

Initiative aims to help low-income troops

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Thousands of U.S. service members will soon see a boost in their housing allowance and lower prices at commissaries, the Pentagon announced Thursday.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also ordered the creation of a new Basic Needs Allowance to begin in January for low-income troops. He also pledged new investments in the Pentagon's child care programs, new initiatives to ease the permanent change of station process and efforts to improve military spouse employment.

In a memo titled "Taking care of our service members and families," the retired four-star general described his orders as "personal for me."

"I have seen firsthand how much our military families sacrifice to keep our force strong, healthy, and ready to defend this exceptional nation. In the face of challenges and frustrations, our families show incredible resilience," Austin wrote in the memo.

Austin's order directs an automatic increase in Basic Allowance for Housing for active-duty troops in 28 U.S. locations where rent prices have spiked an average of more than 20% in 2022.

Austin also ordered a thorough review of

BAH payments for 2023 "to ensure that calculations reflect the unusually dynamic fluctuations in the housing market."

Austin called for the Pentagon to "fully fund" its commissaries to reduce food costs to a level about 25% below those of local food stores. Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said Thursday that the Pentagon was introducing new funding to lower overhead costs for commissaries for them to pass on the savings to eligible shoppers.

By law, commissaries must pay their own operating costs via their profits, but Ryder said the new model would significantly reduce their burden. Commissaries on Defense Department installations across the world sell food tax free with a 5% surcharge used to pay for new commissary construction and renewal efforts.

"We've changed the commissary funding model to ensure that the Defense Commissary Agency is able to provide savings by eliminating the requirement for them to earn a profit margin from higher prices to pay their operating costs," Ryder told reporters at the Pentagon.

Ryder estimated savings would reach service members, families and other eligible shoppers within about two weeks.

The general said the commissary effort

had long been in the works and was not a reaction to record inflation in recent months.

Austin "wants our military men and women to be able to come home, to put food on the table, to have the money in their pocket that they need to be able to live a healthy life," Ryder said. "They deserve a comfortable life while they serve our nation — and so this is one of his priorities."

The Basic Needs Allowance is a new stipend for service members with dependents whose gross household income falls some 130% below the federal poverty line, according to a law passed last year by Congress instructing the Pentagon to implement the new benefit. The Pentagon said troops can apply for the new stipend beginning in January.

The National Military Family Association last year reported some 14% of enlisted service members in the ranks of E-1 to E-6 reported visiting food banks during the previous year because they could not afford to feed their families.

Austin promised the Defense Department would continue to find ways to improve life for military families and put more money in their pockets. Among them, Ryder noted, is an expected 4.6% pay raise next year — the largest pay boost for troops in 20 years.

Navy says USS Nimitz's potable water supply is safe

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Sailors aboard the USS Nimitz recently found "irregularities" in the aircraft carrier's drinking water supply, leading to the discovery that it had been tainted with jet fuel, according to the Navy.

The crew detected "trace amounts" of Jet Propellant-5, a kerosene-based fuel primarily used by military aircraft on aircraft carriers, in the Nimitz's water supply while the ship was off Southern California on Sept. 16, according to Naval Air Forces spokesman Cmdr. Zach Harrell.

"Irregularities were noticed by some of the Nimitz crewmembers and reported to their leadership," he told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday. "After the potable water system was secured, the commanding

officer made an announcement on the ship's PA system to inform the crew on the status of the potable water supply."

The Nimitz, which is homeported at Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., has since docked in San Diego. A system flush completed Sept. 19 restored fresh water to the carrier that is now safe for use, Harrell said.

The water system is also undergoing a full inspection to "ensure the highest quality water is provided to the crew," he added.

The Nimitz was still in San Diego as of Thursday evening, where it is preparing for a pre-deployment exercise.

Several crewmembers either got sick from consuming the water or were injured after exposure to it, according to users on social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit's r/Navy forum.

"Multiple sources claim that sailors on board have chemical burn/rashes from showering in the contaminated water," Twitter user @Terminalcwo wrote on Tuesday.

A Reddit user, kineticstar, wrote on Thursday that "the crew wasn't warned to secure potable water use until after people got sick from the contaminated water."

Harrell dismissed these claims, saying that the crew was notified "as soon as leadership was made aware of the contamination" and that the crew was immediately provided bottled water for free.

"Understandably, there have been some complaints about the water from the crew, but there have been no confirmed cases of illness nor injury related to contaminated water aboard the ship," Harrell wrote in his email.

Referendums carried out in Ukraine to join Russia

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Kremlin-orchestrated referendum got underway Friday in occupied regions of Ukraine that sought to make them part of Russia, with some officials carrying ballots to apartment blocks accompanied by gun-toting police. Kyiv and the West condemned it as a rigged election whose result was preordained by Moscow.

In a grim reminder of the 7-month-old invasion, U.N. experts and Ukrainian officials pointed to new evidence of Russian war crimes. Kharkiv region officials said a mass burial site in the eastern city of Iziurm held hundreds of bodies, including at least 30 displaying signs of torture.

