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Experts dispute upbeat Afghan reports

BY HEATH DRUZIN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Last year was the deadliest in Afghanistan for both troops and civilians since the U.S. invaded the country in 2001, with an entrenched Taliban moving to reassert control over former strongholds.

As international military forces scale back, though, coalition military leaders continue to paint a picture of a country emerging from war, a message that has been repeated for 13 years. It is an upbeat view that some experts worry threatens

ANALYSIS

to undermine reconstruction efforts. “There is no turning back to the dark days of the past,” Gen. John Campbell said during a Dec. 28 ceremony in Kabul marking the end of a 13-year, U.S.-led combat mission. “The insurgents are losing and desperate.”

Some of the major achievements often cited by U.S. civilian and military leaders since 2001 are indeed significant, including improvements in women’s rights, education and medical care. Most notable is that the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force built a 350,000-strong Afghan security force, which is largely fighting on its own.

Despite signs of potential instability, military leaders and politicians continue to portray Afghanistan as a country making steady progress. That can have damaging consequences, experts say.

“The overly positive assessments are repeated so often that the leaders in the military and civilian world start to believe it,” said Thomas Ruttig, who served as a German diplomat and U.N. official in Afghanistan and is now co-director of

the Kabul-based Afghanistan Analysts Network. “If you don’t talk about the problems, you can’t solve the problems.”

Consistent message

What is striking is that the military’s narrative, no matter the circumstances, has remained consistent throughout the war: Afghan forces are effectively fighting insurgents, the Taliban is weakening.

But the Taliban proved so strong that President Barack Obama decided in 2009 that a massive troop surge was necessary. Even in that context, generals made bold predictions. On the eve of the surge in December 2009, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then commander of ISAF, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that in two years, the Taliban would be all but defeated.

The surge did bring limited peace to certain areas of the south, including a drop in violence in the region’s largest city, Kandahar, but the extra troops failed to quash the Taliban.

In a 2012 report, “Dereliction of Duty II,” published in the *Armed Forces Journal* and submitted to Congress, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Danny Davis severely criticized senior U.S. military leadership for “deception” that “has damaged America’s credibility among both our allies and enemies, severely limiting our ability to reach a political solution to the war in Afghanistan.”

Coalition officials reject the notion that they are glossing over problems, noting that they have acknowledged areas in the Afghan security forces, such as logistics and intelligence-sharing, that still need improvement.

“I think ISAF has been forthcoming that there are continued challenges,” Col. Brian Tribus, director of public affairs

for ISAF and now for Resolute Support, said in a December interview.

‘Borderline insane’

Based on the Pentagon’s most recent “1230” report, which tracks “progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan,” coalition officials say the level of violence is going down in the country. But aid workers who tally casualties and experts tracking the arc of the war disagree.

An annual U.N. report released Feb. 18 said there were more civilian casualties in 2014 than in any year since 2009, when it began counting. It said there were more than 3,600 noncombatant deaths and more than 6,800 injured, a sharp increase from the previous year.

A recent report from the International Committee of the Red Cross said staff had transported 37 percent more wounded and more than double the number of dead combatants from the battlefield in 2014 compared with 2013.

Tribus defended the finding that “enemy-initiated attacks” were down 25 percent in the first 11 months of 2014 compared with the year before. He said the media focuses too heavily on the negatives in Afghanistan and gives undue attention to spectacular attacks in Kabul.

Nevertheless, some experts, citing casualty numbers and their own reporting from the provinces, have come to a different conclusion.

‘Inferno is growing’

“They’re still reporting that violence is diminishing in Afghanistan in the latest 1230, which is now borderline insane,” said Graeme Smith, the International Crisis Group’s senior analyst in Afghanistan, who has spent years in the country as a

journalist and researcher.

“You’re saying the war is getting smaller, and it’s not; it’s getting a lot bigger. Policy needs to adjust to deal with the fact that the inferno is growing,” he said.

You don’t have to look very far back for security fallout from overly positive messaging about American military gains against an insurgency, said Ahmad Majidyar, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and frequent adviser to the U.S. military.

“I think it’s very dangerous, and we saw the example of that in Iraq,” he said. “They exaggerated the success of the surge (of U.S. troops), exaggerated the readiness of the Iraqi forces and exaggerated the positive political environment the United States was portraying in Iraq.”

