the great: Pujols spurs Cards on

Associated Press

INDEPENDENCE, Mo. — Rodolfo Castro doesn't remember how old he was when he first met Albert Pujols, or even the exact circumstances, whether it was at a major league game or during one of the big slugger's charitable trips back to the Dominican Republic. Castro remembers how he felt, though. It was that childlike sense of wonder that comes when you meet your hero.

"I know I was a young kid," recalled Castro, now a 23-year-old infielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates. "And I was very timid in approaching him because I knew his stature and knew what he represented."

It was just last year, after Castro signed with the Pirates and climbed every laborious rung on the minor league ladder, that he learned there was nothing to fear. The Pirates were playing the Dodgers and Castro had drawn a fifth-inning walk.

"Pujols was playing first base," he said, "and we just had a brief conversation, and he gave me a really warm welcome into the big leagues and just congratulated me. And then that same series, the next day during BP, I was able to run into him and I approached him and just told him what a pleasure it was to meet him and what a great honor it was to be able to play on the same field as him. He was very warm with me and encouraged me to just continue balling out."

Walkthrough any big league clubhouse and you're bound to come across someone

with a similar Pujols story — a shared laugh during batting practice, a chance meeting in the offseason, an opportunity to work with him in the community. They are shared freely as the erstwhile star tries to hit the five more homers he needs for 700 in his career.

More often than not, though, the stories have to do with how Pujols inspired an entire generation of baseball players, and particularly Latino kids, who saw him rise from humble roots in the Dominican Republic to dominate the game.

"It was very special, mostly because it was unexpected," Castro said of their moment in August 2021. "I had so many mixed emotions. I was so nervous, getting to meet him, but it was special. It was something I'll never forget."

For all his success, and the millions of dollars he's made, the story of Albert Pujols remains downright Dickensian.

He was raised mostly by his grandmother and a large collection of aunts and uncles in Santo Domingo, the capital on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic. And when he speaks of his humble roots, Pujols often recalls using a makeshift glove fashioned out of a milk crate and whatever fruit was available to practice the game he grew to love.

Pujols immigrated with his family to New York in 1996, then moved to the Kansas City suburb of Independence, where his high school coach at Fort Osage, Dave Fry, once

called him "a gift from the baseball gods."

Nothing he's done over the next two decades could persuade anyone otherwise.

Pujols played briefly for Maple Woods Community College before he was drafted by St. Louis — much to the everlasting chagrin of Royals fans. They still lament the fact that an 11-time All-Star, who grew up in the shadow of Kauffman Stadium, would win two World Series and play the majority of his career for the cross-state Cardinals.

Along the way, Pujols showed Latino players from the most modest of backgrounds that they could be something.

To the surprise of many, Pujols is still doing it.

After three National League MVPs, six Silver Sluggers and two Gold Gloves, it seemed as if time was finally catching up to the 42-year-old Pujols. The decade he spent playing for the Los Angeles Angels was a largely underwhelming coda to the 12 superlative years he spent in St. Louis, and many believed the stint he played with the Dodgers that culminated in a trip to the NL Championship Series last year was a fitting way to head off into retirement.

Pujols had other ideas, though. He wanted to return to St. Louis, where he remained beloved by fans, and reunite with longtime pitcher Adam Wainwright and catcher Yadier Molina for one last run.

And here they are: first place in the NL Central as they march through the final month of the regular season.

Hamlin chasing NASCAR titles as co-owner, driver

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Denny Hamlin the driver finds himself in the most enviable of positions heading into Saturday night's race at Bristol, his second-place run at Kansas Speedway over the weekend nearly ensuring his spot in the next round of the playoffs.

Denny Hamlin the owner? He's feeling even better.

The car he was chasing down in the waning laps of Sunday's race happened to be the No. 45 driven by Bubba Wallace for 23XI Racing, which is owned by Hamlin and Hall of Fame basketball star Michael Jordan. The victory pushed the team into the

next round in the race for the owner's championship, the somewhat lesser-known NASCAR Cup Series title.

"I couldn't imagine a team that started from scratch — literally from scratch, we had nothing two years ago — to now have three race wins," said Hamlin, whose team got its first win with Wallace in a rain-shortened race last year at Talladega, the second when Kurt Busch piloted the No. 45 to victory lane in the spring race at Kansas.