The referendums in the Luhansk, Kherson and partly Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions were widely seen as a prelude to Moscow annexing the regions. The voting overseen by authorities installed by Russia, scheduled to run through Tuesday, is almost certain to go the Kremlin's way.

Authorities in the Kherson region said residents of a small Moscow-controlled area of the neighboring Mykolaiv province also will be able to vote, and that small area

was "incorporated" into Kherson until all of Mykolaiv is taken over by Russian forces.

Ukraine and the West said the vote was an illegitimate attempt by Moscow to slice away a large part of the country, stretching from the Russian border to the Crimean Peninsula. A similar referendum took place in Crimea in 2014 before Moscow annexed it, a move that most of the world considered illegal.

Election officials were carrying ballots to homes and setting up makeshift polling stations near apartments in the referendum, taking place over four days, with officials citing safety reasons. Russian state TV showed election teams going to a residential neighborhood, with one such group accompanied by a masked police officer carrying an assault rifle.

Ivan Fedorov, the Ukrainian mayor of Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region, told The Associated Press that Russians and residents of Crimea were brought into his city to urge people to vote:

"The Russians see an overwhelming reluctance and fear to attend the referendum and are forced to bring people ... to create an image and an illusion of the vote," he said.

US privately warned Russia against nukes

The Washington Post

The United States for several months has been sending private communications to Moscow warning Russia's leadership of the grave consequences that would follow the use of a nuclear weapon, according to U.S. officials, who said the messages underscore what President Joe Biden and his aides have articulated publicly.

The Biden administration generally has decided to keep warnings about the consequences of a nuclear strike deliberately vague, so the Kremlin worries about how Washington might respond, the officials said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive deliberations.

The attempt by the White House to cultivate what's known in the nuclear deterrence world as "strategic ambiguity" comes as Russia continues to escalate its rhetoric about possible nuclear weapons use amid a domestic mobilization aimed at stanching Russian military losses in eastern Ukraine.

The State Department has been involved in the private communications with Moscow, but officials would not say who delivered the messages or the scope of their content. It was not clear whether the United States had sent any new private messages in the hours since Russian President Vladimir Putin issued his latest veiled nuclear threat during a speech announcing a partial mobilization early Wednesday, but a senior U.S. official said the communication has been happening consistently over recent months.

Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, wrote Thursday in a post on Telegram that territory in eastern Ukraine would be "accepted into Russia" after the completion of staged "referendums" and vowed to strengthen the security of those areas.

To defend that annexed land, Medvedev said, Russia is able to use not only its newly mobilized forces, but also "any Russian weapon, including strategic nuclear ones and those using new principles," a reference to hypersonic weapons.

"Russia has chosen its path," Medvedev added. "There is no way back."

Interpol officials say 'Fat Leonard' tried to make his escape to Russia

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Since escaping two weeks ago, officials say the fugitive Malaysian defense contractor nicknamed "Fat Leonard" — who orchestrated one of the U.S. Navy's largest bribery scandals — zipped between countries to find a place where he could become virtually untouchable for American authorities.

It almost worked.

After cutting off an ankle monitor and slipping away from house arrest in San Diego on Sept. 4, U.S. and Venezuelan officials say Leonard Glenn Francis went across the border into Mexico, then traveled to Cuba and Venezuela, where he was arrested Tuesday at Simón Bolívar International Airport outside Ca-

racas.

Francis was planning to travel to Russia, according to Interpol Venezuela Director General Carlos Garate Rondon, who disclosed the arrest in a statement posted Wednesday on Instagram. He said Francis would be handed over to the country's judicial authorities to begin extradition proceedings.

Greg Rinckey, a former Army lawyer who is now in private practice, said he believes Francis was "trying to play the angle of using some countries to get outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. Marshals Service."

"It looks like they caught him just in time," Rinckey said. "If he made it to Russia, I don't believe the Russians would have turned him over to us."

Biden vows US will help Puerto Ricans

Associated Press

SAN SALVADOR, Puerto Rico — President Joe Biden said Thursday the full force of the federal government is ready to help Puerto Rico recover from the devastation of Hurricane Fiona, while Bermuda and Canada's Atlantic provinces prepared for a major blast from the Category 4 storm.

Speaking at a briefing with Federal Emergency Management Agency officials in New York, Biden said, "We're all in this together."

Biden noted that hundreds of FEMA and other federal officials are already on the ground in Puerto Rico, where Fiona caused an island-wide blackout.

More than 60% of power customers remained without energy on Thursday, and a third of customers were without water — and local officials admitted they could not say when service would be fully restored.

Biden said his message to the people of

Puerto Rico who are still hurting from Hurricane Maria five years ago is: "We're with you. We're not going to walk away."

That seemed to draw a contrast with former President Donald Trump, who was widely accused of an inadequate response to Maria, which left some Puerto Ricans without power for 11 months.