Dec. 31 marked the end of the ISAF, the NATO-led mission tasked with battling the Taliban and bolstering faith in the fragile Kabul government. On Jan. 1, a greatly reduced force of roughly 13,000 troops shifted to a new mission, Resolute Support, which is focused primarily on training and advising but will allow troops to engage in combat only if threatened and to provide air support as it is deemed warranted.

“In the beginning, you were getting very optimistic reports from them, but the insurgency is still there and in most of the areas, you cannot conclude it has been significantly weakened,” Ruttig said.

Rhetoric about improvements in the economy, health care and other social indicators obscure looming crises, such as the massive loss of jobs that has come with international militaries and civilian organizations scaling back efforts, Ruttig said.

“There’s a lot of social dynamite piling up,” he said.

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Painkiller rules bring grief for veterans, VA

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — New federal rules that make it harder to get narcotic painkillers are taking an unexpected toll on thousands of veterans who depend on these prescription drugs to treat everything from missing limbs to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The restrictions, adopted last summer by the Drug Enforcement Administration to curb a national epidemic of opioid abuse, are for the first time, in effect, forcing veterans to return to the doctor every month to renew their medication, although many were already struggling to get appointments at overburdened Department of Veterans Affairs health facilities. Even if patients can get appointments, the new rules pose an additional hardship for many who live a good distance from the health centers.

While the tighter regulation applies to everyone on opioid painkillers, it's hitting veterans especially hard because so many are being treated for horrific injuries sustained during the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have become dependent on the VA's beleaguered health care system for medical care.

Leaders: Ukraine deal is intact

Bloomberg News

BERLIN — Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine said Thursday that the truce agreed upon last week must be enforced after a rebel offensive pushed government troops out of the strategic town of Debaltseve and leaders in Kiev called for peacekeepers.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and presidents Vladimir Putin, Francois Hollande and Petro Poroshenko “agreed to stand by the Minsk agreement despite the grave breach of the cease-fire in Debaltseve,” according to a German government statement. Ukraine wants a Europe-

an contingent to dominate any peacekeeping operation and sees Russian participation as unacceptable, Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin said in Kiev.

The continued violence after the cease-fire agreement was meant to come into force on Feb. 15 underscores the tenuous nature of the deal brokered by European leaders last week in Belarus. It also shows the difficulty Ukraine has had holding territory the rebels are intent on taking in the 10-month conflict that's killed more than 5,600 people and sent Russia's relations with the U.S. and Europe to post-Cold War lows.

The nations' leaders “agreed that concrete steps need to be taken immediately to enable a comprehensive implementation of the cease-fire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons under observation” by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the German government said in the statement after a phone call among the four leaders on Thursday.

The conversation took place after the Ukrainian army said 90 percent of its troops left Debaltseve and took up positions around the rail and highway junction linking the breakaway regions Donetsk and Luhansk.

Islamic State ties suspected in threats

Los Angeles Times

Angela Ricketts, the wife of an Army officer in Colorado, was startled by the message that popped up on her Facebook account last week.

“Dear Angela! Bloody Valentines Day!” the message began. “While your president and your husband are killing our brothers in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan we're coming for you.”

It went on: “We know everything about you, your husband and your children and we are much closer than you can imagine. You'll see no mercy infidel!”

The message was sent from an account called “CyberCaliphate.” It claimed to be on behalf of “IS,” or the Islamic State group — also known as ISIS or ISIL.

“I'd be lying if I said it didn't frighten me,” Ricketts said. “It had my full name and was very specific.”

Ricketts, the author of a memoir titled “No Man's War: Irreverent Confessions of an Infantry Wife,” was one of five military spouses who received the threatening messages. All are prominent advocates for military families who have been quoted in the news media.

Ricketts and Lori Volkman, wife of a Navy Reserve officer, said in interviews that they had spoken with the FBI, military investigators and local police. They said authorities were trying to determine who sent the messages and whether they had any contact with the Islamic State.

They provided a screen grab of a similar message apparently sent last week to First Lady Michelle Obama's public Twitter account: “Bloody Valentines Day, #MichelleObama! We're watching you, your girls, and your husband. #CyberCaliphate.”

DOD spokesman stepping down; Carter begins transition

BY JON HARPER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Rear Adm. John Kirby is stepping down as Pentagon press secretary at the behest of Ashton Carter, the new secretary of defense who was sworn in Tuesday.

Kirby, who has been in place since December 2013, confirmed his departure at a briefing Wednesday.

New defense secretaries

often change spokespersons and senior staff, but Kirby also mentioned that Carter was looking for a change in appearances as well.

