

Marines pair with Swedes on exercise

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

BERGA NAVAL BASE, Sweden — A joint U.S.-Swedish military exercise this week in Sweden's archipelago in the Baltic Sea sends a strong signal of NATO's resolve in the face of Russian aggression, defense officials from the two countries said.

That determination comes as Sweden prepares to join the alliance and NATO carefully observes the war in Ukraine for important lessons, including ones about fortitude, adaptability and cunning, they said.

Although officials declined to go into detail, they said studying the actions of Russian and Ukrainian forces is instructive for the U.S. military and future NATO member Sweden.

"We are paying very close attention each and every day to

what they are using, what they are trying to use and some of the concepts they are trying to employ," Maj. Gen. Robert Sofge, commander of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa, said Wednesday. "(The war) is a lab in many ways."

Sofge was in Sweden for Archipelago Endeavor 23, which included more than 100 sailors and Marines from the II Marine Expeditionary Force. The exercise ended Thursday.

The war also has served to fortify the determination of allies and partners should the Kremlin turn its attention beyond Ukraine, Sofge said. That was echoed by Col. Adam Camel, commander of Sweden's 1st Marine Regiment.

"We're getting better and more lethal," Camel said.

Sweden announced a 28% increase in military spending this

week, The Associated Press reported Tuesday.

That would bring the country, which is on the brink of NATO membership, on track to reach the bloc's expectation that allies devote at least 2% of gross domestic product to defense expenditures, the AP reported.

Previously worried about provoking Russia, Sweden and neighboring Finland reversed course after the Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine, applying to join NATO in May of that year.

Finland joined in April, but Sweden's bid had been held up by Turkey and Hungary. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the main hurdle, has since relented on his objections, putting Sweden on a path for accession this fall.

With Finland and Norway already in the NATO fold, the impending addition of Sweden of-

fers the alliance unprecedented opportunities in the Baltic region, Sofge said.

Sweden's membership would make nearly the entire Baltic Sea coast NATO territory.

On Wednesday, U.S. and Swedish marines demonstrated their ability to work together in a mock scenario involving the removal of forces under fire.

The Americans praised the professionalism and focus of their Swedish counterparts and were inspired by their littoral capabilities, including use of the Combat Boat 90, an assault craft.

The exercise allowed the two countries' forces to strengthen communication and equipment compatibility and also provided the Corps an opportunity to jointly experiment as it works to integrate across domains, Sofge said.

Acting CNO: Recovery from Tuberville will take years

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The acting chief of naval operations said Thursday that it will take the Navy years to recover from the delay on promotions caused by Sen. Tommy Tuberville's procedural hold on military nominees.

Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the nominee for the Navy's highest-ranking position, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that untangling the monthslong blockade of more than 300 nominations and appointments would take three to four months for three-star officers alone.

"The Navy's facing challenges all around the globe, threats from our adversaries. We want to have the right people with the right level of experience in those positions," Franchetti said. "And as we continue not to have the confirmed

people that we've nominated with that experience, we're going to continue to see an erosion of readiness."

Her own nomination to permanent chief of naval operations is expected to be stalled by Tuberville, R-Ala., as he refuses to let the Senate move forward on senior military confirmations in a bid to force the Pentagon to rescind an abortion access policy.

Franchetti would become the first woman to lead the Navy and serve on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, if confirmed. She has been filling the role of chief of naval operations in an acting capacity following the retirement last month of Adm. Michael Gilday.

Officials serving on an acting basis are prevented from making long-term plans, such as hiring decisions, and cannot move into housing that comes with the job.

Franchetti told senators Thursday that

she is personally seeing the impact of Tuberville's hold on military families, who have been left uncertain of when they will have to move or where they will live.

"I have heard a lot of concerns from our families that they are having difficulty navigating that space right now," she said.

The list of frozen military promotions includes Rear Adm. Yvette Davids, who was nominated in April to become the first female superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy.

"Every young person who is thinking right now about applying to the academy, and every young person anywhere in the Navy must confront head-on the fact that Sen. Tuberville has turned the Navy and the Naval Academy into one more political football," Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass said.

US general: Land forces keep China in check

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The commander of U.S. Army Pacific said Wednesday that strong land forces — not just air and naval strength — will be crucial in defending allies in the Indo-Pacific region and deterring Chinese aggression in the coming years.

Gen. Charles Flynn emphasized the importance of ground troops during a conference call to discuss existing challenges in the region and potential obstacles to implementing the command's vision for the future.

"I contend that [the Indo-Pacific region] is not an air and maritime theater. It is a joint theater," Flynn said. "There is a natural tendency to look at the map and think you can solve this with air and maritime power alone. My thinking on this is that the land power network and armies out here are an essential part of the solution."