The hurricane was still at Category 4 force late Thursday as it was making a close pass to Bermuda, where authorities opened shelters and announced schools and offices would be closed Friday.

Fiona was expected to still be a large and dangerously potent storm when it reached Canada's Atlantic provinces, likely late Friday, as a post-tropical cyclone.

"It's going to be a storm that everyone remembers when it is all said and done," said Bob Robichaud, warning preparedness meteorologist for the Canadian Hurricane Centre.

At least eight of 11 communities in Ca-

guas are completely isolated, said Luis González, municipal inspector of recovery and reconstruction. It's one of at least six municipalities where crews have yet to reach some areas. People there often depend on help from neighbors, as they did following Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm in 2017 that killed nearly 3,000 people.

Puerto Rico's government said some 62% of 1.47 million customers remained without power Thursday. A third of customers, or more than 400,000, did not yet have water service.

The executive director of Puerto Rico's Electric Energy Authority, Josué Colón, told a news conference that areas less affected by Fiona should be expected to have electricity by Friday morning. But officials declined to say when power would be restored to the hardest-hit places and said they were working first to get energy to hospitals and other key infrastructure.

Repairs begins in Alaska towns slammed by storm

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — There's been significant damage to some roads and homes in parts of western Alaska following last weekend's devastating coastal storm, Gov. Mike Dunleavy said Wednesday after touring some communities along the state's vast coastline.

"For the most part, people are recovering and digging out," he told a news conference.

There were no injuries or deaths reported after the storm, the remnant of Typhoon Merbok, which traveled north through the Bering Strait. It brought tidal surges and high winds that ripped up the main streets in several communities, pushed homes off foundations and was described as the worst storm in a half century.

About 21,000 people living along a 1,000-mile stretch of Alaska's western coast — a distance longer than the California coastline — were affected by the

storm.

Among the communities hardest hit was Nome, famous for being the finish line of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race each March.

Ryan Anderson, head of the state transportation department, said many repairs are needed, including fixing torn up pavement on the town's main street and removing storm debris.

In the community of Elim, the main street was completely destroyed; about 3 miles of road were washed out in the community of Golovin.

The most damage in Golovin occurred on a spit, where homes were slammed by waves and knocked off their foundations. Large shipping containers were strewn up to 2 miles across the bay, Dunleavy said.

There are few roads in western Alaska and none that connect to the state's contiguous road system, leaving communities to rely on air travel.

Indiana abortion clinics reopen after ban blocked

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — After an Indiana judge on Thursday blocked the state's abortion ban from being enforced, phones started ringing at Indiana abortion clinics, which are preparing to resume the procedure a week after the ban had gone into effect.

"People are getting the word that abortion is now legal again, and people are ready to get their health care that they deserve and that they desire," Dr. Katie McHugh, an abortion provider at Women's Med in Indianapolis, told The Associated Press.

Owen County Judge Kelsey Hanlon issued a preliminary injunction against the ban, putting the new law on hold as abortion clinic operators argue in a lawsuit that it violates the state constitution.

Indiana's seven abortion clinics were to lose their state licenses under the ban — which only permits abortions within

its narrow exceptions to take place in hospitals or outpatient surgical centers.

The ban was approved by the state's Republican-dominated Legislature on Aug. 5 and signed by GOP Gov. Eric Holcomb. That made Indiana the first state to enact tighter abortion restrictions since the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated federal abortion protections by overturning *Roe v. Wade* in June.

The judge wrote "there is reasonable likelihood that this significant restriction of personal autonomy offends the liberty guarantees of the Indiana Constitution" and that the clinics will prevail in the lawsuit. The order prevents the state from enforcing the ban pending a trial on the merits of the lawsuit.

Republican state Attorney General Todd Rokita said in a statement: "We plan to appeal and continue to make the case for life in Indiana."

4.4M in US roll up sleeves for booster

Associated Press

U.S. health officials say 4.4 million Americans have rolled up their sleeves for the updated COVID-19 booster shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention posted the count Thursday as public health experts bemoaned President Joe Biden's recent remark that "the pandemic is over."

The White House said more than 5 million people received the new boosters by its own estimate that accounts for reporting lags in states.

Health experts said it is too early to predict whether demand would match up with the 171 million doses of the new boosters the U.S. ordered for the fall.

"No one would go looking at our flu shot

uptake at this point and be like, 'Oh, what a disaster,'" said Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "If we start to see a large uptick in cases, I think we're going to see a lot of people getting the (new) vaccine."

A temporary shortage of Moderna vaccine caused some pharmacies to cancel appointments while encouraging people to reschedule for a Pfizer vaccine. The issue was expected to resolve as government regulators wrapped up an inspection and cleared batches of vaccine doses for distribution.

"I do expect this to pick up in the weeks ahead," said White House COVID-19 coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha. "We've been think-

ing and talking about this as an annual vaccine like the flu vaccine. Flu vaccine season picks up in late September and early October. We're just getting our education campaign going. So we expect to see, despite the fact that this was a strong start, we actually expect this to ramp up stronger."

