

Military services see recruiting rebound

Associated Press

FORT JACKSON, S.C. — After several very difficult years and a swath of new programs and enticements, the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Space Force will all meet their recruiting goals by the end of this month and the Navy will come very close, the military services say.

The results represent a slight uptick in young people joining the military, reversing a dismal trend as the services struggled to overcome severe restrictions on in-person recruiting mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the low unemployment rate and stiff competition from private companies able to pay more and provide similar or better benefits.

But Army leaders looking to the future worry that an expected drop in the youth population may signal more difficult times ahead. And other military officials say that while they are seeing improvements, they will still

face tough challenges and must keep transforming their recruiting going forward.

Military leaders note that only about 23% of young adults are physically, mentally and morally qualified to serve without receiving some type of waiver. Moral behavior issues include drug use, gang ties or a criminal record. And of those qualified to serve, many are wary of taking on a job that puts their life or health at risk.

The Army has made the biggest comeback, after falling far short of recruiting goals for the past two years.

Two years ago, the Army brought in 45,000 recruits, far less than the 60,000 it needed, and last year it again fell 15,000 short of what leaders publicly set as a “stretch goal” of 65,000 recruits.

This year, with a lower goal of 55,000, the service will meet its target, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said Wednesday, and she plans to now set a high-

er goal for 2025.

“We not only met our goal, we exceeded it,” she said. “Our goal was 55,000 new contracts and 5,000 young people in our delayed entry program. We exceeded that goal of 55,000 by a few hundred, and we put 11,000 young people into the delayed entry program, which is going to give our recruiters a really strong jumping-off point to start towards our recruiting target for next year.”

Still, she noted, “the headwinds that we’ve been facing are not going to stop blowing.” Wormuth said that an expected drop of about 10% in the number of college-age young people in 2026 is a significant concern. The dip comes 18 years after the financial recession in 2008, which triggered a decrease in the number of children born.

It’s a big issue, she said, because the Army and the other services recruit from that population. And other challenges will also continue.

“I think we’re going to probably continue to see pretty low unemployment. We’re still going to see 60% go to college. It’s a more competitive labor market,” Wormuth said. “So we’re going to have to kind of keep fighting hard for our new recruits.”

A key to the recruiting success, she said, has been the Army’s future soldier prep course that gives lower-performing recruits up to 90 days of academic or fitness instruction to help them meet military standards.

This year more than 13,000 recruits — or 24% of the 55,000 — came in through the program, which was started as a test two years ago.

The Navy is the only service that won’t hit its goal this year. While the service was able to sign up 40,600 recruits as hoped, the crush of last-minute enlistments means it won’t be able to get them all through boot camp by next month.

Zelenskyy visits DC as election builds on divide

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy huddled with U.S. leaders on Thursday to shore up American support for his country’s fight against Russia as the war faces a partisan reckoning in this year’s presidential election.

Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee for president, has pledged to continue sending military assistance to Ukraine if she’s elected. She’ll have her own meeting with Zelenskyy after the Ukrainian leader sits down with President Joe Biden, who

announced billions of dollars more in missiles, drones, ammunition and other supplies. The weapons include an additional Patriot missile defense battery and a new shipment of glide bombs that can be deployed from Western fighter jets, increasing their strike range.

“The United States will provide Ukraine with the support it needs to win this war,” Biden said in a statement, pledging to ensure that all approved funding is disbursed before he leaves office.

He also said he would convene a meeting with other

world leaders focused on Ukraine’s defense during a visit to Germany next month.

Meanwhile, Zelenskyy’s tumultuous relationship with former President Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, continued to deteriorate this week. Instead of meeting with Zelenskyy, Trump criticized him. As for U.S. support for Ukraine, Trump complained that “we continue to give billions of dollars to a man who refuses to make a deal” to end the war. His message dovetails with Russian propaganda that claims intransigence by Kyiv — not aggression from Moscow

— has prolonged the bloodshed.

It’s the most politically treacherous landscape that Zelenskyy has encountered in Washington since Russia invaded nearly three years ago.

Ukrainian officials are anxious to maintain good relations with whoever becomes the next president of the United States, which is its biggest and most important provider of arms, money and other support.

But the effort risks slipping into the political blender of the presidential campaign, polarizing the discussion around a war that used to be a bipartisan cause célèbre in Washington.

Tuberville releases hold on nominee for Army job in Pacific

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Senate confirmed a fourth star for Army Lt. Gen. Ronald Clark on Tuesday just hours after Sen. Tommy Tuberville dropped a brief hold on his nomination to lead the service's forces in the Indo-Pacific region, congressional records show.

Tuberville, R-Ala., imposed the block on Clark's promotion earlier this month over concerns about the general's role in keeping quiet Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization after complications from surgery to treat prostate cancer. The senator dropped the hold after meeting Tuesday with Clark, said Mallory Jaspers, his spokeswoman.

