

DOD weighs discipline for troops' Kirk posts

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The military could invoke broadly written laws to punish service members who criticize slain political activist Charlie Kirk on social media, though it remains unclear whether such cases would hold up at courts-martial.

Social media posts celebrating Kirk's death or denouncing him for his views have prompted Defense Department officials to warn service members and DOD employees about appropriate conduct.

On Sunday, Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell wrote on X that "those who celebrate or mock the assassination" of Kirk are committing a "violation of the oath" they took.

Parnell wrote that the department will not tolerate such behavior, using all-caps for part of

the message.

The right to free speech is limited for service members, said Matt Kent, a retired Marine Corps colonel and former circuit military judge.

"The military can restrict speech to maintain discipline, morale and mission effectiveness, sometimes banning commentary or actions that would be legal in civilian life," Kent said Tuesday.

Service members can be restricted in their expression in matters involving obscenity, political speech, threats or defamation, among other things, according to a publication by the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces titled "First Principles: Constitutional Matters: First Amendment."

The Uniform Code of Military Justice includes a law that bars conduct unbecoming an officer

and another that criminalizes action deemed to bring discredit upon the service.

"There are numerous punitive articles that allow the military to ... criminally prosecute speech that's either considered prejudicial to good order and discipline or service discrediting," Rachel VanLandingham, a law professor at Southwestern University and retired Air Force judge advocate, said Tuesday.

While a military judge or jury ultimately determines whether the prosecution meets the burden of proof, service members sometimes opt for nonjudicial punishment to avoid the risk of a felony conviction.

However, there are judicial safeguards for troops who speak out in a "personal capacity on ideological grounds," VanLandingham said.

She described the recent efforts to punish service members as a "witch hunt."

Kirk, who co-founded the Turning Point USA political organization, was shot and killed last week. His killing and his political stances drew strong reactions on social media, including from some service members.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth wrote on his personal X account that the Pentagon would track and address unacceptable posts. Chiefs of at least three military services followed suit.

Navy Secretary John Phelan referred to posts "displaying contempt toward a fellow American who was assassinated." Any employee of the Navy or Marine Corps "will be dealt with swiftly and decisively" if they act in a way that discredits the service, Phelan said in a post on the Navy's official X account.

Bill would protect troops' pay if government shuts down

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers are scrambling to ensure troops continue to receive paychecks if congressional gridlock leads to a government shutdown on Oct. 1.

Rep. Jen Kiggans, R-Va., this week reintroduced the Pay Our Troops Act to guarantee service members get paid if Congress fails to pass federal funding legislation for the 2026 fiscal year by the end of the month.

"As a former Navy helicopter pilot, wife of a veteran and mom of a service member, I know firsthand the sacrifices military families make every single day," she said. "The last thing they should face is financial uncertainty caused by partisan gridlock."

Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., plans to bring a stopgap spending bill to the House floor this week to fund the government through Nov. 21, but Democrats have said they will oppose the measure unless it includes an extension of Affordable Care Act tax breaks.

Republicans will need the votes of at least seven Democrats to pass the legislation in the Senate and will likely need the backing of some Democrats to pass it in the House, where some fiscal conservatives are bound to withhold their support.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., on Wednesday accused Republicans of refusing to work with Democrats and said his party will soon release its own proposal for a short-term funding extension.

The standoff has raised fears of a shutdown that would require service members to report for duty but not get paid.

Kiggans' legislation, which has dozens of co-sponsors, would direct that existing, unappropriated U.S. Treasury funds be used to continue paying members of the armed forces, both active and reserve duty, as well as the Coast Guard. The funds would also pay civilian employees at the Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security, and contractors who directly support service members.

Multiple military and veterans organizations have endorsed the bill, describing it as a "commonsense, bipartisan" measure that protects military personnel from the political uncertainty of gov-

ernment shutdowns.

"Our military is willing to do their job for the country, which often puts their lives at risk," said Kathy Roth-Douquet, the CEO of the nonprofit Blue Star Families. "We just ask that Congress do their job to keep the government running and get us paid."

The legislation would provide the same paycheck protections Congress gave service members shortly before the start of a 16-day government shutdown in 2013.

Troops were mostly unaffected during the last government shutdown in 2018-2019, but members of the Coast Guard worked without pay for more than a month because the service is operated by the Department of Homeland Security instead of the Defense Department.

UK, Latvia, Lithuania detain possible spies

Associated Press

VILNIUS, Lithuania — British, Lithuanian and Latvian authorities have detained several people on suspicion of carrying out intelligence-related activities on behalf of Russia in the latest of a string of incidents to be linked to Moscow by Western officials.

London's Metropolitan Police force said Thursday that they arrested three people just east of London on suspicion of spying for Russia.

On Wednesday, Lithuanian prosecutors said that they uncovered and detained a Russia-linked network of suspects who

are alleged to have planned and organized arson attacks in various European countries.

Meanwhile, Latvia's security service said it detained a man suspected of passing intelligence about the military to Russia.