Some Americans who plan to get the shot, designed to target the most common omicron strains, said they are waiting because they either had COVID-19 recently or another booster. They are following public health advice to wait several months to get the full benefit of their existing virus-fighting antibodies.

Others are scheduling shots closer to holiday gatherings and winter months when respiratory viruses spread more easily.

Ala. halts execution over time, vein issues

Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. — Alabama officials called off the Thursday lethal injection of a man convicted in a 1999 workplace shooting because of time concerns and trouble accessing the inmate's veins.

Alabama Corrections Commissioner John Hamm said the state halted the scheduled execution of Alan Miller after they determined they could not get the lethal injection underway before a midnight deadline.

Prison officials made the decision at

about 11:30 p.m. The last-minute reprieve came nearly three hours after a divided U.S. Supreme Court had cleared the way for the execution to begin.

"Due to time constraints resulting from the lateness of the court proceedings, the execution was called off once it was determined the condemned inmate's veins could not be accessed in accordance with our protocol before the expiration of the death warrant," Hamm said.

Hamm said "accessing the veins was taking a little bit longer than we anticipated."

He did not know how long the team tried to establish a connection, but noted there are a number of procedures to be done before the team begins trying to connect the IV line.

Miller was returned to his regular cell at a south Alabama prison.

"Despite the circumstances that led to the cancellation of this execution, nothing will change the fact that a jury heard the evidence of this case and made a decision," Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said in a statement. She added that three families are still grieving.

Oz releases health records, putting Fetterman on spot

Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Dr. Mehmet Oz, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, released his health records as he maneuvers to keep questions about Democratic rival John Fetterman's recovery from a stroke front and center in the hotly contested campaign.

Dr. Rebecca Kurth in New York City wrote in a four-page letter obtained by The Associated Press that she found the 62-year-old heart surgeon-turned-TV celebrity to be in "excellent health" in an annual checkup Thursday.

The letter noted that Oz has a total cholesterol level that is "borderline elevated" but unchanged and referenced a hyperplastic lesion — cell growths that could be-

come cancerous — removed from his colon in 2011. An electrocardiogram — a test that records electrical signals in the heart to detect heart problems — he had Thursday came out normal.

"Your examination is healthy, and the blood tests are favorable," Kurth wrote. She recommended no medication.

The release of the health records comes as Oz is trying to close a gap in the polls and is increasingly making Fetterman's fitness to serve a central theme in his campaign.

Fetterman, 53, has been silent about releasing medical records or providing access for reporters to question his doctors, now more than four months after he suffered a stroke in May that has had linger-

ing effects on his speech and hearing.

Fetterman's campaign did not immediately comment Friday.

While it is customary for presidential candidates to release health records, there is no such custom in races for the U.S. Senate. Some U.S. senators have, in the past, released medical records when running for president.

In a statement, Oz said he was releasing his medical records in the interest of transparency and that "voters should have full transparency when it comes to the health status of candidates running for office."

Oz, who has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump, also has questioned Fetterman's truthfulness in disclosing the lingering effects of his stroke.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man admits dousing witch statue with paint

MA SALEM — A man will be sentenced to 18 months of probation after pleading guilty to vandalizing the “Bewitched” statue by dousing the Salem tourist attraction with red paint over the summer.

The 32-year-old resident was originally sentenced to a year in jail, but a Salem district court judge suspended the sentence on conditions the man repay the cost of repairing the damage inflicted on the bronze statue, The Salem News reported.

The statue depicts actor Elizabeth Montgomery — as lead character Samantha Stephens in the 1960s sitcom — sitting on a broomstick in front of a crescent moon.

In June, a prosecutor said the man was “going through a rough time and wanted to do something to get arrested,” and was held on bail.

Walkway collapse hurts 17 boarding cruise ship

GA ST. MARYS — A metal boat gangway collapsed on a coastal Georgia dock, injuring 17 people, including six who were sent to local hospitals.

A group was boarding a cruise in St. Marys when the gangway collapsed, with local news outlets reporting about 20 people falling into the St. Marys River, which marks the border between Georgia and Florida.

Those waiting were Navy veterans and relatives visiting for a reunion of crew members of the submarine USS Angler. The World War II submarine was decommissioned in 1968.

9-year-old is injured in brown bear attack

AK ANCHORAGE — A 9-year-old boy was seriously injured by a brown bear while hunting north of Anchorage, Alaska State Troopers said.

The youth and a 41-year-old man were hunting in the Palmer Hay Flats area about 35 miles from the state’s largest city when they came upon the bear, troopers said in an online statement.

The bear mauled the boy, leaving him with serious injuries. The adult, who troopers say suffered minor injuries, shot and killed the bear.

Both hunters were taken to a nearby hospital for treatment. Troopers say the two are related, but did not identify how. Troopers also did not immediately release their names.

