

## NATO keeps eye on Russia in Adriatic

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

ABOARD THE TCG ANADOLU — NATO allies taking part in an exercise this week are staying wary in case recent Russian incursions in the bloc's skies are followed by Kremlin shadowing at sea.

"In the strategic context, we're monitoring very closely with the (Russian) activities over the last few weeks to see if there is any additional activity," Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Andrew Priddy said Wednesday, the third day of exercise Neptune Strike.

No indications of Russian tails have been seen so far, but naval forces have their eye out for "any sign of Russian interaction, Russian observance, any Russian response to the activity that we're conducting," Priddy said.

The chief of staff for Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO, Priddy joined Turkish and Italian military officials on the amphibious assault ship Anadolu as it sailed in the Adriatic Sea off the coast of Italy near the city of Brindisi.

The third iteration of Neptune Strike this year started on Monday with the Anadolu Expeditionary Strike Group and Italian amphibious forces operating in the southern Adriatic along with the command-and-control ship USS Mount Whitney and the destroyer USS Roosevelt.

Two Turkish frigates and a submarine and the Italian amphibious assault ship ITS San Giorgio were among the vessels nearby.

Meanwhile, the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford is in the North Sea alongside ships and personnel from Finland, Nor-

way and the U.K., among other countries.

The exercise includes over 10,000 military personnel from 13 allied nations operating in the Mediterranean, Adriatic, Baltic and North seas, NATO said.

Priddy's comments come as NATO grapples with recent incursions by Russian drones in Poland and Romania as well as a breach of Estonian airspace by Moscow's fighter jets.

The violation of Polish airspace prompted NATO to create a new mission called Eastern Sentry in an effort to shore up defenses there.

Russia regularly keeps tabs on U.S. and NATO exercises.

American and allied forces do the same when it comes to similar activities involving Russia.

But with last year's overthrow of Syrian strongman Bashar Assad, a longtime

Kremlin stalwart in the Middle East, Russian military access to a strategic port in the country has been crippled.

"The loss of the base in Tartus has kind of significantly hampered the Russians' ability to operate in the Mediterranean," Priddy said.

Turkish assistance to Syrian rebels was crucial in bringing about the ouster of Assad, whose family had held power in the country for more than half a century.

Now, the key NATO ally is playing a leadership role in Neptune Strike.

The exercise offers Turkey an opportunity to demonstrate its amphibious capabilities and commitment to ensuring allies' security, said Rear Adm. Mevlut Savas Bilican, commander of the Anadolu Expeditionary Strike Group.

## Hegseth orders rare meeting of top military officers

*The Washington Post*

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered hundreds of the U.S. military's generals and admirals to gather on short notice — and without a stated reason — at a Marine Corps base in Virginia next week, sowing confusion and alarm after the Trump administration's firing of numerous senior leaders this year.

The highly unusual directive was sent to virtually all of the military's top commanders worldwide, according to more than a dozen people familiar with the matter. The directive was issued earlier this week, as a government shutdown looms, and months after Hegseth's

team at the Pentagon announced plans to undertake a sweeping consolidation of top military commands.

In a statement Thursday, Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell affirmed that Hegseth "will be addressing his senior military leaders early next week," but he offered no additional details.

Parnell, a senior adviser to the defense secretary, voiced no concerns about The Washington Post reporting on the meeting, scheduled for Tuesday in Quantico, Va.

There are about 800 generals and admirals spread across the United States and dozens of other countries and time zones.

Hegseth's order, people familiar with the matter said, applies to all senior officers with the rank of brigadier general or above, or their Navy equivalent, serving in command positions and their top enlisted advisers.

Top commanders in conflict zones and senior military leaders stationed throughout Europe, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region are among those expected to attend Hegseth's meeting, said people familiar with the matter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to publicly discuss the issue. The order does not apply to top military officers who hold staff positions.

None of the people who spoke could recall a defense secretary ever ordering so many of the military's generals and admirals to assemble like this. Several said it raised security concerns.

"People are very concerned. They have no idea what it means," one person said.

The orders come as Hegseth has unilaterally directed massive recent changes at the Pentagon — including directing that the number of general officers be reduced by 20%, firing senior leaders without cause and a high-profile new order to rebrand the Defense Department as the Department of War.

# Pentagon adds exemptions to flu shot rule

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has stepped back from the policy that requires all troops to get the flu shot every year by introducing exemptions for reservists and proclaiming that the shot is only necessary in some circumstances for all service members, according to a document obtained by The Associated Press.

The memo, written by Deputy Defense Secretary Steve Feinberg on May 29 and sent to all the military services, says reserve troops now will need to be on active duty for 30 days or more before being required to get an annual flu shot. It also says the military will no longer be paying for reservists or Na-

tional Guard members to get the vaccine on their own time.