Kirby said Carter was looking to “revisit the role of spokesman,” including having a civilian in the position.

“One of the questions that I think he wants to rhetorically ask and consider is not just who the individual is, but what that individual represents, and

whether it's appropriate or not to have a (person in) uniform up here,” Kirby said. “And those are fair questions for him to ask as he comes into the job.”

Although it is not unprecedented for the Pentagon's top spokesman to be in the military, the post has typically been occupied by a civilian in recent years. Military personnel are supposed to be politically neutral, in keeping with maintaining civilian control of the armed

forces. Some observers believe it's inappropriate to have a uniformed officer defending administration policies.

Typically, a new secretary of defense will bring in his own spokesman. Carter has not decided on a replacement, according to Kirby, who said he has agreed to stay on for “a couple of weeks” to help with the transition.

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Can million-dollar arms prove worthy?

The Associated Press

Max Scherzer and Jon Lester might as well have neon-green dollar signs stamped all over their uniforms and caps when Major League Baseball spring training opens this week.

Their careers were redefined this offseason when they joined MLB's elite echelon of \$100 million arms, a sweet 16 whose salaries total an even sweeter \$2.42 billion. Every game they start, and every pitch they throw, will be viewed through the prism of their incomes.

Judging by history, they had better succeed swiftly with their new teams. Wins and innings pitched are likely to dwindle with age.

Theo Epstein, the Chicago Cubs' president of baseball operations who signed Lester, likens these megadeals to a "splurge on a luxury item," MLB's equivalent of a Birkin bag or vintage Ferrari.

Is the roster candy worth it to their teams? Or merely a status symbol?

"They are difference-makers. They are special talents. Usually there are only 10 to 12 of these in the game, and they give you something that no one else has," said agent Scott Boras, who negotiated the deals for Kevin Brown, Barry Zito and Scherzer. "A lot of teams have a lot of pitchers, but few teams have a true No. 1."

Only three pitchers have won World Series rings after signing nine-figure contracts: CC Sabathia with the New York Yankees, and Zito and Matt Cain with the San Francisco Giants. The rest find their finances sated but their ambitions starved.

The \$100 million pitchers have combined to average a 12-9 record and 3.39 ERA during the first four seasons of their deals, according to STATS. During the remaining years, they fell to a 7-7 record and 4.43 ERA.

Durability decreases dramatically, with the group averaging 205 innings in first seasons, 178 by the third year, and 132 by the fifth.

Justin Verlander was 124-65 and 30 years old when he signed his big deal with Detroit in March 2013. He is 28-24 since, slowed by core muscle surgery before the 2014 season.

"I don't think that there's anyone that looks at long-term contracts for pitchers that are older, and thinks that all of them are going to be years of investment that are at the highest rate," Detroit Tigers president Dave Dombrowski said. "You expect some type of decline and adjustment that takes place."

Pitchers and catchers start workouts with World Series champion San Francisco on Thursday, and position players join five days later. Among the players making fresh starts are Pablo Sandoval and Hanley Ramirez with Boston; Matt Kemp, Justin Upton and James Shields with San Diego; and David Robertson with the Chicago White Sox.

And Alex Rodriguez returns to the New York Yankees at age 39 following his yearlong suspension.

Seeking their first championship, the Washington Nationals gave the 30-year-old Scherzer a \$210 million, seven-year contract, \$5 million shy of the record for pitchers set by the Los Angeles Dodgers' Clayton Kershaw.

The Cubs, who won their last title 17 days after the Ford's first Model T left the car factory in 1908, guaranteed \$155 million over six seasons to Lester, and included 25 hours of private jet use annually to seal the deal with the left-hander, who turned 31 last month.

Epstein weighs health history, body type, athleticism, character, work ethic, mechanics and toughness among the factors in determining whether a pitcher is worth it.

"If you sign Andy Pettitte at age 31, you would have gotten performance throughout the contract," Epstein said. "So it's just a matter of trying to sign the right guy."

Brown became MLB's first \$100 million man when he signed with the Dodgers in December 1998. He pitched Florida to the 1997 World Series title, and San Diego to the 1998 NL pennant.

Brown's deal shocked a league accustomed to escalating salaries since free agency began in 1976.

Sandy Alderson, then an executive in the commissioner's office, called it "an affront to baseball."

"I'm in mourning," said Larry Lucchino, San Diego's president at the time. "Not for the Padres, but for baseball."