Effort to increase quail population begins

WV ALUM CREEK — West Virginia wildlife officials have embarked on an effort to restore the northern bobwhite quail population.

Gov. Jim Justice announced that 12,000 bobwhite quail have been added at wildlife management areas across the state.

The goal is to bring the numbers to 20,000, and the Division of Natural Resources will conduct more stockings through October. It’s part of a five-year restoration project.

Bobwhite quail, known for their “bobwhite” call, disappeared in the state in the 1970s due to a combination of habitat destruction and harsh winters.

Some quail have been fitted

with transmitters to monitor their survival and habitat use. Several locations also have cameras, the governor’s office said in a statement.

Police sue city over inadvertent gun misfires

WI MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee’s police union is suing the city over service weapons that officers say aren’t safe because they have inadvertently fired without anyone pulling the trigger.

It’s the latest legal action involving the P320 model firearm manufactured by SIG Sauer, including a case filed in Philadelphia in June by a U.S. Army veteran who suffered a serious leg injury when his holstered gun discharged.

SIG Sauer, based in Newington, N.H., has denied the P320 model is defective.

The Milwaukee Police Association says the department-issued handguns have inadvertently misfired three times in the last two years resulting in injuries to two officers.

Most recently, a 41-year-old officer was shot in the knee on Sept. 10. In July 2020, Officer Adam Maritato, who is a party in the union’s lawsuit, was unintentionally shot in the leg by another officer’s holstered gun.

Highway covered in Coors Light after crash

FL BROOKSVILLE — A Florida highway had to temporarily close after a semitrailer carrying cases of Coors Light crashed and turned the roadway into a silver sea of beer cans.

The multi-vehicle crash oc-

curred in the southbound lanes of Interstate 75 about 30 miles north of Tampa, the Florida Highway Patrol said in a news release.

The pileup began when one semitrailer clipped another while changing lanes, officials said. That forced other semis to brake, but one failed to stop and collided with a pickup truck and another one of the stopping semis.

The semi that failed to stop was filled with cases of the Silver Bullet beer.

Blind dog rescued from hole at building site

CA PASADENA — Firefighters have rescued a 13-year-old blind dog that fell into a hole at a construction site.

According to KABC-TV, the dog, named Cesar, lives next to the site in Pasadena with his owner. The dog apparently wandered onto the site, said Cesar’s owner Mary, who declined to give her last name.

Cesar then fell into the hole, which was about 15 feet deep and 3 feet wide.

Mary was alerted by the barking of her other dog. Cesar responded and she could hear he was no longer in her own yard. A Pasadena search and rescue team soon responded.

The team hooked up a series of ropes and pulleys to lower one team member into the hole. It took the team member about 12 minutes to reach the dog, secure him in a harness and bring him back to the surface.

Cesar appeared to be healthy and uninjured after he was brought out of the hole.

— From Associated Press

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Browns bounce back, beat rival Steelers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — An unimaginable collapse still fresh in their minds, the Browns managed to avoid a second one in four days.

Jacoby Brissett threw two touchdown passes, Nick Chubb ran for a score and Cleveland bounced back from its epic meltdown by finishing off the rival Pittsburgh Steelers 29-17 on Thursday night.

“We had the right men in that room to be able to get past it,” Brissett said, “and I think we answered that call. We knew it wasn’t going to be easy. The guys answered the bell.”

The Browns (2-1) built a nine-point lead early in the fourth on Chubb’s 1-yard run and then held on for dear life.

The Steelers (1-2) pulled within 23-17 on Chris Boswell’s 34-yard field goal with 1:48 left before Pittsburgh attempted an onside kick. But unlike in Sunday’s 31-30 loss, when the New York Jets overcame a 13-point deficit in the final 1:55 helped by a recovery, the Browns batted the ball out of bounds.

For a split second, it looked like Sunday all over again.

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski was asked what he was thinking as the ball bounced around near Pittsburgh’s sideline. He paused for six seconds before answering.

“A lot,” he said.

Cleveland fans could finally exhale when cornerback Denzel Ward fell on a Steelers fumble in the end zone on the final play for a meaningless touchdown.

Brissett connected with Amari Cooper and David Njoku for TDs, and finished 21-for-31 for 220 yards. The 29-year-old had his second consecutive solid game as he fills in while Deshaun Watson serves an 11-game suspension.

Chubb had 113 yards and pushed and twisted across the goal line on fourth-and-goal with 9:29 left to put the Browns ahead 23-14.

Mitch Trubisky and the Steelers’ stagnant offense showed signs of life in the first half, but bogged down after halftime, punting on their first three possessions while gaining just 54 yards.

Criticized for not throwing deep the first two weeks, Trubisky launched a few long balls but didn’t connect nearly enough.

“I think Mitch made some plays, but we all collectively came up short,” said Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, who said he has no plans to switch to rookie QB Kenny Pickett. “Winning is our business. I wasn’t looking to be impressed, I was looking to win the game.”