British police said they arrested two men, ages 41 and 46, and a 35-year-old woman in the county of Essex.

They searched two addresses and later released the suspects on bail.

Lithuania's prosecutor general office said that suspects in a separate case are accused of sending packages containing

homemade explosive devices to other European Union countries and Britain via courier services, on behalf of Russia's military intelligence services. The highly flammable incendiary devices with timed detonators were hidden inside vibrating massage cushions and tubes of cosmetics.

European security officials have previously warned that a widespread sabotage campaign blamed on Russia is growing more dangerous. The alleged espionage and plots to use explosives are among around 80 incidents linked to Russia that The Associated Press has docu-

mented since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

They include at least 18 incidents of espionage and 18 cases of arson or serious sabotage, including attacks on restaurants, warehouses and shopping centers as well as a plot to assassinate the CEO of a German arms company.

Dominic Murphy, head of the Counter Terrorism Command at the Metropolitan Police, said that the U.K. is seeing an "increasing number of who we would describe as 'proxies' being recruited by foreign intelligence services."

Top Navy officer picked to lead in Europe, Africa

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A Navy admiral who has led the fleet in the Middle East as the U.S. defended against Houthi attacks in the Red Sea is the choice to be the service's highest-ranking officer in Europe and Africa.

President Donald Trump nominated Vice Adm. George Wikoff for promotion to admiral and assignment as commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Allied Joint Force Command Naples, the Defense Department announced earlier this month.

Wikoff currently is in charge of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, headquartered in Manama, Bahrain. He assumed the role in February 2024.

If his nomination is confirmed by the Senate, Wikoff would assume command from Adm. Stuart Munsch, who has held the position since June 2022.

He also would oversee an

area of responsibility grappling with Russian actions ranging from the ongoing war in Ukraine to expansion of operations in the High North and Arctic, an area the U.S. considers vital to national security.

It was unclear Thursday when the Senate would consider Wikoff's nomination, which was announced by the Defense Department on Sept. 5.

But a 2019 Government Accountability Office report found that it took an average of about seven weeks after the defense secretary reviewed a nomination for it to be approved by the president and subsequently confirmed by the Senate.

In his current role, Wikoff also has led the multinational partnership Combined Maritime Forces, a drone and artificial intelligence task force and a Coast Guard unit focused on seizing illegal drugs and weapons, primarily smuggled out of Iran.

Pearl Harbor shipyard to utilize drones in work

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard is planning to use drones to assist with maintenance and inspections to speed up work and increase worker safety.

The shipyard began a multi-year ramp-up of a drone program after a successful demonstration this summer by the San-Diego-based Naval Information Warfare Center Pacific.

The warfare center, which has security clearance to operate drones at military installations, used a Skydio X10D to inspect one of the shipyard's six 200-foot-high cranes.

Those routine inspections would typically involve renting boom trucks and erecting temporary scaffolding.

"If we could demonstrate that we can inspect the crane, we could really inspect whatever they need," Vincent Acevedo, a technical specialist with the warfare center who oversaw the demo, said in an Aug. 28 phone

interview.

Acevedo said he operated the video-equipped drone as a shipyard inspector directed him to hard-to-reach spots for a closer look.

"They were thoroughly impressed," he said of officials at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility.

The demonstration led to plans to acquire two to three drones that will be used for such inspections, as well as security monitoring for the shipyard within Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Harold Shimono, an engineer with the shipyard's innovation lab, said.

The shipyard estimates that using a drone to inspect a single crane could save about 1,500 hours of labor.

In the coming year, the shipyard plans to enter a formal agreement with the warfare center that will allow the shipyard to operate drones under the center's clearance, Shimono said.

ABC suspends Kimmel's show over comments about Kirk

Associated Press

NEW YORK — ABC suspended Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show indefinitely beginning Wednesday after comments that he made about Charlie Kirk's killing led a group of ABC-affiliated stations to say it would not air the show and provoked some ominous comments from a top federal regulator.

The veteran late-night comic made several remarks about the reaction to the conservative activist's assassination last week on "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" Monday and Tuesday nights, including that "many in MAGA land are working very hard to capitalize on the murder of Charlie Kirk."

ABC, which has aired Kimmel's late-night show since 2003, moved swiftly after Nexstar Communications Group said it would pull the show starting Wednesday. Kimmel's comments about Kirk's death "are of-

fensive and insensitive at a critical time in our national political discourse," said Andrew Alford, president of Nexstar's broadcasting division. Nexstar operates 23 ABC affiliates.

There was no immediate comment from Kimmel, whose contract is up in May 2026. ABC's statement did not cite a reason for why his show was preempted.

President Donald Trump celebrated ABC's move on the social media site Truth Social, writing: "Congratulations to ABC for finally having the courage to do what had to be done."

Earlier in the day, FCC Chairman Brendan Carr called Kimmel's comments "truly sick" and said his agency has a strong case for holding Kimmel, ABC and network parent Walt Disney Co. accountable for spreading misinformation. He said the comic appeared to be making an intentional effort to mislead the public that Kirk's assassin was a right-

wing Trump supporter.