News of the policy change, which has not been publicly announced by the Pentagon, comes as the Trump administration and its advisers have suggested changes to other vaccination guidance. An influential immunization panel that the administration updated to include anti-vaccine figures decided to not recommend the COVID-19 shot to anyone, while President Donald Trump used his platform to promote unproven and, in some cases, discredited ties between the pain reliever Tylenol, vaccines and autism.

At the Pentagon, the flu shot memo declared that “going forward, the Department will con-

serve its resources by requiring seasonal flu vaccination for service members only when doing so most directly contributes to readiness.” However, the document is not clear about the changes because it later says the annual requirement for active-duty troops is still in effect.

While the memo was quietly sent months ago, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth drew attention to it Wednesday when he reposted a comment from an anonymous account that claimed they “won’t be forced to get a flu shot this fall for the privilege of serving my state and country in the National Guard.”

Officials in Hegseth’s office did not answer questions on the conflicting nature of the memo

or comment on the post he amplified.

The Trump administration also has offered back pay to former service members who refused the COVID-19 vaccine and were kicked out of the military under the Biden administration.

Those who declined the vaccination have been able to return to service since 2023, but only 113 of the more than 8,000 discharged service members had chosen to do so.

The back pay offer was intended to encourage more to reenlist but met with limited success. Two months later, Pentagon officials said only 13 people — all Army soldiers — had rejoined the military.

## China’s ‘nature reserve’ is called a sovereignty ploy

By ALEX WILSON

*Stars and Stripes*

Beijing’s recently announced plan to establish a nature reserve on a contested shoal in the South China Sea is really a form of “lawfare” aimed at establishing sovereignty, according to a pair of experts in international relations.

China’s National Forestry and Grassland Administration unveiled plans on Sept. 11 for a “national nature reserve” on Scarborough Shoal, a maritime feature also claimed by Taiwan and the Philippines.

The shoal, known in China as Huangyan Dao, is 140 miles west of the Philippines, within its exclusive economic zone, and 500 miles southeast of Hong Kong.

Beijing proposed the plan as a means to conserve the Scarborough ecosystem, according to a Sept. 11 news release from China’s State Council. The reserve would cover 14 square miles of the 58-square-mile shoal.

China’s real motivation is establishing legal frameworks for asserting its claim on the shoal over other nations, the experts said.

“This is part of a long-term strategy to establish facts on the sea. We call it ‘lawfare,’” Stephen Nagy, a professor of international studies at International Christian University’s Tokyo Campus, said by email Wednesday.

Beijing may also be trying to overshadow its embarrassment from an Aug. 11 incident in which a Chinese warship collided with a Chinese coast guard vessel near the shoal, said Benjamin Blandin, a non-resident research fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy. Both experts agreed that Beijing’s primary goal is reinforcing its claim over the island.

“Establishing and implementing a nature reserve serves as one of many sovereignty markers one country can use at sea,” Blandin said by email Tuesday.

## Yokosuka rings bell to honor sailors lost over past year

By ALEX WILSON

*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The solemn tolls of a ship’s bell rang through Kosano Park on Thursday as volunteers read out the names of 176 sailors who died over the past year.

The ceremony — part of the Navy Gold Star Program’s annual Bells Across America for Fallen Service Members — drew about 60 sailors and civilians, including 10 Gold Star family members, to pay their respects.

A group of 22 sailors in their summer whites took turns reading out the names, with a single bell toll following every five or six names.

“Each ring is a simple sound with a solemn meaning: A watch begun, a watch relieved, a life remembered,” base commander Capt. Jonathan Hopkins told those attending. “Here in Yokosuka, the bell reminds us that no name is spoken alone. Its echo

reaches every pier, every shop, every household in this community.”

Among the 176 names was Petty Officer 3rd Class Jose Antonio Rivera Lynch IV, an aviation boatswain’s mate assigned to the aircraft carrier USS George Washington. He was declared dead in a presumed overboard accident on July 30.

In addition to those who died this year, five names were read to honor the Gold Star families in attendance: Cmdr. Frank Bivins, Chief Petty Officer Charles Findley, Chief Petty Officer Abraham Lopez, Petty Officer 2nd Class Adam Thomas and Chief Petty Officer Demond Walker.

The ceremony, now in its 10th year globally, was mirrored at numerous Navy bases in the U.S. this month. In Japan, simultaneous events were held at Sasebo Naval Base and Naval Air Facility Atsugi, according to the Navy Gold Star Program’s website.

# Agencies prep for mass firings as potential shutdown nears

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House is telling agencies to prepare large-scale firings of federal workers if the government shuts down next week.

In a memo released Wednesday night, the Office of Management and Budget said agencies should consider a reduction in force for federal programs whose funding would lapse next week, are not otherwise funded and are “not consistent with the President’s priorities.” That would be a much more aggressive step than in previous shutdowns, when federal workers not deemed essential were furloughed but returned to their jobs once Congress approved government spending.

A reduction in force would not only lay off employees but eliminate their positions, which would trigger yet another mas-

sive upheaval in a federal workforce that has already faced major rounds of cuts this year due to efforts from the Department of Government Efficiency and elsewhere in the Trump administration.