"After a detailed discussion, Sen. Tuberville dropped his hold," she wrote Wednesday in an email. "While there were certainly failures elsewhere, the senator is confident that Lt. Gen. Clark more than fulfilled his duties during the secretary's hospitalization. Sen. Tuberville is thankful for Lt. Gen. Clark's many decades of service to our nation and wishes he and his family the best in his new assignment."

Tuberville drew fire from Democrats and Republicans last year when he blocked promotions of generals and admirals from February until December in protest of a Pentagon policy that allowed travel reimbursements for service members in locations with restrictions on reproductive health, including abortions. Tuberville's hold ultimately stalled promotions for more than 400 top offi-

cers. The Pentagon never altered its policy.

Clark, 58, was one of dozens of top military officers confirmed for promotions on Tuesday by the Senate. The 36-year Army veteran has served as Austin's top military aide since July 2022. He will replace Army Gen. Charlie Flynn as the chief of U.S. Army Pacific in Hawaii in the coming weeks.

Tuberville's brief hold of his promotion came over concerns that Clark, one of Austin's closest confidants, had been involved in the missteps when the secretary was hospitalized in January days after his prostate surgery. Austin's condition and hospitalization status was not revealed to White House staffers and President Joe Biden for days, according to a February review of the incident. Austin and his staff faced condemnation from lawmakers for failing to report the defense secretary's condition to the White House and Capitol Hill.

A summary of the Pentagon's review of the incident did not name Clark but said Austin's staff faced a difficult situation given health privacy laws. The review concluded Austin's staff had no "ill intent" and made "no attempt to obfuscate" the secretary's condition to the White House or the public.

Austin, 71, spent about two weeks in the hospital. Pentagon officials said there was never a lapse of military command and control during that period. In February, Austin apologized publicly to the American public, admitting he "did not handle this right."

China passes US ability to respond to Asian conflict

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

For the first time, China enjoys a slight edge over the United States should war break out in Asia, according to an Australian think tank's annual report on regional military power.

The Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index still rates the U.S. as the region's most powerful nation, leading China on six out of eight measures.

However, America's military advantage is eroding, according to the report released Tuesday by the Sydney-based think tank.

"For the first time, experts surveyed for the Asia Power Index judged that China is better able to deploy rapidly and for a sustained period in the event of an interstate conflict in Asia," researchers wrote in the report.

The index rates 27 countries in the region on military alliances and capability, economic resources, diplomatic and cultural influence, trade, resilience

and future trends.

"China has continually improved its Military Capability and has closed more than a quarter of the lead that the United States held in this measure in 2018," the report states.

It falls short in terms of long-range power projection and lacks America's network of regional alliances, according to the report.

China will not exceed the U.S. in terms of overall military capability for the foreseeable future, the report states, adding: "That may not be needed to achieve its strategic objectives in East Asia, including with respect to Taiwan and the South China Sea."

Chinese President Xi Jinping has said he wants his military ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.

However, New Zealand-based security expert Paul Buchanan said Beijing has a limited advantage in regional force projection.

Joint venture secures new \$113M deal for Guam base

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A joint venture between a California construction company and a Japanese developer acquired another contract for more facilities at Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz as the Guam installation inches closer to full operation.

For \$113 million, Granite Construction Inc., of Watsonville, Calif., and Obayashi Corp., of Tokyo, will build an auto organization shop, an organic storage facility, an electrical and communications maintenance shop, a vehicle wash rack and a vehicle lay-down area, according to a

news release Tuesday from Granite.

This contract with Naval Facilities Systems Command Pacific falls under a multiple award contract that, so far, has yielded at least \$404 million in work at Blaz for the joint venture since 2017, according to a Sept. 9 news release from NAVFAC Pacific.

The project supports III Marine Expeditionary Force's 9th Engineer Support Battalion. Construction is expected to begin in October and finish in January 2027.

The project was one of several announced Sept. 9 by NAVFAC Pacific.

Helene gains strength ahead of landfall

Associated Press

CRAWFORDVILLE, Fla. — Fast-moving Hurricane Helene was advancing Thursday across the Gulf of Mexico toward Florida, threatening a “catastrophic” storm surge in northwestern parts of the state as well as damaging winds, rains and flash floods hundreds of miles inland across much of the southeastern U.S., forecasters said.

Helene was upgraded Thursday morning to a Category 2 storm and is expected to be a major hurricane — meaning a Category 3 or higher — when it makes landfall on Florida’s

northwestern coast Thursday evening. Hurricane warnings and flash flood warnings extended far beyond the coast up into south-central Georgia. The governors of Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia have all declared emergencies in their states.

Rain was beginning to blow in the predawn darkness Thursday along coastal U.S. Highway 98, which winds through countless fishing villages and vacation hideaways along Florida’s Big Bend. Shuttered gas stations dotted the two-lane highway, their windows boarded up with

plywood to protect from the storm.