Pittsburgh’s defense is missing star end T.J. Watt, but tackle Cameron Heyward said that wasn’t the issue.

“When you try to arm-tackle Nick Chubb, he’s going to make you pay,” Heyward said. “We need to do a lot better.”

The victory smoothed over a rough few days for Cleveland.

Sunday’s debacle was followed by Myles Garrett criticizing fans for booing the Browns as they left the field, and a fan was arrested on charges he threw a plastic bottle in the direction of owner Jimmy Haslam on the sideline.

There was little drama this time, just a win over their hated neighbors from Pennsylvania.

Brissett’s 7-yard TD pass to Njoku put the Browns up 13-7 with 8:58 left before half-time.

No. 11 Vols can start loosening No. 20 Gators’ hold on rivalry

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Coach Josh Heupel learned quickly just what playing Florida really means to Tennessee.

“Probably 30 seconds after I arrived on campus,” the second-year Tennessee coach said. “This is one of the ballgames that this fan base and our players point to.”

This hasn’t been much of a rivalry the past two decades, not with Florida winning five straight and 16 of the last 17.

No. 11 Tennessee (3-0) feels much more confident as a double-digit favorite looking for its best start since 2016 with fans painting a sold-out Neyland Stadium an orange-and-white checkerboard for the Vols’ Southeastern Conference opener.

This will be the third team ranked inside the AP’s Top 20 that the 20th-ranked Gators (2-1, 0-1) have faced in the first month, the toughest start in the Bowl Subdivision. The Gators are just above South Carolina at the bottom of the SEC East after holding off South Florida 31-28 last week.

Tennessee routed Akron 63-6, running Heupel’s up-tempo offense designed to wear out opposing defenses. The Vols rank third nationally with averages of 553.7

yards and 52 points a game.

And this is the Gators’ first road game of the season with ESPN bringing GameDay to Knoxville for the show.

“It’s a big game for everybody,” Florida safety Tre’Vez Johnson said. “Can’t make the moment too big. We’ve still got to go out there and play.”

Experienced QB

A year ago, quarterback Hendon Hooker made his second straight start for Tennessee after replacing an injured Joe Milton in a 38-14 loss to Florida. Hooker graded that performance as a D, and he still is looking for more.

“I haven’t played to my standards yet, but we’ve been winning ballgames and that’s the total end story that I’m looking for, is are we winning?” Hooker said. “It doesn’t matter how I play or how somebody else plays if we’re winning.”

Change of plans

With Florida quarterback Anthony Richardson still looking for his first TD pass of the season, coaches decided to do something to get him and his receivers on the same page. Richardson and his receiving

corps watched last week’s game together and broke down Vols’ film together.

“Just trying to understand what can help us in different coverages and stuff like that,” Richardson said. “So we’re going to try a new philosophy this week and see how it goes.”

Family ties

First-year Florida coach Billy Napier was born in Cookeville, Tenn. — about 100 miles west of Knoxville and smack dab in the middle of Vols country.

“I’ve got all kinds of family that’s die-hard Tennessee fans,” Napier said as he prepares for his first trip to Neyland as a head coach.

Napier’s family moved to Georgia when he was 2, but he still has ties to the Volunteer State. He has an uncle living in Crossville. Both parents went to college at Tennessee Tech. His mom’s parents owned a tobacco farm in Sparta. His dad grew up in Salina.

Are they rooting for the Gators on Saturday?

“Absolutely, yeah,” Napier said. “If they’re not, they won’t be at the game, I can promise you that.”

Celtics suspend Udoka for entire season

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Boston Celtics have suspended Ime Udoka for a full year, banning the coach who led them to the NBA Finals last spring for the entire 2022-23 season over what two people with knowledge of the matter said was an improper relationship with a member of the organization.

The people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the team did not reveal that detail publicly. In a statement issued Thursday night after a full day of wrangling over the terms of the punishment, the Celtics said Udoka violated team policies and left open the possibility that a longer separation could follow.

“A decision about his future with the Celtics beyond this season will be made at a later date,” the team said.

Assistant coach Joe Mazzulla will take over as interim coach, one of the people who spoke with The AP said. The defending Eastern Conference champions are scheduled to hold media day on Monday and open training camp on Tuesday in preparation for the Oct. 18 season opener.

In a statement published by ESPN, Udoka apologized “to our players, fans, the entire Celtics organization, and my family for letting them down.”

“I am sorry for putting the team in this difficult situation, and I accept the team’s decision,” he said. “Out of respect for everyone involved, I will have no further comment.”

A longtime assistant in his first NBA head coaching job, Udoka led Boston to a 51-31 record last season — going 26-6 in the final 32 games. The Celtics beat Brooklyn, Milwaukee and Miami on the way to the NBA Finals, where they lost to the Golden State Warriors in six games.

The developments stunned the NBA and shook up a team that had been among the favorites to contend for a championship this season. It would be an unprecedented 18th title for the franchise.