Once any potential government shutdown ends, agencies are asked to revise their reduction in force plans “as needed to retain the minimal number of employees necessary to carry out statutory functions,” according to the memo, which was first reported by Politico.

This move from OMB significantly increases the consequences of a potential government shutdown next week and escalates pressure on Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

The two leaders have kept nearly all of their Democratic lawmakers united against a

clean funding bill pushed by President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans that would keep the federal government operating for seven more weeks, demanding improvements to health care in exchange for their votes.

In statements issued shortly after the memo was released, the two Democrats showed no signs of budging.

“We will not be intimidated by your threat to engage in mass firings,” Jeffries wrote in a post on X. “Get lost.”

Jeffries called Russ Vought, the head of OMB, a “malignant political hack.”

Schumer said in a statement that the OMB memo is an “attempt at intimidation” and predicted the “unnecessary firings will either be overturned in court or the administration will end up hiring the workers back.”

# Trump, Erdogan discuss F-35 ban

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is holding talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the White House on Thursday and signaling that the United States might soon lift its hold on sales of advanced fighter jets to Ankara.

During Trump’s first term, the U.S. removed Turkey, a NATO ally, from its flagship F-35 fighter jet program after Turkey purchased an air defense system from Russia. U.S. officials worried that Turkey’s use of Russia’s S-400 surface-to-air missile system could be used to gather data on the capabilities of the F-35 and that the information could end up in Russian hands.

Trump started his Oval Office meeting with Erdogan by offering hope that a resolution to the matter could be found during the leaders’ talks.

“He needs certain things, and we need certain things, and we’re going to come to a conclusion. You’ll know by the end of the day,” Trump said. The president added to Erdogan, “And I think you’ll be successful with buying the things” you would “like to buy.”

It was Erdogan’s first trip to the White House since 2019. They forged what Trump has described as a “very good relationship” during his first White House term.

Over the years, U.S. officials have cited concerns about Turkey’s human rights record under Erdogan and the country’s ties with Russia. Tensions between Turkey and Israel, another important American ally, over Gaza and Syria have made relations difficult with Turkey at times.

# White House: Trump’s verbal assault toward Russia is ‘negotiating tactic’

The Washington Post

UNITED NATIONS — President Donald Trump’s furious rhetoric toward Russia is “a negotiating tactic” intended to pressure the Kremlin, a senior White House official said Wednesday, a day after the president stunned global policymakers and delighted Ukrainian leaders by embracing Kyiv’s ambitions for a decisive defeat of Russia.

The president’s apparent flip in favor of Ukraine’s reconquering its full territory is a marker of Trump’s frustration toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, the senior White House official said, a month after a red-carpet summit in Alaska between the two leaders yielded

few concrete results.

But Trump was not signaling a major shift in U.S. policy toward Kyiv during a day at the U.N. General Assembly in which he met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the official said.

The U.S. president has long suggested that Ukraine will need to give up territory to end the war, so his declaration on Tuesday that Kyiv can “WIN all of Ukraine back in its original form” with the right support was a notable break.

But hours later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio told the U.N. Security Council that the war would end at a negotiating table, not the battlefield — a conventional restatement of existing

U.S. policy that suggested that Trump’s new approach was not being translated into practical action.

The senior White House official said that everything the president does is “from the lens of ‘How can we make a deal?’”

Trump “has been very frustrated with Putin for a long time. He’s sending a very strong message. Russia is a massive country with a massive economy — they have a war economy — and Ukraine has still been able to defend itself for nearly four years,” the official said. “All he’s saying is, look, if Putin doesn’t want peace, let the fighting continue, and we’re going to continue to sell weapons to NATO.”



# Analysis: Iran likely conducted secret ICBM test

*Associated Press*

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran has likely carried out an undeclared missile test at its Imam Khomeini Spaceport, satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press showed, underlining Tehran's effort to maintain its weapons program despite the 12-day war with Israel in June.

Iran has not formally acknowledged last week's test at a pad that has hosted other launches by the country's civilian space program. A single lawmaker in Iran's parliament, however, claimed, without offering evidence, that Tehran tested a possible intercontinental ballistic missile.

The test and the claim raise concerns that Iran may be trying to expand the reach of its missiles as tensions remain high ahead of United Nations

sanctions, which are likely to be reimposed this weekend over Tehran's nuclear program — as it also repairs missile sites that were struck by the Israelis.

"Israel's successes in the 12-day war against Iran's missile attacks reinforced for Tehran the importance of developing more ballistic missiles and qualitatively better versions of them," said Behnam Ben Taleblu, an analyst at the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The think tank has long been critical of Iran and has been sanctioned by Tehran.

"Consider this part of Tehran's efforts to build back better, and as quickly as possible," he added.

On Sept. 18, Iranian social media users posted images of the sky over Semnan province, showing what appeared to be a

rocket's contrail at sunset. Iranian officials did not acknowledge what caused the contrail, nor did Iranian state media report on the incident.