The storm was expected to make landfall in the Big Bend region, where Florida’s panhandle and peninsula meet, according to Jack Beven, senior hurricane specialist at the National Hurricane Center in Miami.

“Regardless of how strong it is, it is a very large storm,” Beven said. “It’s going to have impacts that cover a large area.”

Mandatory evacuation orders stretched from the panhandle south along the Gulf Coast in low-lying areas around Tallahassee, Gainesville, Cedar Key,

Lake City, Tampa and Sarasota.

The National Weather Service office in Tallahassee forecast storm surges of up to 20 feet and warned they could be particularly “catastrophic and unsurvivable” in Florida’s Apalachee Bay. It added that high winds and heavy rains also posed risks.

“This forecast, if realized, is a nightmare surge scenario for Apalachee Bay,” the office said. “Please, please, please take any evacuation orders seriously!”

Along Florida’s Gulf Coast, school districts and multiple universities have canceled classes.

NYC Mayor Adams is charged with bribery and fraud

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York City Mayor Eric Adams was indicted Thursday on federal charges alleging that he took bribes and illegal campaign contributions from foreign sources.

The U.S. attorney’s office in Manhattan alleges in the indictment that Adams “compounded his gains” from the illegal contributions by gaming the city’s matching funds program, which provides a generous match for small dollar donations. His campaign received

more than \$10,000 in matching funds as a result of the false certifications, according to the indictment.

Adams allegedly “solicited and demanded” bribes, including free and heavily discounted luxury travel benefits from a Turkish official, the indictment alleges, noting that the official was seeking Adams’ help pertaining to regulations of the Turkish Consulate in Manhattan.

FBI agents entered the mayor’s official residence and seized his phone early Thursday,

hours before the indictment was made public.

“Federal agents appeared this morning at Gracie Mansion in an effort to create a spectacle (again) and take Mayor Adams['] phone (again),” Adams’ lawyer, Alex Spiro, said in a statement hours before the indictment was made public. “They send a dozen agents to pick up a phone when we would have happily turned it in.”

In a video speech released Wednesday night, Adams vowed to fight any charges against him, claiming he had

been made a “target” in a case “based on lies.”

“I will fight these injustices with every ounce of my strength and my spirit,” he said.

The indictment caps off an extraordinary few weeks in New York City, as federal investigators have honed in on members of Adams’ inner circle, producing a drumbeat of raids, subpoenas and high-level resignations that have thrust City Hall into crisis.

The U.S. attorney’s office in Manhattan has declined to comment on the investigation.

Congress passes stopgap measure to avoid shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress on Wednesday passed a temporary measure that keeps government agencies funded into December, avoiding a shutdown for now while punting final spending decisions until after the Nov. 5 election.

The Senate approved the measure by a vote of 78-18 shortly after the House easily approved it. The bill generally funds agencies at current levels through Dec. 20. But an addi-

tional \$231 million was included to bolster the Secret Service after the two assassination attempts against Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump. Money was also added to aid with the presidential transition, among other things.

The bill now goes to President Joe Biden’s desk to be signed into law.

“This bipartisanship is a good outcome for America,” Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said moments before

the vote. “I hope it sets the tone for more constructive, bipartisan work when we return in the fall.”

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., billed the measure as doing “only what’s absolutely necessary,” a statement directed at members of his own conference concerned about spending levels.

Still, it was a no-go for some Republicans, which forced House GOP leadership to rely on Democratic votes to pass the

bill through a process that requires at least two-thirds support from voting members. The final vote was 341-82, with Republicans supplying all the no votes in both chambers. Johnson said the only alternative to the continuing resolution at this stage would have been a government shutdown.

“It would be political malpractice to shut the government down,” Johnson said. “I think everyone understands that.”

Netanyahu demurs on Hezbollah cease-fire

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — Dimming hopes for a cease-fire, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that Israel plans to continue striking Hezbollah “with full force” and will not stop until all of its goals are achieved.

Netanyahu spoke as he landed in New York to attend the annual U.N. General Assembly meeting and as U.S. and European officials were pressing for a 21-day halt in fighting between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah to give time for negotiations.

Only a short time before his statement, the Israeli military said it killed a Hezbollah drone commander in an airstrike on an apartment building in the suburbs of the Lebanese capital.

Netanyahu said Israel’s “policy is clear. We are continuing to strike Hezbollah with full force. And we will not stop until we

reach all our goals, chief among them the return of the residents of the north securely to their homes.”

Israel has dramatically escalated strikes in Lebanon this week, saying it is targeting Hezbollah. Israeli leaders have said they are determined to stop more than 11 months of cross-border fire by the militant group into Israel, which has forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of Israelis from communities in the north.

The statement tempered hopes for the international initiative aimed at halting increasingly heavy exchanges of fire that have killed hundreds of people in Lebanon and threatened to trigger an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah. Israel has talked of a possible ground invasion into Lebanon to push the militant group away from the border.