Brown was 139-99 with a 3.30 ERA when he agreed to the contract and went 72-45 with a 3.23 ERA during the deal for the Dodgers and Yankees, who acquired him for the final two years. In all, the \$100 million men have averaged a 96-64 career record with a 3.46 ERA when they agreed to the contracts, then a 39-28 mark with a 3.55 ERA mark while earning the big money.

Just two of the previous 14 have losing records under their deals: Zito was 63-80 for San Francisco, and Cole Hamels has gone 17-23 for Philadelphia despite a 3.05 ERA in the first two seasons.

"For most long-term deals, you see the best return on investment in the earlier years, and typically in the last year or two, you're not getting quite the bang for the buck," Epstein said. "Inflation helps mitigate that somewhat, because by the end of your deals, salaries have escalated, the cost per win has escalated, so you're not requiring the player to do quite as much to be worth the contract at that point."

Nine of the pitchers reached their deals as free agents, and the others were within two years of free agency. Kershaw and the Yankees' Masahiro Tanaka were the youngest at 25, and Brown the oldest at 33.

Boras said the dropoff is factored in. He argues the aces are underpaid in the initial seasons.

"These players may be worth \$40, \$45 million for those three or four years," he said, "The complaint is that, 'Oh, you're going to pay for this in the latter years.' Well, the reality of it is you're not paying their true value in the early years. That's the quid pro quo."

Gearing up for spring training

The Associated Press

Washington's star-studded rotation reports to Florida. Matt Harvey continues his comeback with the New York Mets. Joe Maddon takes over the Chicago Cubs, and Russell Martin gets a closer look at Toronto's pitching staff.

While much of the Northeast and Midwest navigates bitter cold and piles of snow, spring training begins in earnest as pitchers and catchers file into camps in Florida and Arizona. World Champion San Francisco was one of four National League teams slated to begin Thursday, and most of the majors' pitchers and backstops will be in place by this weekend.

Following several massive free-agent deals and blockbuster trades, there are plenty of compelling story lines heading into baseball's first spring training since Rob Manfred took over as commissioner.

The Nationals strengthened their already solid rotation by signing free agent Max Scherzer to a \$210 million, seven-year contract. Now the pressure is on Scherzer to deliver on that big deal and help the reigning NL East champs advance deep into the playoffs for the first time since the franchise moved to Washington.

Harvey missed all of last season for his recovery from elbow ligament-replacement surgery, and got an early start on spring training by reporting to New York's facility about two weeks before the first

scheduled workout. He is hoping to be ready for opening day, but the Mets could decide on a slow and steady approach for the ace right-hander.

It's a brand new day for the Cubs when they report to Arizona after a banner offseason that included the addition of Maddon, who had a 754-705 record during his nine-year run with Tampa Bay.

Martin was one of the majors' most prized free agents over the winter, and he opted for an \$82 million, five-year contract with the Blue Jays. The three-time All-Star, who was born in Toronto and raised in Montreal, hit .290 with 11 home runs and 67 RBIs with Pittsburgh last season, helping the Pirates to a second straight playoff berth.

Here are a few more things to watch heading into spring training:

Here come the champs. The last team to win consecutive World Series was the New York Yankees from 1998-2000. The next team to take a crack at that feat is San Francisco, which beat Kansas City in seven games for the title last fall.

The good news for the Giants is they have plenty of experience when it comes to defending the title, having also won the World Series in 2010 and 2012. But they failed to make the playoffs following each of their previous two championships, slipping to a 76-86 record in 2013.

One spot to watch this spring is third base, where Casey McGehee replaces

Pablo Sandoval after the slugger signed a \$95 million, five-year deal with Boston over the winter. Madison Bumgarner returns after throwing a whopping 270 innings last year, and Matt Cain is back after he had surgery in August to remove bone chips from his right elbow.

Many happy returns. The comeback capital of the majors is New York, which has Harvey hoping to return to form, and three intriguing situations with the Yankees. Left-hander CC Sabathia is back after he missed much of last season with a degenerative cartilage problem in his right knee, and Masahiro Tanaka is looking for a healthy second season after he was limited to 20 mostly impressive starts last year due to an elbow injury.

But one of spring training's biggest stories is the return of Alex Rodriguez after the three-time AL MVP was suspended for last season for violations of baseball's drug agreement and labor contract. Rodriguez's last major league game was Sept. 25, 2013, against Tampa Bay, so no one really knows what to expect from the 39-year-old slugger.