But in Boston, the story was reminiscent of the shakeup across town in 2020, when Red Sox manager Alex Cora was suspended by Major League Baseball for a year for his role in a sign-stealing scandal at his previous job, with the Houston Astros. Instead, the sides parted ways.

After a last-place finish under Ron Roenicke in the pandemic-shortened season, Cora was re-hired a year later and welcomed back.

It is unclear if Udoka and the Celtics will be as eager to reunite.

The 45-year-old Udoka spent the bulk of

his NBA playing career with San Antonio and then joined Spurs coach Gregg Popovich’s staff as an assistant. Udoka was on the Spurs’ staff from 2012 through 2019, winning it all in ‘14, and he quickly found his way onto short lists for open head coaching jobs.

He spent the 2019-20 season in Philadelphia and the 2020-21 season in Brooklyn before the Celtics hired him in June 2021 as the successor to Brad Stevens — who moved up to the front office. In Year 1, Udoka finished fourth in coach of the year voting and the Celtics came within two wins of the championship.

“The future is bright and we’re just getting started,” Udoka said after the NBA Finals.

Perhaps not.

The bombshell on the eve of training camp is the latest twist heading into what was supposed to be a promising season for the NBA’s most-decorated franchise.

The Celtics bolstered their runner-up roster by acquiring guard Malcolm Brogdon in a trade from Indiana, then added sharpshooting veteran forward Danilo Gallinari as a free agent. But last month, Gallinari tore the ACL in his left knee and will be lost for the coming season.

US women use stellar defense to rout Puerto Rico

Associated Press

SYDNEY — The United States is quickly identifying itself as a stellar defensive squad by using its athleticism to make it difficult for opponents to score.

Shakira Austin scored 19 points, Kahleah Copper added 16 and the U.S. played suffocating defense to rout Puerto Rico 106-42 on Friday in the women’s World Cup.

“We talk every day about being hard to play against, getting deflections, and the team has really bought into that,” U.S. coach Cheryl Reeve said.

The Americans (2-0) forced Puerto Rico into 21 turnovers and contested nearly every shot, making every point tough to come by.

“It’s fun playing on a team that loves to play defense. It really fuels our offense,” said Alyssa Thomas, who had six of the Americans’ 13 steals.

The U.S. jumped out to a 27-11 lead after one quarter as Thomas had 10 points and five steals in the opening 10 minutes. The Americans forced nine turnovers in the pe-

riod. The U.S. kept the pressure on in the second, holding Puerto Rico without a point for nearly the first five minutes of the period.

Mya Hollingshed finally ended the drought, making a contested three-pointer that made it 40-17. The Americans led 54-21 at the half. There was little drama in the second half as the U.S. kept extending its lead.

The Americans contained guard Arella Guirantes, who had 26 points, nine rebounds and eight assists in Puerto Rico’s opening win over Bosnia and Herzegovina. She was held to seven points on 2-for-12 shooting. The U.S. threw four or five different defenders at her, starting with Copper.

“We like to be aggressive on both ends,” Breanna Stewart said. “We can and will guard multiple positions and make it hard for the other team. Our activity and awareness of one another on the defensive end will go a long way in the tournament.”

The U.S. now has won 24 consecutive World Cup games since losing in the 2006 semifinals to Russia. The Americans are

two wins short of matching their record 26-game run from 1998-2006.

Puerto Rico (1-1) was coming off its first-ever World Cup win. Hollingshed, who played in college at Colorado, finished with 10 points.

Reinforcements

Chelsea Gray and Kelsey Plum landed in Sydney after celebrating the Las Vegas Aces’ first WNBA championship with a parade on Tuesday. They sat on the U.S. bench and cheered on their teammates. A’ja Wilson, the third member of the championship team, was expected to land in Sydney later Friday.

“We’ll get some time in the morning with them before we play against a really good China team tomorrow,” Reeve said. “The depth will be helpful.”

Bench play

Led by Austin, the U.S. reserves outscored Puerto Rico’s 47-21. Brianna Jones added 15 points and nine rebounds.

US takes 4-1 lead in Presidents Cup

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — American red numbers filled the electronic scoreboards Thursday in the Presidents Cup, an outcome that surprised no one for these one-sided matches.

“Somebody came on the radio and said, ‘Yeah, but we’re 1 up in three matches and those can flip real quick,’ ” U.S. captain Davis Love III said.

When it was over, the International team was happy it wasn’t shut out.

Patrick Cantlay and Xander Schauffele set the tone with the shortest foursomes match in the Presidents Cup since 2011, dispatching Hideki Matsuyama and Adam Scott in 13 holes as the American duo im-

proved to 5-0 in this alternate-shot format.

Right behind them were Jordan Spieth and Justin Thomas, coming up with big moments after bad shots in a 2-and-1 win over Sungjae Im and Corey Connors.

Another strong American team from top to bottom played at a high level on a hot day at Quail Hollow and walked off with a 4-1 lead after the first session.