Soon after the statement was is-

sued, Hezbollah TV station Al-Manar reported an Israeli airstrike in a suburb of Beirut. It and other stations showed a damaged apartment building in Dahiyeh, the mainly Shiite suburb where Hezbollah has a strong presence.

The Israeli military later said the strike killed Mohammed Hussein Surour. Hezbollah offered no immediate comment on the claim.

Two people were killed and 15 wounded in the strike, the Lebanese Health Ministry said.

Over the past week, Israel has carried out several strikes in Beirut targeting senior Hezbollah commanders. Earlier in the day, a strike in eastern Lebanon killed 20 people, most of them Syrian migrants, according to Lebanese health officials.

Israel has dramatically stepped up its bombardment in Lebanon, saying it is determined

to stop Hezbollah’s near-daily rocket volleys over the past 11 months that have forced tens of thousands to evacuate homes in northern Israel. Strikes since Monday have killed more than 630 people in Lebanon, around a quarter of them women and children, according to local health authorities. Intensifying Hezbollah barrages have wounded several people in Israel.

Hezbollah has not yet responded to the proposal for a pause in fighting. Lebanon’s caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati welcomed it, but his government has no sway over the group.

Hezbollah has insisted it would halt its strikes only if there is a cease-fire in Gaza, where Israel has battled Hamas for nearly a year. That appears out of reach despite months of negotiations led by the United States, Egypt and Qatar.

S. Korea sets pre-ban plan to pay dog meat farmers

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea announced plans Thursday to compensate farmers and others in the country’s dwindling dog meat industry before a formal ban goes into effect in 2027, a move that is drawing opposition from both farmers and some animal rights activists.

South Korea’s parliament passed a landmark bill in January that will ban slaughtering, breeding or selling dog meat for human consumption after a three-year grace period. It will be punishable by 2-3 years in prison. The Agriculture Ministry said that farmers would receive compensation starting from \$170, and rising up to \$450 per dog if they agree to shut down early.

An association of farmers rejected the offer, saying in a statement that they cannot relinquish their dogs for such low prices. Farmers earlier called for \$1,505

per dog. They’ve said the ban infringes on their right to choose their own jobs and will aggravate their economic difficulties.

The association said that farmers will keep fighting even if they end up being jailed.

Sangkyung Lee, a campaign manager at the Korean office of the anti-animal cruelty group Humane Society International, called the South Korean announcement “an important milestone in this historic ban that will see the ban through to completion and end our country’s dog meat era for good.” But Lee said his office is “disappointed” at the plan because it would pay farmers based on the number of dogs they have, “potentially increasing dog breeding to get more money from the scheme and more puppies being born into suffering.”

Dog meat consumption is a centuries-old practice on the Korean Peninsula.

Taliban to critics: Afghans don’t face discrimination

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban said Thursday it was absurd to accuse them of gender discrimination and other human rights violations, as four countries vow to hold Afghanistan’s rulers accountable under international law for their treatment of women and girls.

Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands are set to start legal proceedings against the Taliban for violating a U.N. convention on women, to which Afghanistan is a party. The countries launched the initiative on Wednesday on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly.

Despite promising more moderate rule after they seized power in 2021, the Taliban have barred women and girls from education beyond sixth grade, many public spaces and most jobs. In August, the Vice and Virtue Ministry issued laws banning women’s bare

faces and prohibiting them from raising their voices in public.

More than 20 countries expressed their support Thursday for the proposed legal action against the Taliban.

“We condemn the gross and systematic human rights violations and abuses in Afghanistan, particularly the gender-based discrimination against women and girls,” the countries said, adding that they did not politically recognize the Taliban as the legitimate leaders of the Afghan population.

The Taliban’s deputy spokesman Hamdullah Fīrat said human rights were protected in Afghanistan and that nobody faced discrimination.

“Unfortunately, an attempt is being made to spread propaganda against Afghanistan through the mouths of several fugitive (Afghan) women and misrepresent the situation,” he said on X.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Snowmobiler who collided with helo is awarded \$3M

MA BOSTON — The federal government was mostly responsible for a nighttime collision involving a snowmobiler who nearly died after hitting a Black Hawk helicopter that was parked on a Massachusetts trail, a judge ruled in awarding him \$3.3 million in damages.

U.S. District Judge Mark Mastroianni blamed both parties for the March 2019 crash in his ruling Monday, but said the government was 60% responsible for parking the helicopter on a snowmobile trail. He criticized Jeff Smith for not operating the snowmobile safely, for speeding and for wearing tinted goggles. Smith, a Massachusetts lawyer, had asked for \$9.5 million in damages.

Smith's lawyers argued that the crew of the Black Hawk helicopter that flew from New York's Fort Drum to Worthington, Mass., for night training was negligent for parking a camouflaged 64-foot aircraft on a rarely used airfield also used by snowmobilers.