The U.S. Army Pacific's newly released 2023 Vision Book outlines many of the challenges facing U.S. allies and interests in the Indo-Pacific region, which includes about three dozen countries across Asia and

the Pacific and Indian oceans, including South Korea, Japan, China, India and Australia.

Flynn acknowledged air and naval forces are vital to protecting the region, but he added that the land component has often been overlooked.

"In my view, the security architecture that actually binds this region together is the armies," he said. "These nations have large armies, they don't have large navies and air forces."

"There is a unique on-the-ground fingertip feel that you get when you're out in the vil-

lages ... out in the jungle, out in the mountains and operating amongst the people," Flynn continued. "Do you want to know what's going on inside these countries? Ask somebody from the land force, because we are in these countries for extended periods of time. And I think we have a deeper understanding of what's actually happening."

Flynn said Army Pacific's vision is in step with the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, which was released in the fall and identifies China as the top U.S. "pacing challenge."

China stepping up naval, air demonstrations near Taiwan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

China's military sent scores of ships and planes near Taiwan for a fifth day Thursday, its largest show of force since April, according to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense.

Between 6 a.m. Wednesday and 6 a.m. Thursday, Taiwan's military monitored 68 Chinese aircraft and 10 ships in the waters and airspace around the island, the ministry said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Forty of the aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait's median line and entered the island's air defense identification zone from the southwest and southeast, the ministry said.

Farther west, the Chinese aircraft carrier Shandong, two frigates, two destroyers and a support ship were in the Philippine Sea on Wednesday, approximately 400 miles south of Miyako Island, Japan's Joint Staff said in a news release that day.

Japan's military observed fighter jets and helicopters taking off and landing on the carrier,

the Joint Staff said.

Thursday marked the largest number of Chinese aircraft operating near Taiwan since April 11, during a three-day series of drills that encircled the island.

China's air and naval forces have kept up pressure on Taiwan since Sunday. The island's forces tracked 35 aircraft on Wednesday; 27 aircraft and 13 ships on Tuesday; 22 aircraft and 20 ships on Monday; and 26 aircraft and 13 ships on Sunday, according to a series of reports from Taiwan's Defense Ministry.

The scale of Chinese military activities has "constantly increased this year" and is intended as a political deterrent and a demonstration of China's "level of readiness," Norah Huang, director for international relations at the Prospect Foundation, a security and foreign affairs think tank in Taipei, told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday.

Beijing's recent actions are likely a response to a joint U.S.-Canada transit of the Taiwan Strait on Saturday, Huang said by email Tuesday.

USAF to miss active recruiting goal for first time in decades

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force will miss its active-duty recruiting goal for the first time since 1999 by about 10%, Brig. Gen. Chris Amrhein said Wednesday.

"If we hadn't deviated much from our former recruiting practices, this recruiting shortfall could have been much worse," said Amrhein, who took over as the Air Force Recruiting Service commander in June.

The Air Force recruiting goal for fiscal 2023 was 26,877, but the service will miss it by about 2,700, Air Force Recruiting Service spokeswoman Leslie Brown wrote in an email.

In addition to the active-duty number falling short, Amrhein said the recruiting goals for the Air National Guard and Reserve will each come up short by nearly 30%.

Amrhein said he is still "cautiously optimistic" about seeing improvement in recruiting. Last September, the Air Force

and Space Force announced a new pilot program that would grant certain applicants who test positive for THC a chance to retest and possibly join the ranks. THC is the main psychoactive component of marijuana.

"We realized with about three dozen states having legalized marijuana laws that this was not a policy that made sense," Amrhein said. "Let's make no mistake, drug usage has absolutely no place in our Air and Space forces. But allowing second tests in the recruiting process is the right thing to do."

The policy change allowed about 165 airmen into the service, the general said. In March, the Air Force announced additional changes to policies for hand and neck tattoos, body fat standards and college loan repayment programs for enlisted troops.

As a result, Brown said the Air Force was able to bring in more than 1,200 new airmen who would have been disqualified in the past.

Judge declares revised DACA is illegal

Associated Press

HOUSTON—While a federal judge on Wednesday declared illegal a revised version of a federal policy that prevents the deportation of hundreds of thousands of immigrants brought to the U.S. as children, he declined to order an immediate end to the program and the protections it offers to recipients.

U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen agreed with Texas and eight other states suing to stop the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program. The judge's ruling was ultimately expected to be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, sending the program's fate before the high court for a third time.

"While sympathetic to the predicament of DACA recipients

and their families, this Court has expressed its concerns about the legality of the program for some time," Hanen wrote in his 40-page ruling. "The solution for these deficiencies lies with the legislature, not the executive or judicial branches. Congress, for any number of reasons, has decided not to pass DACA-like legislation. ... The Executive Branch cannot usurp the power bestowed on Congress by the Constitution—even to fill a void."