Satellite photos taken prior to that by Planet Labs PBC show the circular pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport — about 145 miles southeast of Iran's capital, Tehran, in Semnan — painted blue ringed with red, white and green lines — the colors of the Iranian flag.

But in satellite images since Sept. 18, the pad appeared discolored, though it wasn't fully clear until a more-detailed Planet image requested by the AP taken this Wednesday. That image shows significant scorch marks, the pattern of which resembled scorching seen at the pad following past launches. When rockets launch, the flames from their engines pour

down onto pads.

Fabian Hinz, a research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, who studies missiles, said the scale of the scorching suggested Iran launched a solid-fuel missile, as burning aluminum oxide particles cause such marks.

The north-south marks suggest a blast deflector being used to channel the flames, he said.

Iranian parliament member Mohsen Zanganeh, appearing on Iranian state television on Saturday, claimed that the Islamic Republic had launched an intercontinental ballistic missile last Thursday. He portrayed it as a sign of Iran's strength as it faces challenges from Israel and the West.

Zanganeh did not elaborate on where he got his information, nor did he provide any evidence to support his assertion.

## Motive in ICE facility shooting remains unclear

*Associated Press*

DALLAS — For the second time in two weeks, a shooter on a rooftop inflicted death on the ground, this time at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Dallas, where a detainee was killed and two others were critically wounded by the gunman, who then fatally shot himself.

The Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that shots were fired indiscriminately early Wednesday at the ICE building, including at a van in a gated entryway.

No ICE personnel were wounded.

The shooter was identified as 29-year-old Joshua Jahn by a law enforcement official who could not publicly disclose details of the investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. Investigators had not determined

the assailant's motive.

FBI Director Kash Patel posted a photo on social media showing a bullet found at the scene with "ANTI-ICE" written on it. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem ordered more security at ICE facilities across the U.S.

The attack was the latest high-profile targeted killing in the U.S. It happened two weeks after conservative activist Charlie Kirk was killed by a shooter on the roof of a building at Utah Valley University and as heightened immigration enforcement has prompted a backlash against ICE and fear in immigrant communities.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association called the shootings "a stark reminder that behind every immigration case number is a human being deserving of dignity, safety and respect."

## Family sues airline over crash with Army helicopter

*The Washington Post*

The family of one of the people who died in the fatal collision of an American Airlines regional jet and an Army Black Hawk helicopter near Washington is suing the carrier and its subsidiary PSA Airlines, alleging the parties failed to implement policies and procedures that could have prevented the crash.

The first federal lawsuit tied to the crash was filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia by the family of Casey Crafton, who was among the 64 passengers aboard American Eagle Flight 5342, which collided with an Army Black Hawk helicopter on Jan. 29 near Reagan National Airport. In all, 67 people died in the crash.

"The Defendants knew, or should have known, that [Flight 5342] was transiting one of the

busiest airspaces in the United States, and they knew, or should have known, that the airport approaches presented certain safety risks, specifically including the possibility of a mid-air collision," read the complaint. "... The Defendants' collective failures (for which they are jointly and severally liable) caused, and/or contributed, to the mid-air collision complained of herein, resulting in the tragic deaths of 67 individuals, specifically including Plaintiff's decedent, CASEY CRAFTON."

Crafton, 40, was returning home from a business trip to Wichita at the time of the crash.

In a statement, American Airlines said it has a "strong track record of putting safety ... above everything else."

Also named in the suit are the Federal Aviation Administration and the U.S. Army.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Dem wins special election for congressional seat

**AZ** PHOENIX — Southern Arizona voters on Tuesday chose Adelita Grijalva to succeed her father, the late U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, a progressive Democrat who represented the state for more than two decades in Congress.

She defeated Republican candidate Daniel Butierrez in the 7th Congressional District, which hugs almost the entire length of Arizona's border with Mexico. The decisive win — early returns showed Grijalva with more than double the number of votes as her Republican opponent — will make Grijalva the first Latina to represent Arizona in Congress.

Grijalva retired from the Pima County Board of Supervisors and launched her bid for Congress shortly after her father's death in March. She will serve the final months of her father's term.

### Officials lift evacuations after fire threat recedes

**HI** HONOLULU — Officials on the Hawaiian island of Maui lifted evacuation orders for residents living near a wildfire that broke out late Tuesday. Police had gone door-to-door evacuating residents and emergency sirens sounded before firefighters stopped the blaze's forward progress.

The fire, which grew to about 300 acres, was first reported at 1:30 p.m. near the north shore town of Paia, officials said. There was no containment estimate and no immediate information on what caused the fire.

Paia is a former sugar plantation town that has become pop-

ular with windsurfers. It is on the other side of the island from Lahaina, which was destroyed by a deadly wildfire in 2023.