Smith, 48, has been surviving on disability assistance. He struggles with simple tasks.

Passenger, horse killed in quick series of crashes

CA NORCO — The passenger in a car was killed when a horse smashed through the windshield during a series of crashes on a Southern California interstate over the weekend, authorities said.

The first collision occurred about 2 a.m. Sunday when a Toyota Tacoma towing a horse trailer veered to the right and

struck a guardrail on northbound Interstate 15 near Norco, according to the California Highway Patrol.

The trailer split open, sending the horse onto the freeway. Then a semitractor-trailer smashed into the horse trailer.

The horse made it to the median but then tried to cross the interstate, when it was clipped by a black Honda Accord, highway patrol Officer Javier Navarro told the Southern California News Group. Next, a gray Honda Accord struck the horse, which smashed through the car's windshield, Navarro said. The passenger, a 25-year-old man in the front seat, was killed. The horse also died.

State senator's arrest is his second in 2 months

WV CHARLESTON — A West Virginia state lawmaker who was arrested last month is facing new charges after police say they suspect he was driving under the influence, news outlets reported.

Police pulled over Republican Sen. Mike Maroney, 56, on Monday for several alleged traffic offenses, the Wheeling News-Register reported. Following a roadside investigation, Maroney was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence, McMechen Police Chief Robert Shilling told the newspaper.

Maroney has only a few months left to serve in his second four-year term. He was defeated in the May primary.

In August, Maroney was stripped of his position as chair of the state Senate Health and Human Resources Committee after being charged with inde-

cent exposure and disorderly conduct.

Judge sides with Catholic employers on protections

ND BISMARCK — A federal judge is allowing more than 8,000 Catholic employers nationwide to reject government regulations that protect workers seeking abortions and fertility care.

U.S. District Judge Daniel Traynor, of Bismarck, N.D., granted a preliminary injunction Monday, ruling that the Catholic Benefits Association and the Diocese of Bismarck were likely to succeed in proving that a final rule adopted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in April violated their freedom of religion. The regulations are meant to enforce the federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act.

The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act is widely considered a victory for women who are low-wage workers and have routinely been denied accommodations for everything from time off for medical appointments to the ability to sit or stand on the job. But controversy ensued when the EEOC adopted an expansive view of conditions related to pregnancy and childbirth that required accommodations, including for abortion, fertility treatment and birth control.

'Authentic self' video gets ex-COVID adviser fired

NY NEW YORK — A former New York City official who helped coordinate the city's response to the pandemic was fired from his private-sector job after a recording showed him talking about attending a sex party and other

private gatherings when the city was urging people to practice social distancing.

Dr. Jay Varma was terminated from his position as executive vice president and chief medical officer at SIGA Technologies, the New York-based pharmaceutical company disclosed in a filing Monday with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. He served as a senior public health adviser to then-Mayor Bill de Blasio from April 2020 to May 2021.

A hidden-camera video posted last week shows Varma speaking casually to a woman about attending gatherings even as he served as a face of the city's pandemic response.

"I did all this deviant, sexual stuff while I was on TV and people were like, 'Aren't you afraid? Aren't you embarrassed?'" he said at one point in the edited recording. "And I was like, no, I really like being my authentic self."

Varma acknowledged the authenticity of the video in a statement.

Democratic campaign office damaged by gunfire

AZ TEMPE — Someone fired shots at a Democratic Party campaign office in a Phoenix suburb, causing damage but no injuries, authorities said.

Tempe police said the damage was discovered early Monday and it is being investigated as a property crime since nobody was in the office at the time the gunshots were fired.

Police also said rounds from a pellet or BB gun were shot at the same office a week before, the Arizona Republic reported.

— From wire reports

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Alabama, Georgia set for another Top 5 match

Associated Press

It's still Alabama and Georgia, with all the made-for-TV trappings. Star quarterbacks. Stout defenses. Top 5 rankings and NFL prospects galore.

All Saturday night's clash between the fourth-ranked Crimson Tide and second-ranked Bulldogs lacks is the make-or-break, elimination game-style magnitude. It's also minus the familiar story line of Kirby Smart vs. Nick Saban, protege vs. mentor.

Whatever happens, the national and Southeastern Conference championship hopes of the loser will be damaged but hardly dashed. National showcase games are nothing new for either team.

"We've been on the national stage a lot, especially the last three to four years," Smart said. "So it's the reason kids want to come to Georgia. They say, 'I want to play in games like that.'"

It's September, not December or January when Georgia and Alabama customarily meet. And with the newly expanded College Football Playoff field,

there's still little reason to doubt that both will be among the top 12 teams at the end of the season.

Lo and behold, Alabama is a home underdog for the first time since Saban's debut season, 17 years ago.