Hanen's order extended the current injunction that had been in place against DACA, which barred the government from approving any new applications, but left the program intact for existing recipients during the ongoing legal review.

Hanen also declined a request

by the states to order the program's end within two years. Hanen said his order does not require the federal government to take any actions against DACA recipients, who are known as "Dreamers."

Thomas Saenz, president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, or MALDEF, which is representing DACA recipients in the lawsuit, said it will ultimately be up to higher courts, including the Supreme Court, to rule on DACA's legality and whether Texas proved it had been harmed by the program.

"Judge Hanen has consistently erred in resolving both of these issues, and today's ruling is more of the same flawed analysis. We look forward to continuing to defend the lawful and

much-needed DACA program on review in higher courts," Saenz said.

The Biden administration criticized the judge's ruling.

"We are deeply disappointed in today's DACA ruling from the District Court in Southern Texas," press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement Wednesday night. "... As we have long maintained, we disagree with the District Court's conclusion that DACA is unlawful, and will continue to defend this critical policy from legal challenges. While we do so, consistent with the court's order, DHS will continue to process renewals for current DACA recipients and DHS (the Department of Homeland Security) may continue to accept DACA applications."

Romney announces he won't seek Senate reelection

Associated Press

Utah Republican Sen. Mitt Romney said Wednesday that he will not run for reelection, ending a storied two-decade political career that included the 2012 Republican GOP nomination for president and a term as Massachusetts governor.

Romney, 76, said the country's many challenges call for a younger generation of leaders. He said the U.S. would be better served if the two front-runners

for their parties' 2024 presidential nominations — Democratic President Joe Biden and Republican former President Donald Trump — stepped aside. Biden is 80 and Trump is 77.

"The times we're living in demand the next generation step up and express their point of view and to make the decisions that will shape American politics over the coming century," Romney said in a news conference at the Capitol. He said

baby boomers like him are "not the right ones to be making the decisions for tomorrow."

He said after he leaves the Senate he plans to focus on getting more young people voting and involved in the political process.

As the GOP's 2012 nominee for the White House, Romney campaigned across America as a buttoned-up former Massachusetts governor and private equity executive. But with

Trump's populist rise as the party's dominant figure, Romney's brand of Republicanism shifted from establishment to outlier.

He was the only GOP member of Congress to vote to convict Trump at both of his impeachment trials.

Romney said at the news conference that he belongs to the "wise wing of the Republican Party" and doesn't think it will fade away.

Biden's rules on clean cars face appeals challenges

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—Efforts by the Biden administration to limit pollution from automobile tailpipes — a major source of planet-warming emissions — face a crucial test as legal challenges brought by Republican-led states head to a federal appeals court.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit will hear arguments

Thursday and Friday on three cases challenging Biden administration rules targeting cars and trucks. Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming, and the legal cases could go all the way to the Supreme Court.

Republican attorneys general say the legal challenges are needed to curtail government overreach, while environmen-

tal groups and the Democratic administration say an adverse ruling could jeopardize protections against deadly pollution that contributes to climate change.

The cases before the appeals court will test a 2021 Environmental Protection Agency rule that strengthened tailpipe pollution limits and a 2022 EPA decision that restored California's authority to set its own

tailpipe pollution standards for cars and SUVs. At least 15 states and the District of Columbia have signed on to California's vehicle standards, which are stricter than federal rules and are designed to address the state's severe air pollution problems.

A third case challenges mileage standards set by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration.

Soaked New England warily eyes hurricane

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Days of wild weather that produced torrential rain, flooding, sinkholes and a likely tornado in New England could be a prelude to something more dangerous lurking offshore — Hurricane Lee.

As the Category 1 system swirled southwest of Bermuda, Maine Gov. Janet Mills declared a state of emergency on Thursday, and the state was under its first hurricane watch in 15 years. The water-logged region prepared for 20-foot waves and wind gusts up to 70 mph, along with more rain.

A dangerous storm surge was projected for Friday evening for Massachusetts' Cape Cod Bay and Nantucket Island, while the brunt of the storm was to arrive early Saturday.

Although Lee did not contribute to the recent flooding, it

threatened to exacerbate conditions in a region that is already much too wet.

The Coast Guard and emergency management agencies warned New England residents to be prepared, and utility companies brought in reinforcements to deal with power outages.

At Boothbay Harbor Marina in Maine, the community came together to remove boats from the water to keep them out of harm's way.

"It's a batten-down-the-hatches kind of day," owner Kim Gillies said Thursday.

Similar scenes played out at Kennebunkport Marina, where crews planned to take 100 boats out of the water, said Cathy Norton, marina manager.

Commercial lobster fisherman Steve Train said fishermen have been sinking gear in deeper water to protect against storm

damage. Fishing boats were also headed to the safety of harbors.