### Police shoot armed nude man, sparking inquiry

**MA** BOSTON — Police in Boston are investigating an officer-involved shooting, sparked by calls of a naked man with a knife who allegedly broke into a Beacon Hill business.

Officers responded to reports of a breaking-and-entering near the 1928 Beacon Hill restaurant, around 6 a.m. There, they encountered a naked man armed with a "large knife" in a rear alley, Boston Police Department Superintendent Paul McLaughlin said.

McLaughlin said three officers responded, with an officer attempting to use a Taser to subdue the man, "striking the suspect to no avail."

"Officers then discharged their department-issued firearms multiple times, striking the individual," McLaughlin said. "He was immediately given first aid by the officers on scene and immediately transported to a local hospital, where he is being treated for non-life-threatening injuries."

### 'Sandy Hook' message left; bus driver charged

**NC** KING — A school employee left a handwritten message mentioning "Sandy Hook Elementary" and a shooter near a school door, leading to a shelter-in-place and criminal charges, authorities in North Carolina said.

The message was found on the sides of a wooden block wedging open an exterior door

at King Elementary School in King on Sept. 15, according to a Monday news release from the King Police Department.

In addition to "Sandy Hook Elementary," Susan Heflin Carter is also accused of writing "Shooter's Accomplice Block" on the piece of wood, police said.

Carter, 64, of Tobaccoville, was criminally charged with disorderly conduct "by disruption of the teaching of students of a public educational institution," according to authorities.

Carter worked as a bus driver at King Elementary School, Stokes County Schools Superintendent Dr. Brad Rice confirmed in a statement Tuesday.

Carter, who was hired by the district in January 2016, has been fired, Rice said.

Twenty first-grade students and six staff members were killed in a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, 2012. Carter is accused of leaving the message on the wooden block "as a commentary" against leaving doors open, according to WGHP.

### Man sentenced for series of arsons, firebombings

**CA** OAKLAND — A California man was sentenced Tuesday to nearly 20 years in prison for committing a series of arsons and firebombings last year at University of California, Berkeley and the Oakland federal building, prosecutors said.

Casey Robert Goonan, 35, of Oakland and Pleasant Hill, previously pleaded guilty to one count of maliciously damaging or destroying property used in or affecting interstate commerce by means of fire or an ex-

plosive, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

On June 1, 2024, Goonan placed a bag containing six Molotov cocktails underneath the fuel tank of a marked University of California Police Department patrol car parked near UC Berkeley, prosecutors said. Goonan lit the bag on fire and the flames spread to the patrol car, according to prosecutors. The incident was caught on camera.

On June 11, 2024, Goonan also tried to firebomb the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Oakland, prosecutors said. Goonan set other fires at the UC Berkeley campus on June 1, June 13 and June 16, 2024.

Prosecutors said Goonan acknowledged that the arsons and firebombings were inspired by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, and that he called on others to damage property on Bay Area college campuses in support of Palestine.

### Coast Guard evacuates ill man from cruise ship

**NJ** ATLANTIC CITY — A military crew aboard a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter rescued a 73-year-old man who suffered a medical episode on a Carnival Cruise Line ship Monday night, authorities said.

Authorities received a report shortly after 10 p.m. of a man in need of medical attention aboard the Venezia cruise ship, according to the Coast Guard.

The distress call was made about 30 miles off the coast of Atlantic City, N.J. A Coast Guard helicopter landed near the Venezia around 11:35 p.m. and transported the passenger to an Atlantic City hospital.

— From wire reports

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# Raleigh hits 60th HR, M's win AL West

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Only fitting that it was Cal Raleigh who catapulted Seattle to its first AL West championship in 24 years Wednesday night.

The switch-hitting catcher launched two more homers to give him a major league-best 60 this season, and the streaking Mariners clinched the fourth division crown in the franchise's 49-year history with a 9-2 victory over the Colorado Rockies.

"To do it in this fashion, on this night, in front of these fans, Mom and Dad, obviously, was really cool," Raleigh said.

The lone big league team that's never been to a World Series, Seattle last won the AL West in 2001 when it set an American League record with 116 wins — thanks in large part to a prolific rookie season from new Hall of Famer Ichiro Suzuki.

But similar to that team, winning the division this year required more than a record-setting performance from one player. In addition to Raleigh, the 2025 Mariners had four other All-Stars: outfielders Randy Arozarena and Julio Rodríguez, as well as right-hander Bryan Woo and closer Andrés Muñoz.

"Really proud of the guys here," said Raleigh, the seventh big league player to reach 60 homers in a season. "It's 20-plus years since we've done something like

this, and it's special. It's special to this group, to this organization, to the city."

Even with that All-Star quintet, Seattle entered the July 31 trade deadline just six games over .500. President of baseball operations Jerry Dipoto felt compelled to add to a team that entered August 4½ games back of the division lead, and did so in a meaningful way.