"Yeah, that's interesting," said Kalen DeBoer, Saban's first-year successor and a coach with a 12-2 record against ranked teams in his own right. "I actually didn't know that. Yeah, welcome to the SEC, right?"

Welcome to the SEC, indeed.

Georgia still has to play No. 1 Texas, No. 5 Tennessee and No. 6 Mississippi. Alabama has the Volunteers, 11th-ranked Missouri and No. 14 LSU still on the docket.

Nothing will necessarily be decided in this one, but it's still Alabama-Georgia.

Rare home underdog

Georgia is favored by 1½ points, according to BetMGM Sportsbook. It's the first time Alabama has been the underdog at Bryant-Denny Stadium since LSU was a touchdown favorite

in the 2007 game as Saban was just beginning to build what turned into a dynasty.

"Winning is hard," Alabama quarterback Jalen Milroe said. "You know, that's something that we embrace as a football team, is that winning is hard. One motto that we try to preach [as] much as possible is prepare like you never won before. You know, that's so key. You've got to hate losing more than you love winning."

Tangling for titles

Titles have been on the line the last three times these two SEC powerhouses met. Alabama won the SEC Championship Game 27-24 last season to make the playoffs and bounce previously unbeaten Georgia from contention for a third straight national title, ending a 29-game win streak in the process. The Bulldogs won in the 2022 national championship game (33-18), which was a rematch from the 2021 SEC title game also won by Georgia 41-24.

Milroe vs. Beck

Quarterbacks Milroe and

Georgia's Carson Beck are no strangers to big games. This is Beck's eighth start against a Top 20 team, and his only loss as a starter came against the Tide. Milroe led Alabama to the win in last year's SEC Championship game and has accounted for 14 touchdowns already this season (eight passing, six rushing).

Neither he nor Beck has thrown an interception.

Pedigreed coaches

Smart has led Georgia to a school-record streak of 42 consecutive regular-season wins, including 28 against SEC teams. The Bulldogs have won 16 straight in an opponent's home stadium, the longest active streak in the FBS. The last such loss: At then-No. 2 Alabama in 2020.

DeBoer hasn't been in a game like this with Alabama but is 4-1 against Top-10 foes at other stops. His streak of 12 consecutive wins over ranked teams was snapped in Washington's 34-13 loss to Michigan in last season's national championship game.

Miami opens ACC play against Virginia Tech amid hot start

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — This is basically where Miami was at this time last year. Unbeaten through four games, climbing in the national rankings, feeling good going into the start of Atlantic Coast Conference play.

And then, thud.

ACC play last season for Miami started with a debacle against Georgia Tech, a contest where the Hurricanes didn't take a knee to run out the clock and wound up giving the game away. This season's ACC slate for No. 7 Miami starts on Friday night, at home against Virginia Tech, a game where these Hurricanes can try to continue to show that things really are different now.

"They decided a while back," Miami coach Mario Cristobal said. "They've had enough."

Expectations were high entering the year

for the Hurricanes and have climbed every week since. Quarterback Cam Ward — now the Heisman Trophy favorite, according to BetMGM Sportsbook — is leading one of the highest-octane offenses in the country and the Hurricanes are one of only four unbeaten teams left in the ACC.

"These games really don't matter," Ward said after Miami finished its four-game non-conference slate with a 50-15 rout at South Florida last weekend. "Only games that matter are ACC play."

It's also the ACC opener for Virginia Tech (2-2), which has two wins over Sun Belt teams and two one-score losses against Power Four opponents. The Hokies didn't face the Hurricanes last year.

"I think it's one of the better rivalries in college football," Virginia Tech coach Brent Pry said. "I'm glad that they're back on our schedule. I think it's good for us and

good for our league and we've got to go down and play competitive. They're doing their part, we got to do ours. They've got a load of talent."

Lots of balance

Miami enters the week as one of six power-conference teams with at least nine rushing touchdowns and nine passing touchdowns so far this season. The Hurricanes have scored 15 through the air, 12 more on the ground.

The other Power Four schools in the 9-and-9 club so far are Indiana, Ole Miss, Tennessee, Washington State and Texas. All six of those schools are 4-0 entering this week.

Virginia Tech will test Miami's plan for balance. The Hokies have allowed eight rushing TDs but only three passing scores through four games.

49ers' defense must fix issues without Hargrave

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The past two weeks have exposed flaws on the San Francisco 49ers' defense that typically aren't an issue for what has been one of the league's top units.

Fixing those problems will be an even bigger challenge now that star defensive tackle Javon Hargrave is likely out for the rest of the season after partially tearing his triceps during Sunday's loss to the Los Angeles Rams.

During losses to Minnesota and the Rams the past two weeks, San Francisco has struggled to generate consistent pressure on the quarterback, failed to slow down the run game and been beaten for two big plays over the top.

It adds up to a team that is allowing a staggering 6.11 yards per play, which is the third-worst mark in the NFL this season and the fourth-worst in franchise history through three games.