In her emergency declaration on Thursday, the governor urged residents to take the storm seriously and to make preparations. Mills, a Democrat, also asked President Joe Biden to issue a preemptive presidential disaster declaration to give the state access to federal resources.

Earlier in the week, the region saw 10 inches of rain over six hours. Tornado warnings were posted Wednesday for communities in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and more heavy rain opened up sinkholes and brought devastating flooding to several areas.

The National Weather Service in Boston said radar data and videos indicated that a likely tornado damaged trees and power lines in Rhode Island and Connecticut on Wednesday.

In Lincoln, R.I., photos taken

after the storm showed that at least one roof was damaged, and the press box at the high school stadium tipped into the bleachers.

At midday Thursday, Lee was spinning 245 miles southwest of Bermuda, with maximum sustained winds of 90 mph, according to the National Hurricane Center. It was traveling north on a path that could lead to landfall in Nova Scotia, Canada, possibly as a tropical storm, forecasters said.

The system threatened to bring a mixed bag of threats. Ocean waves as tall as 20 feet could lash the coast, damaging structures and causing erosion; powerful wind gusts could knock down trees weakened by a wet summer; and rain could cause flash flooding in a region where the soil is already saturated, said Louise Fode, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Maine.

NASA report urges shift in UFO discussion 'to science'

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA said Thursday that the study of UFOs will require new scientific techniques, including advanced satellites as well as a shift in how unidentified flying objects are perceived.

The space agency released the findings after a yearlong study into UFOs.

In its 33-page report, an independent team commissioned by NASA cautioned that the negative perception surrounding UFOs poses an obstacle to collecting data. But officials said NASA's involvement should help reduce the stigma around what it calls UAPs, or unidentified anomalous phenomena.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said the agency wants to shift the conversation about UAPs "from sensationalism to science." Nelson added the panel found no

evidence that UAPs had extraterrestrial origin.

The 16-member panel noted that artificial intelligence and machine learning are essential for identifying rare occurrences, including UFOs. At its only public meeting earlier this year, the independent team selected by the space agency insisted there is no conclusive evidence of extraterrestrial life associated with UFOs.

No top-secret files were accessed by the scientists, aviation and artificial intelligence experts, and retired NASA astronaut Scott Kelly, the first American to spend nearly a year in space. Instead, the 16-member group relied on unclassified data in an attempt to better understand unexplained sightings in the sky.

NASA said there are so few high-quality observations that no scientific conclusions can be drawn.

Judge blocks NM governor's halt of right to carry a gun

Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — A federal judge has blocked part of a public health order that suspended the right to carry guns in public across New Mexico's largest metro area, with criticism mounting and political divides widening over the Democratic governor's action.

The ruling Wednesday by U.S. District Judge David Urias marks a setback for Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham. The second-term governor imposed an emergency public health order last Friday that suspended the right to openly carry or conceal guns in public places based on a statistical threshold for violent crime that applied only to Albuquerque and the surrounding area. She cited recent shootings around the state that left children dead.

Urias, who was appointed to the

federal bench by President Joe Biden, agreed Wednesday with plaintiffs who have accused Lujan Grisham of trampling on constitutional rights. Urias granted a temporary restraining order to block the governor's suspension of gun rights until another hearing is held in early October.

The governor in a statement issued Wednesday said she would not be resigned to the status quo.

"I see the pain of families who lost their loved ones to gun violence every single day, and I will never stop fighting to prevent other families from enduring these tragedies," she said.

Connecticut-based attorney Cameron Atkinson, who represents We The Patriots USA and Bernalillo County resident Dennis Smith, characterized the governor's action as an emotional reaction to heartbreaking tragedies.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Suit accuses Beverly Hills police of racial profiling

CA BEVERLY HILLS — A lawsuit accuses Beverly Hills police of racially profiling nearly 1,100 Black people during traffic stops.

The suit announced Monday was filed on behalf of most of the Black drivers who were pulled over in the wealthy city between August 2019 and August 2021. Out of a total of 1,088 Black motorists stopped, only two were convicted of crimes, attorney Benjamin Crump said at a news conference.

About a third of all arrests made during the period involved Blacks, who make up only 1.5% of the city's population, Crump said.

"It wasn't to deter crime. It was to send a message to Black people that we don't want your kind around here," Crump said. "That is racial profiling 101!"

The city denied the allegations, saying in a statement, "The statistics presented referencing the number of convictions is a mischaracterization of the evidence in this case. In addition, the 1,088 arrests referenced includes people cited and released, not just custodial arrests."

The suit seeks \$500 million in damages.

Prisoner captured after a month on the lam

NY NEW YORK — A prisoner who used a rope made of bedsheets to escape from the fifth floor of a New York City hospital has been rearrested after a month on the lam, police said Wednesday.

The 44-year-old man was ap-

prehended Tuesday in Queens after escaping from Mount Sinai Beth Israel hospital in Manhattan on Aug. 9, a police spokesperson said.