"I can't tell you how hard it is to win in this series," Hamlin said. "And with this five-year plan to get to a championship-contending organization, I'm the realist

in the group, knowing we have a ton of ground to cover, but we're starting to get the results. This hard work is paying off. And in a few years, hopefully, you'll talk about us winning on a more regular basis."

Well, folks are certainly talking about the team this week.

Wallace narrowly missed out on competing for the mainstream driver's championship in the No. 23 car, finishing second in the Daytona 500 and again at Michigan, when a victory at either would have guaranteed his spot in the 16-driver field.

Busch got in with his victory at Kansas, but a crash during qualifying at Pocono in July left him

feeling long-term effects of a concussion. He decided to bow out of playoff consideration before the final regular-season race, but with the car still eligible for the owner's title, Hamlin and the 23XI team decided to move Wallace into the No. 45 seat.

The moved worked well.

Wallace, who has shown a penchant for getting flustered come crunch time, remained calm while cruising around Kansas Speedway with a comfortable lead. And even when Hamlin began to nip tenths of a second off it down the stretch, Wallace kept making solid laps, keeping his boss at bay and ultimately taking the checkered flag.

Cubs hold off NL East-leading Mets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Chris Bassitt had his shortest start in three months, failing to get through the fourth inning as the NL East-leading New York Mets lost to the Chicago Cubs 5-2 Monday night.

New York remained 1½ games ahead of Atlanta, which lost 3-2 in San Francisco.

The Mets had won each of Bassitt's past eight starts, a span in which he had a 2.24 ERA. But the right-hander gave up five runs in 3½ innings — his quickest exit since he lasted a season-low 3½ innings against San Diego on July 8.

"He's pitched at such a high level, it really catches your attention [when he doesn't]," New York manager Buck Showalter said. "Chris has been such a rock for us all year and will be again."

Rafael Ortega homered in the second — the first home run allowed by Bassitt (13-8) since he gave up Manny Machado's round-tripper July 23, a stretch of 54½ innings. Zach McKinstry hit a two-run shot in the third before Ortega and Alfonso Rivas each had an RBI single in the fourth.

"It's a bad start," Bassitt said. "Obviously, this entire game's on me. It's unfortunate. But I'll work my butt off and go to the next one."

A quartet of relievers blanked the Cubs on two hits over the final 5½ innings. But the Mets stranded 10 runners — including seven over the first six innings against rookie right-hander Javier Assad (1-1), who allowed five hits in earning the first victory of his career.

Mark Canha struck out with the bases

loaded in the first. James McCann delivered a two-out RBI single in the fourth, when Brandon Nimmo whiffed to leave two on. Eduardo Escobar tripled with two outs in the sixth but was left there when Assad struck out Tyler Naquin.

"This is a hostile environment here in New York and they've got a really good team," Chicago manager David Ross said. "He had some innings there that things could have sped up on him."

The Mets loaded the bases with nobody out but didn't score in the eighth, when Showalter utilized Mychal Givens — who'd pitched the seventh and eighth — as a pinch-runner at first base for designated hitter Daniel Vogelbach. It was the first pinch-running appearance of Givens' eight-year career.

Trout homers in 7th straight in loss to Guardians

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Angels star Mike Trout homered in his seventh consecutive game, one shy of the major league record, but the AL Central-leading Cleveland Guardians beat Los Angeles 5-4 on Monday night.

Amed Rosario doubled off Aaron Loup (0-5) scored Steven Kwan with the go-ahead run in the seventh for Cleveland, which increased its advantage to three games over the Chicago White Sox and five games over third-place Minnesota.

The game featured a strange sequence in the seventh when Cleveland manager Terry Francona and Angels interim manager Phil Nevin were both ejected without a pitch being thrown in between the tossings.

Trout's 35th homer of the season came in the fifth. The three-time AL MVP connected off Konnor Pilkington for a 422-foot drive to dead center at Progressive Field.

Pittsburgh's Dale Long established the MLB record of eight straight games with a home run in 1956. Don Mattingly of the Yankees matched it in 1987, as did Seattle's Ken Griffey Jr. in

1993.