The Mariners acquired slugging third baseman Eugenio Suárez and multi-talented first baseman Josh Naylor from the Arizona Diamondbacks, and getting ahold of both has proven to be quite the shrewd move. Since the deadline, Seattle has gone 31-17, won 16 of its last 17 and clinched a playoff spot Tuesday thanks to some late-game heroics from Naylor.

It hasn't just been a potent Mariners lineup — one that entered Wednesday's game with the third-most homers in the majors — that has powered the club back to the postseason for the first time since 2022.

Despite injuries to the likes of right-handed starters George Kirby, Bryce Miller, Logan Evans and Logan Gilbert, Seattle's rotation has held together. Veteran right-hander Luis Castillo has been steady and available all season, while Woo broke out in a big way during his first All-Star campaign.

"When you look at this team, the depth of our lineup, the depth of our pitching,

the bullpen," manager Dan Wilson said, "we've got incredible guys here."

Woo leads all Mariners pitchers in wins, innings pitched, strikeouts and WAR. He didn't take his next turn in the rotation, however, as his scheduled Thursday night start against the Rockies was skipped due to pectoral tightness, Seattle general manager Justin Hollander said Tuesday.

Regardless of Woo's health, it won't be easy for the Mariners in October. Still looking for its first pennant, the franchise has never made it further than the AL Championship Series in five postseason appearances.

But as Seattle has proven all season, it is hardly a one-dimensional club, even if Raleigh has drawn ample headlines with his propensity for the longball. Instead, it's a deep team with plenty of camaraderie and a handful of starting pitchers who would be aces on other teams.

"We care about each other, truly," Rodríguez said. "We would die for each other every single day. It means a lot for a team to be able to be like that."

Only time will tell if this Seattle squad has what it takes to write a new chapter, and go further in the postseason than any previous Mariners team.

"I think we're playing our best baseball right now, and that's the teams you see win it all," Gilbert said. "So, I think we've got a chance."

## Yankees' Judge ties record with 50 homers for 4th time

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Aaron Judge put himself in some rare company while lifting the Yankees into a share of the AL East lead for the first time in 3½ months.

Judge became just the fourth player to reach 50 home runs four times and, just like last year, he followed by hitting No. 51 in the same game.

"If you sit back and admire it, then you're going to stop your momentum," Judge said after he drove in four runs to lead New York over the Chicago White Sox 8-1 on Wednesday night. "Hopefully I have a long career here and we do some special things that we can talk about at the end."

The Yankees (90-68) have won seven of eight, moving a season-high 22 games over .500 and getting to 90 wins for the seventh time in the last eight full seasons. New York, which hadn't been in first place since before play July 3, is tied with Toronto atop the AL East with four games left — though the Blue Jays hold the tiebreaker. Toronto led by five games with 11 remaining but has lost six of seven.

"All across Major League Baseball it's been a crazy 10 days, two weeks," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said.

A day after New York clinched its 60th postseason berth and eighth in nine years, Judge joined

Babe Ruth (1920, '21, '27, '28), Mark McGwire (1996-99) and Sammy Sosa (1998-2001) as the only hitters with four 50-homer seasons.

Judge drove a 96.6 mph sinker from Jonathan Cannon (4-10) into the Yankees bullpen in right-center field for a 3-1 lead in the second inning.

"Obviously made a mistake to the best hitter in the game and punished me for it," Cannon said. "He hits everything."

Judge followed Trent Grisham's two-run homer in the eighth with a solo shot off Cam Booser on a fastball for his 46th multi-homer game, matching Mickey Mantle for New York's second-

most behind Ruth's 68.

Judge had three hits, raising his major league-leading batting average to .328 along with 109 RBIs. The 6-foot-7 Yankees captain, who turned 33 in April, is on track to become the tallest batting champion in big league history. He also has the top OPS at 1.136.

Defending AL champion New York still hopes for its second straight AL East title and third in four seasons. It's been a topsyturvy season, in which all three AL summer division leaders have frittered away leads. Toronto topped the East by 6½ games, Detroit the Central by 14 and Houston the West by seven.



# Historic rebound has Guardians atop AL Central

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Steven Kwan wasn't looking at the American League Central standings in early July when the Cleveland was eight games under .500, in fourth place and 15½ games behind Detroit.

The All-Star outfielder wasn't about to look Wednesday night, even though the Guardians have staged the biggest comeback in baseball history.

Cleveland moved into sole possession of first place with a 5-1 victory over Detroit and became the first major league team to overcome a deficit of 15½ games and take the lead in either division or league play, beating the Tigers 5-1 on Wednesday night.

The Guardians (86-72) have a one-game lead over Detroit (85-73) with four games to play. Cleveland also has the tiebreaker by taking the season series.

The last time the Guardians had sole possession of the division was April 22, when they were 14-9 and a half-game ahead of the Tigers.

The 1914 Boston Braves were 15 games back in the National League on July 4 and rallied to win by 10½ games according to Elias. Since baseball went to division play in 1969, the biggest deficit overcome was 14 games by the 1978 New York Yankees to win the AL East.