The man had been in custody on a drug charge since July 31 when he was brought to the hospital Aug. 4 after he complained of chest pains, authorities said.

He used a rope made of sheets to escape from a fifth-floor window five days later after asking to take a shower, police said. He rappelled to a rooftop below and from there made it to the street, where he got into a taxi.

The man was taken into custody Tuesday by U.S. Marshals and officers from the city's Department of Correction intelligence bureau, a correction department spokesperson said.

Bigger homes OK'd as slave descendants object

GA DARIEN — Descendants of enslaved people living on a Georgia island vowed to keep fighting Tuesday after county commissioners voted to double the maximum size of homes allowed in their tiny enclave, which residents fear will accelerate the decline of one of the South's few surviving Gullah-Geechee communities.

Black residents of the Hogg Hummock community on Sapelo Island and their supporters packed a meeting of McIntosh County's elected commissioners to oppose zoning changes that residents say favor wealthy buyers and will lead to tax increases that could pressure them to sell their land.

Commissioners voted 3-2 to weaken zoning restrictions the county adopted nearly three decades ago with the stated in-

tent to help Hogg Hummock's 30 to 50 residents hold on to their land.

Hogg Hummock is one of just a few surviving communities in the South of people known as Gullah, or Geechee, in Georgia, whose ancestors worked island slave plantations.

Schools take union to court over teacher absences

NV LAS VEGAS — School district officials in Las Vegas are asking a judge to put an end to what it claims is a coordinated union campaign of teacher absences during a bitter contract battle, forcing school closures and classroom disruptions in a state where it is illegal for public employees to strike.

Since Sept. 1, unexpected staff shortages have forced seven schools to cancel classes for the day and two others to combine classes, according to the Clark County School District, which includes Las Vegas. The district's motion seeking an emergency court order said one of those schools had 87% of its teachers call out sick on the same day.

The Clark County Education Association — which represents about 18,000 licensed educators — has denied that it is behind the recent wave of absences.

Clinics halt transgender care for minors, cite law

MO ST. LOUIS — At least two Missouri health care centers have stopped prescribing puberty blockers and hormones to minors for the purpose of gender transition, citing a new state law that one clinic says "creates unsustainable liability" for health care workers.

Washington University Transgender Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital on Monday announced it stopped providing those services, and a spokesperson said University of Missouri Health Care stopped treatments for minors Aug. 28.

The new Missouri law, which took effect Aug. 28, outlawed puberty blockers, hormones and gender-affirming surgery for minors. But there are exceptions for youth who were already taking those medications before the law kicked in, allowing them to continue receiving that health care.

Both Washington University and University of Missouri said physicians there are referring current patients to other providers.

Bull moose captured in capital, moved to habitat

NM SANTA FE — A wandering bull moose was captured in downtown Santa Fe and relocated to a suitable habitat in northern New Mexico, authorities said Tuesday.

State Game and Fish officials and Animal Service Officers for the capital city said the moose was spotted around 8 a.m. near Fort Marcy Park. Officers set up a perimeter to protect residents and pedestrians in the park, which is a popular walking area.

The moose was sedated with a tranquilizer dart and loaded onto a trailer before being evaluated by a Game and Fish Department veterinarian and determined to be in good health. Department biologists estimate the moose weighed over 900 pounds and was 4 to 5 years old.

— From wire reports

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Championship model: FSU uses depth

Associated Press

Expectations were extremely high for defensive end Jared Verse at Florida State, yet the preseason All-American has just two tackles and two quarterback hurries in two games.

Verse has drawn double teams and attention, but a veteran Seminoles' defensive front has demonstrated it is more than a one-man show. No. 3 Florida State had four sacks in the season-opening win over LSU and tacked on two more last week against Southern Miss, which scored just three points in the first half against the first-team defense.

"We're going to be the best in the nation," defensive tackle Fabien Lovett said. "It won't be no ifs, ands or buts about it. We're just focused on the best we can be each day, every rep."

Coach Mike Norvell and his staff have made an emphasis of accumulating defensive line talent in an effort to minimize how

many reps the Seminoles will log each game. Verse arrived from FCS school Albany in 2022, while defensive tackle Braden Fiske (Western Michigan) and defensive end Gilber Edmond (South Carolina) arrived through the transfer portal this offseason.

"Every play that they play, we want at an elite level, chasing the ball, everything that we're doing, physicality," Norvell said. "And when you have good players, you can do that. I did an offseason study, looking at the past three or four national champions and there's only one defensive lineman on those teams that played over 50% of the snaps defensively. But you saw a lot of guys around 30-45%. It shows depth, it shows quality."

Norvell paused briefly and underscored another key point: "There's a lot of first-round draft picks that came from that."