Dodgers 6, Diamondbacks 0: Mookie Betts hit a three-run homer, Cody Bellinger added a two-run double and Los Angeles won at Arizona to become the first major league team to clinch a playoff spot this season. For real, this time.

The Dodgers thought they had secured a playoff berth Sunday after beating the Padres, celebrating with a postgame toast and distributing caps with the post-season logo on them. But then MLB acknowledged Monday it had made a mathematical mistake.

This time, there shouldn't be any confusion. Los Angeles won its 97th game of the season and is 54 games over .500.

Tyler Anderson (15-3) and Diamondbacks rookie Ryne Nelson engaged in an impressive pitching duel for the first six innings.

Blue Jays 3, Rays 2: Bo Bichette launched a go-ahead, two-run homer in the eighth inning after being hit by a high fastball in his previous at-bat, leading host Toronto past Tampa Bay.

The Blue Jays tied idle Seattle atop the standings for the three wild-card spots. The Rays are a

half-game behind.

Bichette connected off Jason Adam (2-3) for his 24th homer. Bichette went 2-for-3 and drove in all three Toronto runs.

Rangers 3-6, Marlins 2-10: Rookie Charles Leblanc hit a pair of RBI doubles during an eight-run burst in the fifth inning and host Miami earned a split of a day-night doubleheader.

Texas won the opener as Mark Mathias drew a bases-loaded walk to snap an eighth-inning tie.

The Marlins trailed 3-1 in the nightcap before breaking loose. Leblanc's double against reliever A.J. Alexy (1-1) got Miami within one before Jon Berti hit a go-ahead, two-run single. Brian Anderson followed with an RBI single and Garrett Cooper hit a two-run double. Nick Fortes added an RBI single and Leblanc capped the outburst with his second double. Marcus Semien homered, tripled and singled and Corey Seager hit his 30th homer for the Rangers.

Giants 3, Braves 2: Rookie starter Spencer Strider struck out nine over five innings but allowed a season-high nine hits as his winning streak ended at four, and Atlanta missed a chance to

gain ground in the NL East with a loss at San Francisco.

Dansby Swanson hit a two-run single with nobody out in the eighth against Zack Littell, who then induced Austin Riley's double play before Giants manager Gabe Kapler replaced him with Scott Alexander. An angry Littell then had words with the manager, who could be seen shortly after going with the pitcher down the tunnel.

Pirates 6, Reds 3: Rodolfo Castro and Diego Castillo homered in a five-run fifth inning to power Pittsburgh to a win at Cincinnati.

Castro hit a three-run home run off Mike Minor in the fifth inning for his eighth of the season. Castillo, who was recalled from Indianapolis before the game, hit a two-run shot — his 11th — to cap the inning.

Astros 7, Tigers 0: Framber Valdez pitched his first career shutout to lead Houston to a win at Detroit. Valdez (15-5) posted his 24th straight quality start, tying Mets ace Jacob deGrom (2018) for the longest single-season streak. The All-Star left-hander gave up six hits and struck out eight with one walk.

Seahawks survive in Wilson's return

Associated Press

SEATTLE — It was a familiar scene in Seattle: Russell Wilson leading his team downfield for a game-winning score late in the fourth quarter.

This time, he wasn't given a chance by his new coach in Denver, pulled off the field in exchange for a 64-yard field goal attempt that left plenty of confusion and the Seahawks celebrating an unexpected season-opening, 17-16 victory over the Broncos on Monday night.

With Denver facing fourth-and-5 in Seattle territory with a minute remaining and all its timeouts, coach Nathaniel Hackett opted to let the clock run down to 20 seconds before sending out Brandon McManus to try the low-percentage kick.

"I don't think it was the wrong decision. I think he could make it," Wilson said after his return to the city where he played his first 10 seasons. "Obviously in hindsight, we didn't make it, but if we were in that situation again, I wouldn't doubt whatever he decided."

Geno Smith threw two first-half touchdown passes as the Seahawks' offense started brilliantly in the post-Wilson era. The Broncos had plenty of chances after halftime but fumbled twice at the 1-yard line.

Then came the final minute, which raised plenty of questions about Hackett's clock management and decision-making in his debut as a head coach. NFL kickers are 2-for-35 on attempts of 64 yards or more since 1991, according to Sportradar, and McMa-

nus' career long is 61 yards.