During his Monday evening monologue, Kimmel suggested Kirk's alleged killer, Tyler Robinson, might have been a pro-Trump Republican. "The MAGA Gang (is) desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it," Kimmel said. "In between the finger-pointing, there was grieving."

"This is a very, very serious issue right now for Disney," Carr said on the Benny Johnson podcast. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to take action on Kimmel or there is going to be additional work for the FCC ahead."

Authorities say the 22-year-old grew up in a conservative household in southern Utah but was enmeshed in "leftist ideology."

Portland to issue land use violation to ICE

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Portland, Ore., said Wednesday it will issue a land use violation notice to the city's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement building, accusing the facility of detaining people beyond the limits of what its land use approval allows.

The building's conditional land use approval, in place since 2011, does not allow people to be kept overnight or held for more than 12 hours. The city alleges that this provision was violated 25 times over the 10-month period from last October through most of this July.

"U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement made clear detention limitation commitments to our community, and we believe they broke those policies more than two dozen times," Portland Mayor Keith Wilson said in a news release. "I am proud of our team for conducting a thorough, thoughtful investigation, and referring the matter to the next steps in the land use violation process."

The city said it would issue the notice, which also references a second violation regarding boarded-up windows, on Thursday. ICE did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Recently, the building has been the site of nightly protests, which peaked in June, with smaller clashes also occurring since then. Immigration and legal advocates often gather there during the day to help those arriving at the building, while protesters, often dressed in black and wearing helmets or masks, show up at night.

Federal Reserve unites, deciding to cut key interest rate amid Trump's attacks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve's nearly unanimous decision Wednesday to reduce its key interest rate was seen by many observers as a quiet show of unity and independence amid President Donald Trump's relentless pressure for steeper cuts and his unprecedented effort to fire a top Fed official.

Many Fed-watchers expected a contentious two-day meeting this week, with the economy's future uncertain and a Trump appointee hastily added to the board just hours before the meeting began. The White House has also floated several members of the Fed's governing

board as potential replacements for the current chair, Jerome Powell, when his term ends in May, creating incentives for those officials to push for the deep rate cuts Trump has demanded.

Trump has appointed three members to the Fed's governing board — two in his first term — all of whom could have voted in favor of steeper cuts.

And many officials on the rate-setting committee are wary of cutting too quickly, with inflation still clearly above the Fed's 2% target. Some observers thought one of those policymakers could dissent in the other direction — in favor of not cutting rates at all.

Instead, just one official dissented from the Fed's decision to reduce its rate by a quarter-point: Stephen Miran, who was nominated by Trump to an empty seat and hurriedly approved by the Senate late Monday, just hours before the two-day meeting began.

Trump has said that one of the Fed governors he appointed in 2018 — Christopher Waller — is a potential replacement for Powell, and Waller dissented in favor of a rate cut in July, when the Fed kept borrowing costs unchanged. Another Trump appointee from his first term, Michelle Bowman, also dissented in July. Yet on Wednesday they both voted with their colleagues.

Trump and Starmer announce tech deal

Associated Press

AYLESBURY, England — President Donald Trump on Thursday signed what he called a historic agreement on science and technology with Britain as United Kingdom officials who have gone all out to impress him with royal pageantry during his state visit now try to deliver key trade and business deals that can further their country's interests.

Trump and Prime Minister Keir Starmer held a roundtable with business leaders as they signed the deal. They also had private meetings where the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and tariff rates the U.S. may set on steel imported from Britain were expected to be discussed. At a subsequent joint news conference, Starmer said, "While we shape this bond for a new era,

the fundamentals have not changed."

Trump said he was "tremendously thankful" for the hospitality during his visit and that King Charles III and Queen Camilla are "two fantastic people."

At the earlier signing ceremony for an agreement meant to promote tech investment in both nations, Starmer referred to the American president as "my friend, our friend" and spoke of "leaders who respect each other and leaders who genuinely like each other." The event took place at Chequers, a 16th-century manor house northwest of London that serves as a rural retreat for British leaders.

The British charm offensive continued after the king and queen had feted Trump and first lady Melania Trump at Windsor Castle, on Wednesday. The roy-

als used the first of the Trump's two-day state visit to offer all the pomp the monarchy can muster: gold-trimmed carriages, scarlet-clad soldiers, artillery salutes, a glittering banquet in a grand ceremonial hall and the biggest military honor guard ever assembled for such a state visit.

Trump has seemed grateful for all the attention — so much so that he has largely stuck to script and offered little of his typical off-the-cuff criticism of hosts.

Still, he had his moments. Trump joked with his treasury secretary, Scott Bessent, and commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick, as he signed the tech deal, "Should I sign this Howard? Scott? If the deal's no good I'm blaming you."

After bidding goodbye to the king and queen at Windsor —

Trump called the monarch "a great gentleman, and a great king" — the Trumps flew by helicopter some 20 miles to Chequers. The Republican president was welcomed by ceremonial honor guard complete with bagpipers — a nod to Trump's Scottish heritage — and shown items from the archive of wartime leader Winston Churchill, who coined the term "special relationship" for the bond between the allies.