“I told the guys last night we need to set the tone — us and J.T. and Jordan’s match — and we did,” Schauffele said. “Playing this format on a day like today and not making any bogeys, it’s exactly what we need.”

Even the breaks fell the Americans’ way. Max Homa and Tony Finau were all square with four holes to play when Homa’s shot

from a fairway bunker on the 15th hole — typically the 18th at Quail Hollow — was headed for the middle of the stream when it caromed off the rocks and into the rough. Finau pitched to 8 feet and Homa made the putt to halve the hole.

“That tie felt like a win,” Homa said, and they wound up winning the match with a par on the 18th hole.

The lone bright spot for the International team was Cameron Davis and Si Woo Kim, who won the last four holes to take out Sam Burns and Masters champion Scottie Scheffler, the No. 1 player in the world.

“If we got whitewashed today, it would have been a tough pill to swallow,” International captain Trevor Immelman said

Donovan’s grand slam lifts Cardinals over Padres

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Lars Nootbaar provided St. Louis’ first run in four games with a solo homer, and then rookie Brendan Donovan gave the NL Central leaders an even bigger lift.

Donovan hit his first career grand slam in the seventh inning to lead Albert Pujols and the Cardinals to a 5-4 victory against the San Diego Padres on Thursday, snapping a three-game losing streak.

Pujols was among the first teammates to greet Donovan in the dugout.

“It was one of the bigger swings I’ve had this year so that was cool for me,” Donovan said.

Pujols remained at 698 career homers, although he did drive two balls to deep left field, one for a single and one for an out on the warning track. The next stop in his pursuit of the 700-homer club is Dodger Stadium, where the Cardinals opened a three-game series on Friday.

Manny Machado hit his 30th homer for the Padres, who had won five in a row. They currently hold the NL’s No. 2 wild-card spot.

Rays 10, Blue Jays 5: Wander Franco had three RBIs and

Jonathan Aranda homered, powering host Tampa Bay to the win in the opener of a big four-game series between playoff contenders.

Tampa Bay (83-67) pulled within one game of Toronto (84-66) for the top spot in the AL wild-card standings. Seattle (82-67) is in third, four games ahead of Baltimore.

Phillies 1, Braves 0: Ranger Suárez (10-5) pitched six sparkling innings, and host Philadelphia continued its push toward the club’s first playoff berth in a decade.

Philadelphia (82-67) moved within a half-game of San Diego for the National League’s second wild-card spot and remained 2½ games ahead of Milwaukee for the final playoff berth.

The Braves (93-57) fell 1½ games behind the idle New York Mets for the NL East lead.

Guardians 4, White Sox 2: Shane Bieber (12-8) pitched two-run ball into the eighth inning, and visiting Cleveland beat the Chicago for a three-game series sweep.

Cleveland opened a seven-game lead over Chicago in the AL Central with its 15th win in 18 games. The Guardians (83-

67) are going for the franchise’s first division title since 2018.

Mariners 9, Athletics 5: Julio Rodríguez doubled and scored before leaving with lower back tightness, and visiting Seattle avoided a three-game sweep.

Orioles 2, Astros 0: Kyle Bradish (4-7) came within one out of his first career shutout, outpitching Justin Verlander (17-4) in a stellar performance and leading host Baltimore to the victory.

Trey Mancini went 0-for-3 in his first game back at Camden Yards since the Orioles traded him to Houston on Aug. 1, and the Astros failed in their first attempt at earning their 100th victory this season.

The Orioles remained four games behind Seattle in the race for a postseason spot.

Brewers 5, Reds 1: Kolten Wong hit a career-high three homers and drove in five runs, leading Brandon Woodruff (12-4) and visiting Milwaukee to the victory.

Dodgers 3, Diamondbacks 2: Max Muncy hit a tying infield single in the ninth inning and pinch-hitter Mookie Betts singled home the winning run, helping host Los Angeles edge Arizona for its major league-

leading 45th comeback victory.

Royals 4, Twins 1: Jonathan Heasley (4-8) pitched six innings of two-hit ball, and host Kansas City beat Minnesota to complete a three-game series sweep.

The first home sweep of at least three games by the Royals since July 2021 also probably ended the fading playoff hopes of the Twins, who two weeks ago were in the midst of an AL Central race but lost eight of nine on their road trip.

Giants 3, Rockies 0: Mike Yastrzemski homered and John Brebbia pitched an inning in his second start of the series, helping visiting San Francisco complete a four-game sweep.

Rangers 5, Angels 3: Corey Seager hit a tiebreaking two-run homer in the eighth inning, sending host Texas to the win.

Cubs 3, Pirates 2: Chicago rookie Hayden Wesneski (2-1) had an immaculate inning against host Pittsburgh in his second major league start.

Wesneski had an immaculate inning in the fifth when he struck out the side on nine pitches. He fanned the three hitters at the bottom of the order: Jack Suwinski, Zack Collins and Jason Delay.