"Ignorance is bliss. You kind just keep your head down and don't worry about those kind of things," Kwan said. "It is a long, long season, so I think if you get caught up in those things early on, you're going to be doomed."

"Just keep pushing, keep doing what we do. Can't jinx it either. I mean, we've been doing what we've been doing for so long, it'd be a little silly to look forward too far."

According to FanGraphs,

Cleveland had a 2.9% chance to make the postseason and a 0.2% chance to win the division on Sept. 1. After improving to an MLB-best 18-5 in September, it has a 92.3% chance for the postseason and 80.7% to take the division for the second straight year.

"It feels good, but there's no prize for having that spot today. I'm really proud of what our guys have done to get themselves back into it and give us a chance to get into the postseason," manager Stephen Vogt said. "We have a lot of work left to go. It's exciting. Sure, we're going to enjoy the win for a few hours, but we got another game tomorrow going to come out ready to go."

A key to the Guardians' hot September has been their pitching. The starting rotation has allowed two or fewer runs in 19 consecutive games, matching the 2019 Tampa Bay

Rays and 1916 New York Giants for the second-longest streak since the mound was moved.

The 1917 Chicago White Sox have the mark at 20, according to Elias.

Cleveland starters are 12-0 with a 1.35 ERA during their 19-game run. Tanner Bibee improved to 3-0 in September, allowing only one run in six innings.

"I'll be honest, I don't think about the streak at any moment other than when you guys bring it up to me. We're out here to win games each and every day, and those guys compete with each other," Vogt said. "The truth is that when they take the mound, they want to give us a chance to win. And man, have they stepped up the last few weeks."

The Guardians finish with Detroit on Thursday before hosting Texas in the final regular-season series.

## Verbal jabs grow ahead of Ryder Cup opening tee

Associated Press

FARMINGDALE, N.Y. — The opening tee shot still two days away, the gamesmanship at the Ryder Cup began Wednesday when European captain Luke Donald took a few subtle jabs on pay-for-play during his speech at the opening ceremony.

"We're fueled by something money cannot buy," Donald said.

Europe, 1 up.

And then U.S. captain Keegan Bradley made the first bogey of these matches when he spoke of being around the 17th green at Brookline in 1999 for one of the biggest moments in Ryder Cup history, only to mistakenly say Justin Rose — not Justin Leonard — made the 45-foot putt.

Europe, 2 up.

The actual golf doesn't start until Friday morning at rowdy Bethpage Black. More than 5,000 fans who attended the ceremony made their presence felt with constant chants of "U-S-A!" and a smattering of boos for the Europeans. The strongest booing was when both captains thanked New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, who attended the ceremony.

Donald is the first European to be captain in consecutive Ryder Cup matches since Bernard Gallacher (1991-95). He was polished in Rome, using perfect Italian in a short message to the fans, and he was equally distinguished in sending a clear message on what this week is all about.

Europe has practically owned the Ryder Cup in the modern era that dates to 1979, and it has built a legacy that has equipped its team with supreme confidence.

"The American team is rightly proud of their heritage, but so are we," Donald said. "Our European legacy is rooted in resilience, in togetherness and in proving people wrong. Time and again, we've shown that when we come together as one with a shared purpose, we can achieve remarkable things."

Donald wasted little time in bringing money into the conversation, saying the Ryder Cup "is not about prize money or world ranking points. It's about pride."

The Americans have received \$200,000 to donate to charity since 1999. This year the charity amount is \$300,000, along with

a \$200,000 stipend. The American players have said from the start they would be donating the entire \$500,000 to charities in their communities.

Still, that was ample ammunition for Europeans to say they didn't need compensation to compete for a 17-inch gold trophy, suggesting it was an example of why the Ryder Cup meant more to them than the Americans.

Europe has won 10 of the last 14 times against American teams that typically look stronger on paper in terms of world ranking and major championships. It now tries to win for the fifth time on U.S. soil. The Americans have not won in Europe in 32 years.

"We didn't come here just to be a part of the show. We came here to earn our place in Ryder Cup folklore," Donald said. "We're not just playing to win, we're playing for each other and for every young golfer back home who dreams about one day representing Team Europe."

"We know it won't be easy. Winning away never is," Donald said. "The toughest roads lead to the greatest rewards."

# Ravens DT Madubuike out against Chiefs

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Baltimore will again be without defensive lineman Nnamdi Madubuike when it faces Patrick Mahomes and Kansas City this weekend.

Madubuike was out Monday night with a neck injury, and the Ravens lost 38-30 to a Detroit team that rushed for 224 yards.

Now coach John Harbaugh has wasted no time ruling the 27-year-old lineman out for this weekend as well — and everything about the ailment sounds ominous.

“I would say I am concerned about it, but I’m not really in a position to comment on it right now — haven’t been given the OK to comment on it at this point,” Harbaugh said. “He’s not going to play this week, I can tell you that. We’re going to have to see going forward, when they know what they need to know.”