It's a point that Trump's British hosts have stressed, almost 250 years after that relationship endured a rocky start in 1776.

Trump told business leaders at a reception at Chequers that the two countries shared an "unbreakable bond." Starmer said that relationship "is the very foundation of our security, our freedom and our prosperity."

Kennedy's new advisory panel to vote on vaccines

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s new vaccine advisory committee kicked off a two-day session on Thursday morning focused on shots against COVID-19, hepatitis B and chickenpox.

In his opening remarks, committee Chairman Martin Kulldorff defended the group against critics who say it leans toward anti-vaccine views.

"The members of this ACIP Committee are committed to reassuring the public and restoring public confidence by removing unnecessary risks and harms whenever possible. That is a pro-vaccine agenda," Kulldorff said.

He later added: "We welcome scientific critique of any of our votes, as there are gray areas due to incomplete scientific knowledge."

Votes were expected in the afternoon on hepatitis B and on a combined shot against measles,

mumps, rubella and chickenpox, but Department of Health and Human Services officials have not said exactly what proposals would be considered.

Information on the meeting agenda suggests the committee may be poised to roll back — at least partly — a longstanding recommendation that virtually all children get an initial dose of hepatitis B vaccine right after birth.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and many public health officials support that decades-old practice.

Dr. Mysheika Roberts, health department director in Columbus, Ohio, said rates of the liver disease among children have dropped tremendously since it was put into place.

"I don't understand the rationale of why we would stop providing that vaccine and that guidance to babies when we've seen such great progress in that area," said Roberts.

Suspect in Kirk's death feared being shot by cops

Associated Press

OREM, Utah — Tyler Robinson, the Utah man accused of assassinating Charlie Kirk, was afraid of being shot by police and eventually agreed to surrender only if it was done peacefully, a sheriff involved with taking him into custody said Wednesday.

Robinson appeared quiet and somber when he arrived with his parents to turn himself in last Thursday at the Washington County Sheriff's office, a day after Kirk was shot and killed at Utah Valley University, said Sheriff Nate Brooksby.

"He didn't want a big SWAT team at his parents' house or his apartment," said the sheriff, who was only involved with the surrender and not the broader investigation. "He was truly fearful about being shot by law enforcement."

On Tuesday, prosecutors charged the 22-year-old Robinson with capital murder and an-

nounced they will seek the death penalty while revealing a series of incriminating messages and DNA evidence that they say connect Robinson to the killing of Kirk, a prominent conservative activist and confidant of President Donald Trump.

Robinson also faced his first hearing in the case Tuesday where a judge said he would appoint an attorney to represent him. A message was left Wednesday with the county's public defender office.

Robinson's family has declined to comment to The Associated Press since his arrest.

The Sept. 10 shooting that stunned the nation and exposed deep political divides also left the Utah Valley campus reeling. On Wednesday, students returning for the first day of classes since then gathered silently and stared at the barricaded courtyard where Kirk was shot while speaking to students.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Well-known chef charged in 3 bank robberies

CA SAN FRANCISCO — A well-known chef who robbed a northern California bank in 2018 is facing charges again after three bank robberies in central San Francisco last week, according to police.

Officers responding to a bank alarm around noon on Sept. 10 learned that a man passed a note demanding money to an employee, who complied in fear for their life, a San Francisco Police Department news release said. The man then fled with a bag of money, police said. With help from the community, investigators identified the suspect as Valentino Luchin, 62, of San Francisco, and arrested him, police said.

There were two other bank robberies in the central district that day involving a suspect with a similar description and methods and police also charged Luchin with those robberies, police said.

Luchin was charged with robbery and attempted robbery, police said. He's being held on \$200,000 bail, according to the San Francisco Sheriff's website. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for Sept. 24.

Local news outlets report that Luchin was known for his work at Italian restaurants such as Rose Pistola and Ottavio. He was charged in a 2018 bank robbery in Contra Costa County.

Strip club execs accused of bribing tax auditor

NY NEW YORK — Executives at a company that owns strip clubs around the country have been charged

with bribing a New York official with free trips to some of the venues and with private dances to avoid paying more than \$8 million in sales taxes, authorities said Tuesday.

Houston-based RCI Hospitality Holdings and its corporate leaders received favorable treatment during at least six tax audits that were performed over a decade in exchange for the perks given to a state auditor, New York Attorney General Letitia James said.

James alleges RCI gave the auditor at least 13 complimentary trips to Florida, including hotels, meals, plus up to \$5,000 per day for private dances at its strip clubs, including Tootsie's Cabaret in Miami. The auditor also received free dances, food and admission at clubs in New York, authorities said.

RCI Hospitality, publicly traded on the Nasdaq composite, owns and operates more than 60 clubs and sports bars and restaurants across the country, including Rick's Cabaret establishments in more than a dozen cities including New York, according to the company's website. It also owns two other businesses in Manhattan.