Verse was projected to be a first-rounder in the 2023 draft by some analysts but chose to return because he felt he could improve as a run-stopper, learn from a second season of Power Five football and help continue the program's ascent. While the sack numbers aren't there yet this fall, defensive coordinator Adam Fuller said, "I thought his game against Southern Miss was actually even a cleaner game than it was against LSU."

As Florida State (2-0) opens ACC play at Boston College (1-1) on Saturday — and with a showdown at Clemson looming on Sept. 23 — the Seminoles have shown off a veteran, deep front and are 15th in the FBS in third-down conversion defense (allowing just 6 of 23 conversions).

One unexpected source of pressure on opposing quarterbacks is defensive tackle Dennis Briggs, who has a sack in each game. Briggs had just four sacks in his prior five seasons at

Florida State. Another defensive tackle who has impressed is Joshua Farmer, who had a sack in his first start against LSU. All of this is happening without Darrell Jackson, a transfer who had his waiver to play this fall declined by the NCAA in August.

Behind an aggressive front, Florida State's defense halted LSU on all three of its fourth-down attempts and held the Tigers to 3-for-10 on third-down attempts. On Saturday, Southern Miss didn't convert any of its five third-down attempts in the first half.

"I thought we were dominant," Fuller said. "There were a lot of three-and-outs in there."

A dominant and rested line is one of the reasons why. And the Seminoles feel they are just getting started.

"We're not perfect," Lovett said. "We're not where we want to be. But we're working to get there."

Two weeks into season, SEC appears vulnerable

Associated Press

The mighty Southeastern Conference, which has claimed 13 of the last 17 national championships, including four straight, looks far more vulnerable than anyone expected and the slow start could be important when teams are competing for playoff spots.

The SEC's 1-4 record against Atlantic Coast Conference teams ranks as perhaps the biggest surprise of the young season. The league also has been humbled in other high-profile matchups, including Texas beating then-No. 3 Alabama 34-24 and Florida falling at Utah, 24-11.

The SEC's 3-6 record against Power Five teams includes two attention-grabbing losses against ACC teams. Florida State beat LSU and North Carolina rolled past South Carolina on

the opening weekend. Texas A&M was also clobbered at Miami.

More signs of SEC mediocrity came last week when Auburn had to rally to beat California 14-10 and Kentucky struggled to beat FCS team Eastern Kentucky, 28-17.

The league's customary strength-of-schedule advantage with the College Football Playoff committee may be in jeopardy this year. A one-loss team that is not the SEC champion may have a more difficult argument for a playoff spot against a one-loss team from another league, including the ACC and Big 12.

Would No. 1 Georgia, the two-time defending national champion still sitting atop the AP Top 25, have more reason to worry about the implication of a loss? Georgia coach Kirby Smart not-

ed all those SEC losses in the first two weeks came against quality opponents as his Bulldogs prepared for their SEC opener against South Carolina on Saturday.

"I really have no idea," Smart said when asked about the league's rough start. "I mean, I can't put a finger on it or explain it. I think that every team you mentioned that beat an SEC team is a really good team, really, really good teams. And most of those teams have been improving for a while."

Florida coach Billy Napier suggested patience when evaluating the league.

"I do think as we settle in here, the end of the year typically, I think you'll be able to evaluate that more," Napier said.

Kentucky coach Mark Stoops remained optimistic even after

the Wildcats trailed Eastern Kentucky until late in the first half.

"We know we will get better," Stoops said. "We are 2-0. And there are plenty of teams around the country that have a lot to do."

The league's only win over an ACC team came in Tennessee's 49-13 rout of Virginia on Sept. 2. The Vols dropped two spots to No. 11 in the Top 25 following their lackluster 30-13 win over Austin Peay. The uninspiring performance led to a players-only meeting to refocus for this week's game at Florida.

"It was a great meeting for us honestly just because it allowed everybody to see that we all still have the same page, flush the game that happened and let's just continue to go work this week," said Vols defensive lineman Omari Thomas.

Pederson seeking 1st win against Reid

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Doug Pederson has known Andy Reid for nearly 30 years.

He played for Reid in Green Bay (1996-98) and then Philadelphia (1999). He spent seven years coaching under Reid in Philadelphia (2009-12) and then Kansas City (2013-15).

They share offensive philosophies, coaching principles and core beliefs.

They'll share the field for the third time in 10 months when Pederson and the Jacksonville Jaguars (1-0) host Reid and the Kansas City Chiefs (0-1) on Sunday. And Pederson is still looking for a breakthrough victory against his mentor and close friend.

"I got a ton of respect for Coach Reid and his career and what he's done," Pederson said Wednesday. "I've played for him. I worked for him and obviously you'd love to eventually win a football game against him."

Pederson is 0-3 in head-to-head matchups against Reid, with all three of those played at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City.