"People are going to look at all

the bad stuff that we're doing when we are losing," All-Pro linebacker Fred Warner said. "It's not the standard that we have had since I've been here. But I see the things that are positive on tape and we just need to clean up things that are negative."

They will have to do it without Hargrave, who signed a four-year, \$81 million deal in 2023. He had an up-and-down first season with the Niners but was coming off one of his better games, with his five pressures against the Rams matching his high from any regular-season game last season.

After cutting defensive tackle Arik Armstead in a salary-cap move in the offseason, the Niners will likely go with two newcomers at defensive tackle in Maliek Collins and Jordan Elliott. Kevin Givens provides depth and San Francisco will likely promote another defensive tackle from the practice squad with T.Y. McGill the most experienced option.

"It's just a group effort," de-

fensive end Nick Bosa said. "We have a lot of depth at that position."

The Niners build their defense from the front to the back, investing heavy resources into the defensive line in hopes of controlling the game in the trenches.

That hasn't happened so far this season. San Francisco is tied for 14th with eight sacks and ranks 19th in pressure rate at 21.3% of dropbacks, according to Sportradar.

Over the previous five seasons, the Niners ranked tied for seventh in sacks and 11th in pressure rate.

Hargrave's absence could force San Francisco to use more blitzes to create pressure.

"You would love to always get there with the front four," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "That's the goal. Getting there with four and having seven guys in coverage makes it a lot harder for the offense. But if you can't do that, you've got to mix it up. ... It's a huge loss, losing Javon. Guys are going to have to step it up

and when you don't have the rush, then you've got to turn to other things schematically."

Hargrave has nearly half of the team's pressures from the interior—eight out of 18—leaving a gap in the defense that needs more options outside of Bosa to generate pressure.

Defensive end Leonard Floyd was supposed to provide a boost this season after signing as a free agent. He recorded 39½ sacks the previous four years. But he has one sack through three games this season and has generated only one pressure the past two weeks, according to Pro Football Focus.

The run defense has also been spotty, with the 4.52 yards per carry on pace to be the worst mark since Shanahan arrived in 2017 and more than a yard more per carry than the team allowed in 2022.

"We've had moments where we've been strong, but we're not playing up to how we usually do," Shanahan said. "We've got to make sure to get back to playing that way."

Hunt still looking to prove himself back with Chiefs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Kareem Hunt never expected to walk through the doors of the Kansas City Chiefs practice facility again.

So when their erstwhile star running back did last week, what struck Hunt first was even more unexpected.

"Honestly, my first thought was the building smelled the same," he said Wednesday. "Brought back so many memories."

Mostly good. Some bad, including the way things ended six years ago.

Hunt had become one of the NFL's premier players by his second season in the league, and was helping a team led for the first time by Patrick Mahomes in pursuit of the playoffs.

But in late November, video surfaced that showed Hunt kicking a woman in the hall of a Cleveland hotel. While no charges were filed when she stopped cooperating with authorities, the Chiefs swiftly and decisively released him, putting Hunt's future as a pro-

fessional football player in peril.

"I was very young at the time — 23 — and had a lot of success going for me, and felt like I needed time to figure myself out," said Hunt, who was signed by Kansas City last week when Isiah Pacheco was placed on injured reserve with a knee injury.

"I felt like it was good for me to do that," he added. "I guess it worked out."

Hunt ultimately signed with the Browns, served an eight-game suspension for violating the NFL's personal-conduct policy and became an important part of their backfield. He ran for 2,285 yards and five touchdowns over five years.

After he was hampered for much of last season by a sports hernia, Hunt opted for offseason surgery. He didn't sign with a team during the summer or training camp, so when the Chiefs lost their second running back — Clyde Edwards-Helaire was already on the non-football illness list — they flew Hunt into town and gave him a chance

to prove he still had it.

"You can see how hungry he is," said Mahomes, who remained close to Hunt even after his release by Kansas City. "You come in and you haven't had training camp and stuff like that, but he pushed through. He took last week like a mini training camp."

Hunt spent last week working with the scout team ahead of their game Sunday night in Atlanta. While the Chiefs have been happy with the production of Carson Steele, an undrafted rookie, and journeyman Samaje Perine, they also wanted some experienced depth.

Hunt checked that box. And the fact that he already was familiar with some of the playbook, and its complex terminology, allowed him to get up to speed more quickly than most.

"Looks like he's in pretty good shape, so now the next step is getting him into the game. He'll rotate in and we'll see how he does," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said.

Some suprising drivers still in playoffs

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C.— Alex Bowman opened NASCAR's playoffs on defense — not of his style of driving, but of his status in the seat of the No. 48 Chevrolet at Hendrick Motorsports.

The first playoff race was just days away and Bowman spent an entire afternoon insisting rumors he'd be out of the car next season were untrue.