A 79-count grand jury indictment charges RCI, five of its executives and the three clubs in Manhattan with conspiracy, bribery, tax fraud and other crimes.

Jerry quits Ben & Jerry's, says independence stifled

VT SOUTH BURLINGTON — Ben & Jerry's co-founder Jerry Greenfield is leaving the ice cream brand after 47 years, saying that the independence it once had to speak up on social issues has been sti-

fled by parent company Unilever.

In a letter that co-founder Ben Cohen posted on social media platform X on Greenfield's behalf, Greenfield said that he felt the independence the brand had to speak on social issues and events was lost to Unilever.

"For more than 20 years under their ownership, Ben & Jerry's stood up and spoke out in support of peace, justice and human rights, not as abstract concepts, but in relation to real events happening in our world," he wrote. "That independence existed in no small part because of the unique merger agreement Ben and I negotiated with Unilever, one that enshrined our social mission and values in the company's governance structure in perpetuity. It's profoundly disappointing to come to the conclusion that that independence, the very basis of our sale to Unilever, is gone."

Unilever acquired Ben & Jerry's in 2000 for \$326 million. At the time, Ben & Jerry's said the partnership would help the progressive ice cream company expand its social mission.

Driver rams car into FBI gate, leaves American flag

PA PITTSBURGH — A man who rammed a car into an FBI security gate in Pittsburgh and covered it in an American flag Wednesday said he did it to "make a statement," the FBI said.

Donald Phillip Henson was captured seven hours after fleeing the crash and invoked the Latin phrase "sic semper tyrannis," meaning "thus always to tyrants," while talking to the FBI, according to an affidavit.

John Wilkes Booth shouted the phrase after shooting President Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

Henson, 46, of nearby Penn Hills, was being charged with assault with a deadly weapon and damaging government property. He will remain in custody until a detention hearing set for Tuesday.

Dem elected to replace slain representative

MN MINNEAPOLIS — Democrat Xp Lee won a special election Tuesday to fill the Minnesota House of Representatives seat of a top Democratic leader who was assassinated.

Rep. Melissa Hortman, of Brooklyn Park, held the seat until her death in June.

Lee is a former Brooklyn Park City Council member. He defeated Republican real estate agent Ruth Bittner in the heavily Democratic district.

Lee's win restores a 67-67 tie in the House, and it preserves a power-sharing deal that existed for most of the 2025 legislative session, after the 2024 elections cost House Democrats their majority.

Former House Speaker Hortman brokered that agreement, which ended Democrats' three-week boycott. Under the deal, she agreed to end her six-year tenure as speaker and let Republican Lisa Demuth take the position.

The election to replace Hortman takes place about three months after she and her husband were gunned down in their home. Vance Boelter, 57, faces federal and state murder, attempted murder and other charges in the June 14 attacks.

— From wire reports

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McLaughlin-Levrone cracks 48 seconds at 400

Associated Press

TOKYO —When Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone powered through the final curve of the 400-meter final at world championships, she glanced to her right and saw something that hadn't been there in a while.

Another runner.

She had a race on her hands.

The best way to explain how McLaughlin-Levrone became the first woman in nearly 40 years to crack the all-but-unscalable 48-second mark in the 400 is that the opponent she beat Thursday night on a rain-glistened track in Tokyo, Marileidy Paulino, broke 48 seconds, too.

"You don't run something like that without amazing women pushing you to it," McLaughlin-Levrone said.

The final numbers in this one: McLaughlin-Levrone 47.78 seconds. Paulino 47.98.

They are the second- and third-fastest times in history, short only of the 47.60 by East Germany's Marita Koch, set Oct. 6, 1985 — one of the last vestiges from an Eastern Bloc doping system that was exposed years after it ended, but too late for the records to be stripped from the books.

McLaughlin-Levrone, who stepped away from hurdles to

see what she might be able to do in the 400 flat, said she was every bit as focused on winning the title in a new event as going after a record that had always been thought unapproachable.

And Paulino, the reigning Olympic and world champion in this event, wasn't just going to give it away.

This was an even race, the likes of which McLaughlin-Levrone hadn't been part of in at least three years in the hurdles, as the runners rounded the stretch. She opened a gap of about four body lengths with 30 meters left, but Paulino was actually gaining ground when they both lunged into the finish line.

"At the end of the day, this wasn't my title to hold onto, it was mine to gain," McLaughlin-Levrone said. "Bobby (Kersee) uses boxing terms all the time. He said, 'You've got to go out there and take the belt. It's not yours. You've got to go earn it.'"

Kersee is the wizardly coach who helped transform McLaughlin-Levrone into the greatest female hurdler ever and might be doing the same in the 400. Brutal training sessions with one-time UCLA quarter-miler Willington Wright were part of the regimen.

"I felt that somebody was go-

ing to have to run 47-something to win this," Kersee told The Associated Press. "She trained for it. She took on the challenge, took on the risk. She's just an amazing athlete that I can have no complaints about."

As the times came up on the scoreboard, the crowd roared. The enormity of the moment wasn't lost on anyone.