Madubuike is in the second

year of a four-year contract extension. He’s had 30 sacks in five-plus seasons, and his absence against the Lions — along with Kyle Van Noy’s hamstring injury — left Baltimore with a very limited pass rush. The Ravens had a 57-game sack streak snapped.

If Madubuike’s injury keeps him out long term, Baltimore (1-2) may be in a position where it needs to trade for help on the interior defensive line. The Ravens signed defensive tackles Taven Bryan and Josh Tupou to the practice squad Wednesday. Bryan started six games for Indianapolis last season. Tupou played three games for Baltimore in 2024.

The Ravens had a walk-through type of practice Wednesday, then released participation estimates. In addition to Madubuike, defensive tackles Travis Jones (knee) and Broderick Washington (ankle) were listed as not participating. None

of that is encouraging after Baltimore allowed the third-most yards rushing in franchise history and most in a game since 2017.

“We’ll be OK. We’ll be fine. There’s a lot of real simple things that we didn’t do very well at times,” Harbaugh said. “We’ll have the same play, really against the same defense two different times. One time it’s no gain because we’re pretty much exactly where we’re supposed to be. And another time, we’re not where we’re supposed to be.”

Detroit’s offensive line can be a tough matchup for anyone, and at the beginning of the game, the Lions set the tone with impeccable pass protection that gave Jared Goff plenty of time to throw. As the game wore on, the running game became more of a factor.

“I think part of it’s just trying to do too much sometimes,” Harbaugh said. “Sometimes

you try to do more than our job, and that’s not really required.”

Detroit had an 18-play, 98-yard scoring drive that took 10:48 off the clock in the first half. The Ravens rebounded from that, and the game was tied at 21 when Baltimore pinned the Lions back on their 4 late in the third quarter.

What followed was another TD drive that went almost the entire length of the field, although this one didn’t take nearly as long.

The key play was a run by David Montgomery on second-and-10 that went for 72 yards to the Ravens 13.

“Playing with a little more, just calmness and belief in the whole structure and the 10 guys around you. Then also tackling in the back end,” Harbaugh said. “Those runs, they shouldn’t go to what they did. Those runs should be tackled 8, 10 yards if they break through the line.”

## Georgia will rely on Branch’s explosive play vs. Alabama

Associated Press

ATHENS, Ga. — Nearly three weeks ago, after No. 5 Georgia beat Austin Peay 28-6 in a game that didn’t feel much like a win, quarterback Gunner Stockton felt like he needed answers. How can the offense maximize explosive plays, the kind that will be essential in SEC competition?

Stockton may have found the answer in Week 3, when the Bulldogs delivered a 44-41 overtime win against No. 15 Tennessee. Junior transfer Zachariah Branch played a key role, catching a team-high five passes for 69 yards, a touchdown and hauling in the two-point conversion to force overtime.

Through three games, Branch leads Georgia with 181 receiving yards and two touchdowns. His two scores came on nearly identical plays — short

screen passes taken 30+ yards to the house. It might not have been the deep shot downfield Stockton envisioned, but when Branch reached a top speed of 21.4 mph on his 36-yard touchdown in Week 3, it was hard to describe as anything but explosive.

Kirby Smart likes what he’s seen out of the junior transfer from USC.

“Zachariah’s been great,” Smart said Monday. “He’s a hard worker. He practices every day, regardless of what touches he gets. He’s never been a me guy. He just wants to win, and he’s willing to do whatever it takes.”

Smart isn’t the only one who’s taken notice. No. 17 Alabama, who the Bulldogs host Saturday night, has circled Branch on the scouting report. Linebacker Deontae Lawson knows how im-

portant it is to minimize the wide receiver from the start.

“Branch is explosive,” Lawson said. “I think he has all of their explosive plays this year, he was definitely explosive at USC last year. You can’t let him get going, you have to stop him in his tracks. If he gets going then it’s going to be a big play. We want to limit that for sure.”

Branch’s speed and versatility will be needed Saturday night. Smart is 1-6 against the Crimson Tide. His sole triumph came at the end of the 2021 season, when Georgia was crowned national champions. The Bulldogs are 0-1 against Alabama with Kalen DeBoer at the helm, losing 41-34 last September.

It won’t be an easy task for Stockton, Branch and Co. against a strong Crimson Tide defense, which has held opponents to an average of 108 pass-

ing yards per game — the lowest in the SEC.

“They’ve got a lot of moving parts, a lot to prepare for,” Smart said. “They have different coverages, they mix man and zone well, but their physicality is the biggest thing. At the point of attack, they’re really physical and they play really hard. I think they have a really good defense and they’re well coached.”

With Alabama’s secondary in mind, Georgia may need to lean on the run to spark the offense. But whether highly targeted or relied on for blocking, Branch is prepared to bring 100% effort every snap.

“I try to affect the game as much as possible every single play, whether I’m getting the ball or not,” Branch said. “I’ll try to affect the game in a positive way for my team as much as I can.”