The kick missed wide left, and instead of Wilson leading the 36th career fourth-quarter or overtime comeback of his career, Seattle celebrated to chants of "Geno! Geno!"

"I was surprised that they took Russ out there," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said.

Denver faced fourth-and-5 at the Seattle 46 after Wilson hit Javonte Williams for a 9-yard gain. McManus said that was the exact spot on the field the offense needed to reach to give him a shot at the kick.

"I wish we would have gotten a lot closer, but it put us in that weird spot there because we were in field-goal range, but we were on that fourth-down situation," Hackett said. "I didn't think we were gonna get that many yards. ... We just made our decision and wanted to take our shot there."

Hackett then used his timeouts while the Seahawks kneeled down, elongating the Seattle celebration.

Smith and Seattle did very little offensively in the second half but their first half was good enough. Smith threw a touchdown pass of 38 yards to Will Dissly on the first possession of the season and hit Colby Parkinson for a 25-yard touchdown in the second quarter.

Smith finished 23-for-28 for 195 yards, but was 17-for-18 for 164 yards in the first half.

"For him to go out there and get a win like that shows the confidence we have in him," Seahawks wide receiver DK Metcalf said.

Wilson was 29-for-42 for 340 yards and a touchdown. But the Broncos couldn't overcome its red-zone inefficiency with both Melvin Gordon III and Williams fumbling on plays snapped at Seattle 1-yard line.

"We can run the ball. We can pass the ball. We just have to be sound in the red zone. That's been our issue," Gordon said.

The Seahawks moved into first place in the NFC West after Arizona, San Francisco and the Los Angeles Rams all lost.

Wilson went from being a disputed third-round pick to a franchise cornerstone that helped Seattle to its only Super Bowl title. But his departure this past offseason in a trade to Denver was a messy conclusion to a mostly sparkling career with the Seahawks.

And Seattle fans were ready to let Wilson find out just what it was like to be an opposing QB at the stadium where he enjoyed so many triumphs.

"Just going out there and seeing him in a Broncos jersey was shocking to me," Metcalf said.

Wilson was greeted with lustful, guttural boos every time he stepped on the field from a crowd notorious for making noise. They started in pregame warmups and didn't decrease in volume throughout the victory.

Some signs in the stadium compared Wilson to Alex Rodriguez, who infamously left for a massive contract in Texas early in his baseball career. Others switched around the words from a catchphrase during his time in Seattle, urging the Seahawks, "Let's Cook Russ."

Notre Dame QB Buchner expected to miss season

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Notre Dame quarterback Tyler Buchner is expected to miss the rest of the regular season with an injury to his nonthrowing shoulder that will require surgery.

Fighting Irish coach Marcus Freeman said Monday that Buchner has a severe AC joint sprain in his left shoulder. Buchner was injured in the fourth quarter of Notre Dame's surprising loss to Marshall over the weekend and was scheduled to have surgery Tuesday.

"The expected recovery time

is about four months," Freeman said. "We can all do that math. That probably puts us somewhere in mid-January."

Drew Pyne, who came off the bench after Buchner was hurt, was listed as the starter on Notre Dame's depth chart for this Saturday's home game against California. Against Marshall, he went 3-for-6 with a touchdown pass and an interception.

In August, Pyne entered training camp competing for the starting quarterback position but lost the job to Buchner after practice No. 7.

"As I said when we addressed

the quarterback competition in fall camp, I had the utmost confidence in both of those guys to be able to lead our offense and lead our football team," Freeman said. "We are still very positive and optimistic about our future moving forward."

Pyne is 20-for-39 for 256 yards, three touchdowns and an interception in five career games. That includes a relief appearance against No. 18 Wisconsin in 2021, where Pyne threw a fourth-quarter touchdown in a late-game comeback victory.

The Irish are 0-2 under first-year coach Freeman after be-

ginning this season ranked fifth in the country.

Now Pyne is charged with orchestrating an in-season turnaround.

"You're thrust into a leadership position when you're the quarterback," Freeman said. "You want people to be able to follow you, not just through your actions, but through your words and who you are as a leader. He's a natural leader. He has a lot of the natural QB traits that you're looking for."

Notre Dame is trying to avoid going 0-3 for the first time since 2007.