Nobody had come within a half-second of Koch's mark until this race. Third-place finisher Salwa Eid Nasar clocked 48.19, a time that would have won the last two world championships.

"It's just amazing what the 400 has become the last couple years," said Britain's Amber Anning, who finished fifth in 49.36. "I love it, it makes me want to step up my game. To see it done, it gives hope to us that anything's possible in the 4."

Paulino, meanwhile, was more focused on her unique place in history than not winning the race.

"I'm thankful for having the opportunity to break 48," she said. "I still feel like a winner. I've spent five years every day training for this."

McLaughlin-Levrone took up the 400 flat in 2023, but injuries derailed her run at a world

championship that year.

She focused on hurdles last year for her second Olympic gold medal in the event, then came back to the flat for 2025.

When she ran 48.29 in the semifinal, she broke a 19-year-old American record and said she still felt she had "something left in the tank."

Then, with a push from Paulino, she let it loose.

"Today was a really great race for track and field, and I'm grateful to put myself in position to bring an exciting event to our sport," McLaughlin-Levrone said.

It's still an open question as to whether she will stick around in this race long enough to go after Koch's record, or return to the hurdles, where the number "50" hangs out there much like "48" did in the race she won Thursday night.

Nobody had thought much about 50 seconds in hurdles until McLaughlin-Levrone started breaking the record in that event on a semi-regular basis. Four years ago at the Olympics, she lowered it to 51.46 in the empty stadium in Tokyo.

She broke it three more times and then, in Paris last year, took it down by another .28 seconds to 50.37.

Plenty at stake for ranked rivals Illinois, Indiana

Associated Press

Bret Bielema and Curt Cignetti don't have a long relationship, but it is clear they admire each other's work.

They sat together at last year's Big Ten spring meetings, crisscross one another's recruiting paths and have built budding powers in the Big Ten, Bielema at No. 9 Illinois and Cignetti at No. 19 Indiana. Both have 3-0 marks this season and top 20 teams heading into one of Saturday's featured games.

"There's very few plays where they have mental breakdowns," Bielema said of Cignetti's teams. "We always say more games are lost than won because of penalties, mental errors, turnovers — and they just don't

do those things. I think one of the tells is special teams. You can have a group that has a really good offensive unit, defensive unit, but when special teams fall in line with that, that's something that kind of goes ding, ding, ding."

It hasn't been easy reaching this point for either team.

Last year, Cignetti broke the Hoosiers' losing legacy with the school's first College Football Playoff appearance. Illinois has followed a similar trek up the polls.

The Fighting Illini have their highest ranking since Dick Butkus' final college season in 1964 and head into this weekend seeking their first road win as a top 10 team since 1990. Indiana is looking for a signature

win to put it back in the mix for another playoff trip.

How long has it been since these teams met with so much at stake? Try October 1950, when No. 12 Illinois beat the No. 19 Hoosiers 20-0 in Champaign, Ill. The 75th matchup in this series between border state rivals marks just the second time they've squared off as ranked foes.

Cignetti, like Bielema, understands the challenge.

"I've always had a lot of respect for him as a coach," Cignetti said. "He was a head coach at a very young age and has really had some nice teams. He's done a great job at Illinois. They're very fundamental, and you can see the coaching show up on tape."

Laulu emerges as standout Raiders defender

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Christian Wilkins' release early in training camp raised all sorts of questions about how Las Vegas' interior defense would make up the difference.

The Raiders' tackles have, for the most part, made those concerns moot.

That includes Jonah Laulu, who already has three sacks in two games. He had just one in 17 games as a rookie last season.

"He has just blossomed," coach Pete Carroll said. "He had enough plays on film coming off of last year that he caught my eye like a potential guy that might really be a factor. So I was really excited

about him in the offseason, and he did everything right."

Carroll might not be all that shocked that Laulu is making a strong impact early this season, but outside the Las Vegas facility, he wasn't on many radars.

Indianapolis drafted him in the seventh round in 2024 out of Oklahoma, and he made to the final cut before the Colts waived him Aug. 27 of last year. Laulu's hometown Raiders picked him up the following day.

He showed enough promise to start seven games last season on a defense ravaged by injuries, and then he built on that experience in this summer's camp.

"He works hard," star pass rusher Maxx Crosby said. "He's doing great. He's young. He's got a lot of good tools and he's just getting better. No one's surprised he's playing well. He's just got to keep building off what he started."

For Laulu, the battle to become an impact player is as much mental as physical, and he has been open about his struggles with impostor syndrome. Though not considered a mental health disorder, many medical experts take the condition seriously that affects many people who doubt they are qualified for their work positions.

That includes Laulu and the NFL.

"I feel like it's really about coming every day to work to be that same person every day," Laulu said. "You want to be consistent. You don't want to be an emotional person. Obviously, football is not an easy sport mentally or physically. I'm trying to be my best every day."

His best has been pretty good this season.

Laulu sacked New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye once in the 20-13 season-opening victory and then took down Los Angeles Chargers QB Justin Herbert twice in Monday night's 20-9 loss.