The Chiefs beat Pederson and Philadelphia 27-20 in Week 2 of the 2017 season; the Eagles rebounded and ultimately won the Super Bowl. The Chiefs swept the Jaguars last season, winning 27-17 in Week 10 and 27-20 in the divisional round of the AFC playoffs.

Pederson still laments the most recent one. His defense gave up a 98-yard drive with Patrick Mahomes (sprained ankle) sidelined in the second quarter. His offense had two chances to tie the game in the third and couldn't move the ball past midfield, and then turned the ball over twice in the fourth.

"There were some missed opportunities by us," Pederson recalled. "Those were critical and those were big and all of that. But I felt like, too, we just missed the opportunities that were

there. Whether that's the outcome of the game or not, who knows?"

"Maybe fortunately for us it's a learning experience and something that our young football team can take away from moments like that. When you're playing good teams like this and defending world championship teams, you can't make those mistakes and expect to win."

Reid has noticed similarities between Kansas City and Jacksonville, especially on the offensive side of the ball.

It's no surprise, either, given how much Pederson studied and learned while playing and coaching under Reid.

"Everywhere you go, you take a piece of it and put it in there," Reid said. "I think he's probably put his own flair on things. I'm sure there are things he does that he took from here, but we were together a long time."

The Chiefs are 3½-point favorites, according to FanDuel

Sportsbook. Jacksonville went 5-0 as home underdogs last season, the best single-season mark by any team in the Super Bowl era.

"It'll be a good test for early in the season to see where we're at," Jaguars receiver Christian Kirk said. "It's big for us, Week 2, to really get a taste of the caliber of football and the level of football that we want to play. We're going to have to beat teams like this to get to where we want to go."

"It's really important for us to approach it that way and see how we respond."

Pederson won't mention either Kansas City loss this week. He doesn't need to. But he'll surely think about those along with the possibility of getting a first win against his mentor.

"I don't really go back," Pederson said. "That's why they call it history; it's in the past. We focus on the future, focus on the present and trying to get better."

New NBA policy hopes to limit star players sitting out

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA took steps Wednesday to try to ensure that its star players appear in more games, particularly nationally televised matchups and the in-season tournament that is being added this year.

The league's board of governors approved a new player participation policy that will take effect for this upcoming season, replacing the player resting policy that was implemented prior to the 2017-18 season. The new rules focus primarily on star players — someone who has been an All-Star or on the All-NBA team in any of the prior three seasons. There are 50 players who fit into the star category.

"It's a shared view by everyone in the league, it's not just

coming from the league office," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said. "I think whether it's our teams, our players association, individual players, I think there's an acknowledgement across the league that we need to return to that principle that this is an 82-game league. ... I think there's a statement of principle that if you're a healthy player in this league, the expectation is that you're going to play."

Increased player participation is a top priority for Silver as the league negotiates a new media rights deal. The current deal ends in 2025.

Teams will have to manage their rosters to ensure only one star player is unavailable per game at the most.

"What we've tried to do as the league office is work through all

the different issues recognizing the genuine concern from the fans and of course the media that's paying for the opportunity to broadcast those games," Silver said.

The league will have the ability to penalize teams that violate the policy by fining them \$100,000 for the first infraction and \$250,000 for the second. Each successive violation will increase by \$1 million.

The NBA also wants teams to maintain a balance between the number of one-game absences a star player has at home and on the road, as well as refrain from any long-term shutdowns where a star player stops playing games.

The league will allow teams to submit written requests in advance for older players for back-

to-back games. This is for a small pool of stars who are either 35 or older at the start of the season or have played over 34,000 regular-season minutes or 1,000 games. LeBron James, Kevin Durant and Stephen Curry all fit in that category.

"The Players Association was very much a part of it," Silver said of discussions on the new policy. "We had extensive discussions with them and then with individual groups of players, particularly the veterans in the league, about how they thought we should be approaching it."

Teams will be able to make other requests to have players miss games that include personal reasons, player's prior injury history and end-of-season flexibility.

Braves clinch 6th straight NL East title

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Crammed into the visitor's clubhouse, the Atlanta Braves puffed on their championship cigars, showered each other with bubbly, shot-gunned beers and danced in alcohol puddles — until the music briefly paused.

"Turn the music up! Some people want to party!" shouted reliever Kirby Yates.

On his command, the music was cranked to max volume and the NL East title celebration resumed. Yates was the one who closed another division title, so he got to call the shots in the locker room.

And as he surveyed the jubilation around him, and ran his fingers through hair matted by booze, Yates knew there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

"So far," he said, "it's the best part about being a baseball player."

It's just what the Braves do this time of year.

The Braves clinched their sixth straight NL East title, beating the Philadelphia Phillies 4-1 on Wednesday night behind Spencer Strider's major league-

leading 17th win and Austin Riley's two-run homer.

"Now the real party starts," Strider said.