"That rumor has certainly been annoying," Bowman said. "All I can tell you is like what my bosses have told me, and that is that there are no plans to change anything. As far as I know, I'm driving the No. 48 next year. Just focused on trying to be strong the next 10 weeks."

Despite the assurances from Hendrick Motorsports and a contract that runs through next season, Bowman still had doubters. Then he finished fifth in the playoff opener at Atlanta Motor Speedway, moved into the top 10 in points, and received a public endorsement from Rick Hendrick.

"The team is really happy, the sponsor is really happy, so we're good to go," said Hendrick, who answered "yes" when asked if Bowman would

"unequivocally" be in the HMS lineup next year.

That sentiment was backed by Andrea Brimmer, chief marketing officer of Bowman sponsor Ally, who reposted Hendrick's quote on social media "To all the doubters." She added an emoji that intimates "be quiet."

Bowman was then 18th at Watkins Glen and ninth Saturday night at Bristol Motor Speedway, where he started on the pole and advanced into the second round of the playoffs. His 120 points scored in the three races was the most among the 16 drivers, and unlike former Cup champions Brad Keselowski and Martin Truex Jr., Bowman avoided playoff elimination.

The reseeding process has him ranked 11th out of 12 drivers and below the cutline as NASCAR heads to Kansas Speedway for Sunday's second-round opening race.

"We did what we needed the whole first round of the playoffs, but also we want to be better and continue that through the next round," said Bowman, who doesn't think the speculation about his future will stop.

"They'll keep talking. I'm not worried about it," he said.

The talk seems pointless as Bowman has turned his season around and is one of a handful of surprise drivers to advance into the second round. Although Ty Gibbs and Harrison Burton were not considered title contenders and their elimination was not shocking, the departure of Keselowski and Truex opened up slots to otherwise overlooked drivers.

The field is led into Kansas by Kyle Larson, who obliterated the competition at Bristol by leading all but 38 of the 500 laps and winning by more than 7 seconds. Then there's Christopher Bell, a final four participant the last two seasons, regular season champion Tyler Reddick, William Byron and defending Cup champion Ryan Blaney.

The surprises are Bowman, Chase Briscoe, Austin Cindric and Daniel Suarez — any of whom could have been picked as first round dropouts based on their season-long performance.

Stewart-Haas Racing has hardly been competitive this season and is closing three of its four teams in November, yet

Briscoe has surged in his final months in the No. 14 Ford. He snatched the final spot in the playoff field by winning the regular season finale at Darlington, then rallied from crashing at Atlanta with finishes of sixth and eighth in the next two races.

He dropped to last in the field with the points reset before Kansas, but he's still a contender.

"I don't think anybody believes this, but I really think we can battle for the championship," Briscoe said. "And I think these last two weeks show that. We're hitting our stride at the right time, and with this format, if you can just be good for 10 weeks, then you can be a champion."

"I feel like we're as strong as any team right now."

Cindric made it through with consistency, scoring back-to-back 10th-place finishes at Atlanta and Watkins Glen, and then was 13th at Bristol — enough to advance the Team Penske driver.

"I don't know what the average finish is for the round, but two top-10s and a 13th, that's what we need to do as a team," Cindric said.

Mets-Braves to finish up with doubleheader Monday

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The final two games of a crucial series between the New York Mets and Atlanta Braves were postponed Wednesday by heavy rains ahead of Hurricane Helene.

Now, a wild-card race that seemed headed to the final day of the regular season may require an extra day.

And a doubleheader, at that.

The regular season was set to end Sunday, but the Mets are now scheduled to return to Atlanta on Monday for a pair of games 40 minutes apart that could determine who heads to

the playoffs.

New York plays three games in Milwaukee against the NL Central champion Brewers beginning Friday, while the Braves have a weekend series against the Kansas City Royals, a playoff contender in the AL.

"We've got to move on to the next series now," Mets manager Carlos Mendoza said. "We're facing another really good team in Milwaukee and we've got to go out there and not only win a series but we've got to go out there and take care of business. That's the only thing we can do: control the things we control."

The Mets (87-70) went into the day with a half-game lead over Arizona in the wild-card race, with the Braves (86-71) a full game back. Two of those teams will make the playoffs, which are set to begin Tuesday with the best-of-three wild-card round.

"I hope the Royals can get here," said Braves manager Brian Snitker, looking ahead to an ominous forecast for the next two days as the hurricane's remnants move through Georgia. "I would hope we don't get things screwed up for their series."

The Diamondbacks beat the San Francisco Giants 8-2 on

Wednesday. Arizona is off Thursday before a three-game series at home against the San Diego Padres to close out the regular season.

The Braves beat the Mets 5-1 on Tuesday night in the opening game of the series against their NL East rivals.

Both teams were off Monday, but there was no indication the teams or MLB considered moving up the start of the series. There was also a missed opportunity to get in Wednesday's game before heavy rain swept through the area during the afternoon.