Las Vegas as a team has six sacks this season, tied for eighth in the NFL.

Taylor doesn't feel need to change Bengals' offense much

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Cincinnati coach Zac Taylor said that since quarterback Jake Browning has shown what he can do in the Bengals' offense and has been a part of the organization for five years, he won't have to change up the scheme much as Browning takes over under center for the injured Joe Burrow.

"Preparation equals confidence," Taylor said Wednesday as Cincinnati (2-0) gets ready to face Minnesota (1-1) on Sunday. "When you've prepared for your opportunity, then there's a true confidence that comes with that."

"There's nothing they're going to show me that I haven't watched and seen and prepared for and thought through in my head and walked through in my own. Jake is an example of someone who's truly prepared for a moment. And so that's where his confidence stems from. And now you just go play football."

Browning started his NFL career as an undrafted free agent with the Vikings in 2019, and he joined the Bengals' practice squad in 2021. In 2023, when Burrow missed the second half of the season with a wrist injury, Browning had a winning record (4-3) in seven starts.

Now with Burrow on injured reserve because of a turf toe injury, Browning gets his next opportunity to show what he can do.

"Execution breeds a lot of confidence," Browning said. "My main goal is just to execute well, play fast, make fast decisions, be decisive and try to help us win and whatever comes as a result of that, or however everybody feels now, I'm pretty focused on doing my job."

While Cincinnati added two potential backups to its practice squad Tuesday in Mike White and Sean Clifford, the Bengals are moving forward with Browning as their starter.

"I love the guy," Cincinnati offensive coordinator Dan Pitcher said. "(Browning) and I have a really good relationship. It's just awesome when you see him get an opportunity and he does what we all believe that he's going to do and this team believes in him, his coaches believe in him, and man, that goes a long way. That's why I sit here 2-0, excited, energized, because everything we want to do this year is right in front of us."

Brett Rypien, who signed onto the Bengals practice squad in August and joined the active roster Tuesday, is set up to back up Browning in the short term.

Rypien, an undrafted free agent out of Boise State, has played in 10 NFL games between 2020 and 2023.

Since he didn't participate in training camp with Cincinnati, he has had to learn the offense on the fly.

"Here, you go through the game plan

and make sure you know what the protection rules are," Rypien said. "If I was going from a jet protection system to a 'Mike' protection system, it'd probably be a lot harder. The calls are similar up front for Minnesota as they are here. It's really just learning what the pass concepts are and being able to know where everyone is going to be at."

White has played in 15 NFL games over the past four years and completed 61.4% of his passes in the regular season. He's friends with former Bengals Eli Apple, CJ Uzomah and Mitchell Wilcox, who all provided good reviews of Taylor and Cincinnati.

Similar to Rypien and Clifford, White is learning a Bengals system that's new to him.

"Your prep time is critical," White said. "Your process in the week. Getting reps after practice. You're not going to get reps in the week because the starter needs it. You commit to a process."

Clifford was selected by the Green Bay Packers in the fifth round of the 2023 draft. He hasn't thrown a pass yet in the NFL.

Clifford is a Cincinnati native and went to St. Xavier High School.

"I'm back on the field in my hometown," Clifford said. "I had over 300 messages yesterday. If I didn't get back to you, I apologize ... It's a lot of love. I can feel it. I'm excited to be a part of a great team."

Cubs top Pirates to clinch playoff spot

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Ian Happ homered and drove in three runs, and the Chicago Cubs clinched their first postseason berth since 2020 with an 8-4 win over the Pittsburgh Pirates on Wednesday.

Chicago has won four in a row and seven of eight overall. It leads the NL wild-card standings with an 88-64 record.

Nico Hoerner had two hits and scored three times for the Cubs. Justin Turner hit a pair of RBI singles after entering in the sixth.

The Cubs grabbed control with three runs in the sixth, helped by errors on Pirates reliever Yohan Ramírez (1-3) and catcher Joey Bart. Michael Busch drove in Dansby Swanson with a tiebreaking sacrifice fly, and Happ and Turner added run-scoring singles.

Aaron Civale (4-9) pitched three scoreless innings for the win.

Chicago scored four runs in the first before Pittsburgh recorded an out. Busch walked and scored on a balk before Happ hit his 23rd homer, a two-run drive on a curveball from Johan Oviedo that prompted an early mound visit. Moisés Ballesteros drove the next pitch over the wall in right for his second career homer.

Bart answered with a three-run shot off Matthew Boyd in the bottom half. Andrew McCutchen's bases-loaded walk in the second tied it at 4.

Boyd permitted seven hits and walked two in a season-low three innings.

Reds 6, Cardinals 2: Spencer Steer homered and drove in five runs, helping Brady Singer and visiting Cincinnati beat St. Louis.

The Reds used 11 hits to take the rubber game of the three-game series. They are hoping to rally into the third NL wild card in the final days of the season.

Orioles 3, White Sox 1: Dylan Beavers homered, Tyler Wells

pitched six effective innings and visiting Baltimore beat Chicago.