Yates struck out Brandon Marsh to end the game and the players danced in a mob near the mound as Phillies fans booed them off the field.

"Congratulations Atlanta Braves 2023 NL East Champions" flashed on the scoreboard.

Braves star Ronald Acuña Jr. responded to booing fans by raising both arms and signaling with his hands to bring it on.

"We've checked one box," manager Brian Snitker said.

Atlanta (96-50) clinched in 146 games, its second-quickest clinch in the divisional era. The division title was the Braves' record 26th, two more than the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Yankees.

The Braves have seemingly made winning the East a rite of September since the 1990s and this year's team looks loaded enough to win their third World Series since moving from Milwaukee to Atlanta in 1966. Over that span, Atlanta won 11 straight

NL East titles from 1995-2005, and the World Series in 1995 and 2021.

Yates earned his fifth save.

Atlanta took special satisfaction in clinching on the same Citizens Bank Park field where the Phillies eliminated them last October in the NL Division Series. The Phillies won that series 3-1 — just as Atlanta won this four-game set.

The Phillies lead the NL wild card and the teams could face each other in October.

For now, September belongs to the Braves.

"Did we want it to be on our field? No," Phillies slugger Kyle Schwarber said. "But they're going to have to do it somewhere. The focus is on us, still. We're going to keep pushing until the very end."

Riley, one of many big boppers in the lineup, gave the Braves all the runs they needed when he connected off Cristopher Sánchez (2-4) in the first for his 35th homer.

"I try not to think of moments like that," Riley said. "You just try and go up there and have a good at-bat. I've put a lot of pres-

sure on myself this year to perform in those moments. I was able to put a good swing on there."

Riley had a sacrifice fly in the third and Kevin Pillar added an RBI double in the fourth for a 4-1 lead.

Sanchez struck out a career-best 10 in 7½ innings, but the Phillies have still lost five of seven.

"We'll bounce back," manager Rob Thomson said. "This group has been resilient all year."

Strider (17-5) took it from there and won for the fifth time in six starts, allowing one run and four hits in seven innings. Strider struck out nine to boost his MLB-best total to 259. He also gave the bullpen some needed rest after a rough first three games in Philly that included Raisel Iglesias surrendering tying homers in the ninth inning in two of them.

That the Braves had the mettle to rebound and win on the road from the crushing blows is just one more reason why they just might be the team to beat in the postseason.

"Let's get ready for October," Strider said.

Scherzer to miss rest of regular season with shoulder injury

Associated Press

TORONTO — Texas right-hander Max Scherzer will miss the rest of the regular season, and likely wouldn't be able to pitch in the playoffs if the Rangers make the postseason, because of a strained muscle in his shoulder.

Rangers general manager Chris Young said an MRI on Wednesday revealed a low-grade strain of the teres major muscle that won't require surgery. That came a day after Scherzer departed his start at Toronto in the sixth inning.

"In some ways I was almost relieved that it's not worse. It's not surgery," Scherzer said. "Talking with the doctors, I fully expect to make a full recovery."

Young said team physician Dr. Keith Meister feels confident that the injury will fully heal with rest, and Scherzer said he needed a couple of weeks of not throwing. But there are only 2½ weeks left in the regular season as the Rangers try to make the

playoffs for the first time since 2016.

"Unfortunately, the timing of the schedule isn't going to line up to where we can provide him rest, and he'll still pitch again, certainly before the regular season," said Young, who was then asked about the postseason. "I don't want to rule it out at this point. We'll see where the next two weeks go and how he's feeling. That said, it's probably unlikely."

The Rangers recalled right-handed reliever Jonathan Hernández from Triple-A Round Rock. Young didn't say how they will fill Scherzer's spot in the rotation, other than that it will be somebody already on the 28-man roster.

Scherzer, whose 3,367 career strikeouts are the most among active pitchers, will be re-evaluated in two weeks. He finished the season 13-6 with a 3.77 ERA in 27 starts for the Mets and Rangers, striking out 174 in 152 ⅓ innings. Texas acquired the three-time Cy

Young Award winner from New York just before the trade deadline, a deal that included Scherzer exercising his 2024 option that is worth \$43.33 million and will be paid mostly by the Mets.

"I've got to listen to what my body says," Scherzer said. "I'll throw a ball when I can throw a ball, but it sounds like I'm not going to be able to throw a ball for a little bit."

Toronto was his third consecutive abbreviated start. The eight-time All-Star allowed three hits and struck out two in 5⅓ scoreless innings Tuesday night, getting the win as the Rangers leapfrogged Toronto into the second AL wild-card spot.

"This team has shown a ton of resolve all season long. We've lost five of six All-Stars in the second half at different periods. We've now lost a future Hall of Fame pitcher," Young said. "Yet here we are in a great position to make a run here at the end of the season and make a playoff push."