The Orioles jumped in front in the first. Gunnar Henderson hit a two-out single and advanced to second when left fielder Will Robertson let the ball go under his glove. Henderson swiped third as part of a double steal and scored on Jeremiah Jackson's infield single to third.

Giants 5, Diamondbacks 1 (11): Christian Koss hit a two-run double in a five-run 11th inning, and visiting San Francisco spoiled a nine-inning, one-hit start by Arizona's Brandon Pfaadt, beating the Diamondbacks to end a four-game skid.

The Giants moved within two games of the Mets, who lost to San Diego later Wednesday, for the final National League wild card, while the Diamondbacks remained 1½ games behind New York.

After rookie Joel Peguero (3-0) worked a scoreless 10th for the Giants, Bryce Elkrige walked leading off the 11th against John Curtiss (3-2) and Jerar Encarnacion singled for the Giants' second hit to make it 1-0. Patrick Bailey singled to load the bases and Koss' double made it 3-0.

Braves 9, Nationals 4: Marcell Ozuna drove in three runs, Matt Olson hit a solo homer, and Atlanta completed a four-game sweep with a road win over Washington.

Braves starter Hurston Waldrep (5-1) shut down the Nationals' first 13 hitters and struck out eight in five innings before CJ Abrams singled in the fourth inning. He allowed three runs in the fifth.

Brewers 9, Angels 2: Brandon Woodruff pitched five solid innings, Sal Frelick hit a three-run homer and Blake Perkins tied a career high with five RBIs to lead Milwaukee to a home win over Los Angeles.

Guardians 4, Tigers 0: Gavin Williams struck out nine in five innings, Bo Naylor hit a two-run single and visiting Cleveland

won its season-best sixth straight game, beating Detroit.

Cleveland, which has won 11 of its last 12, is now 4½ games behind the Tigers in the AL Central race.

It was the 10th shutout loss of the season for the Tigers, who have lost 13 of their last 20 games and need a combination of seven wins and Cleveland losses to win the division.

Rays 2, Blue Jays 1: Rays center fielder Chandler Simpson robbed Alejandro Kirk of a three-run homer and later singled in the go-ahead run in the seventh inning of Tampa Bay's home victory over Toronto.

The AL East-leading Blue Jays saw their six-game winning streak end, while the Rays snapped a three-game skid.

Padres 7, Mets 4: Manny Machado hit a tiebreaking grand slam in the fifth inning and visiting San Diego beat New York in a matchup of postseason contenders.

Ramón Laureano also homered and Jake Cronenworth had an RBI single for the Padres, who entered two games behind the NL West-leading Los Angeles Dodgers. San Diego holds the second of three National League wild cards, five games in front of the Mets.

New York remained 1½ games ahead of Arizona for the final NL playoff spot. Cincinnati and San Francisco are both two games back.

Royals 7, Mariners 5: Adam Frazier hit a go-ahead, two-run home run in the eighth inning and host Kansas City went on to beat Seattle and snap its 10-game winning streak.

Eugenio Suárez snapped an 0-for-32 skid with four hits, two RBIs and two runs for Seattle, which, with Houston's win, dropped a half-game back of the Astros in the AL West.

Cole Ragans, making his first start for Kansas City since June 5, allowed two runs on one hit through 3⅓ innings. He struck out four and walked two. He had

been on the IL with a strained left rotator cuff. He threw his first six pitches for strikes and struck out the side on 10 pitches in the first inning.

Red Sox 5, Athletics 4 (10): Pinch-hitter Nick Sogard's 10th-inning infield grounder off Michael Kelly drove home Nate Eaton with the winning run, and host Boston beat the Athletics for its American League-leading 11th walk-off win of the season.

Yankees 10, Twins 5: Trent Grisham homered twice and Cody Bellinger also went deep as visiting New York beat Minnesota.

The Yankees moved within four games of first-place Toronto in the AL East.

Astros 5, Rangers 2: Jose Altuve hit a two-run home run and Jeremy Peña homered and doubled to help host Houston complete a three-game sweep of Texas.

The victory coupled with Seattle's loss to Kansas City moves the Astros ½ game ahead of the Mariners for first place in the AL West.

Marlins 8, Rockies 4: Agustín Ramírez homered and drove in three runs, and surging visiting Miami beat Colorado.

Mickey Moniak hit his 23rd home run for the Rockies (41-111), who need one win in their last 10 games to avoid matching the 2024 Chicago White Sox for the most losses for a season in the modern era.

Colorado needs two victories to surpass the 1962 New York Mets, who had the fewest wins by an NL team.

Dodgers 5, Phillies 0: Blake Snell struck out a season-high 12 over seven innings, Shohei Ohtani hit his 51st homer and host Los Angeles beat Philadelphia to avoid a three-game sweep.

Freddie Freeman also homered for the Dodgers, who blew multiple-run leads in losing 9-6 on Tuesday and 6-5 in 10 innings on Monday, when the Phillies clinched the NL East title for the second straight year.