Reds first baseman Joey Votto (left knee), Rangers first baseman Prince Fielder (neck surgery), Orioles third baseman Manny Machado (right knee surgery) and Rockies shortstop Troy Tulowitzki (left hip surgery) are among the other noteworthy comebacks to watch this spring.

Ex-Blazer Kersey dies

The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Jerome Kersey, the versatile small forward who helped the Portland Trail Blazers reach two NBA Finals and won a title with the San Antonio Spurs in 1999, died Wednesday. He was 52.

The cause of death wasn't immediately known.

A team ambassador, Kersey appeared Tuesday with fellow former Blazers Terry Porter and Brian Grant at a Portland high school in celebration of African American History Month.

Kersey averaged 10.3 points and 5.5 rebounds in 17 seasons in the NBA with Portland, Golden State, the Los Angeles Lakers, Seattle, San Antonio and Milwaukee. He helped the Blazers reach the NBA Finals in 1990 and 1992, playing alongside Porter, Clyde Drexler, Kevin Duckworth and Buck Williams.

"He was the greatest guy, the nicest friend, teammate and brother. He was loved by everyone. We will all miss him. He just cared so much," Drexler told Comcast SportsNet Northwest. "This is unbelievable."

Kersey retired from basketball in 2001.



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Duke outlasts UNC in OT

The Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Back and forth they went, trading big leads, shots and chances to win both in regulation and overtime.

And then the No. 4 Duke Blue Devils found a way to send their fierce neighborhood rivals home empty again.

Quinn Cook scored 22 points, freshman Tyus Jones matched a season high with 22 and Duke outlasted the No. 15 Tar Heels 92-90 on Wednesday night.

"It's tough for this game to always live up to the hype," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "But I think tonight's game exceeded it."

In a thriller befitting college basketball's most intense rivalry, the Blue Devils (23-3, 10-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) let an early 13-point lead slip away and trailed by 10 with less than four minutes left in regulation before rallying for their sixth straight win this season, and their ninth in 12 meetings in the series.

The three freshmen who start for Duke had their customary big games: Jones added eight assists, Justise Winslow added 16 points and Jahliil Okafor had 12 points and 13 rebounds.

Kennedy Meeks and Brice Johnson each scored 18 points to lead North Carolina (18-8, 8-5). Nate Britt pulled the Tar Heels within two with one free throw with 3.5 seconds left. He missed the second, Marcus Paige raced in and got his hands on the rebound — but Winslow grabbed it as the buzzer sounded.

No. 5 Wisconsin 55, Penn

State 47: Sam Dekker scored 22 points and Frank Kaminsky added 16 as the visiting Badgers overcame a late Nittany Lions surge.

No. 11 Northern Iowa 59,

Loyola 39: Seth Tuttle and Nate Buss each scored 10 points as the visiting Panthers won their 14th straight.

Syracuse 69, No. 12

Louisville 59: Rakeem Christmas rebounded from his worst game of the season, scoring 29 points and blocking four shots as the host Orange surprised the Cardinals.

No. 14 Iowa State 70, No.

22 Oklahoma State 65: Jameel McKay had career highs of 17 points and 14 rebounds in visiting Iowa State's win over Oklahoma State.

McKay, a 6-foot-9 forward, created problems on both ends with his leaping ability. He made 13 of 18 free throws, blocked four shots and had nine offensive rebounds.

No. 18 Arkansas 84,

Missouri 69: Michael Qualls had 21 points and the host Razorbacks beat the Tigers for their fifth straight victory and eighth in nine games.

Arizona St. 68, UCLA 66:

Savon Goodman had 20 points and 12 rebounds, Shaquille McKissic added 14 points and the Sun Devils held on to beat the visiting Bruins.

Xavier 59, Cincinnati 57:

Freshman Trevon Bluiett made two free throws with 11.5 seconds left — his only points of the game — and Xavier rallied for a win over the host Bearcats, another dramatic finish in the crosstown rivalry.

Tulsa 69, East Carolina 58: James Woodard scored 19 points to help the Golden Hurricane roll to a victory over the visiting Pirates.

Miami 76, Virginia Tech 52:

Sheldon McClellan scored 21 points, Tonye Jekiri finished with 15 points and 15 rebounds and the Hurricanes shook off a slow start to easily beat the visiting Hokies.

Colgate 84, Army 69: Luke Roh recorded his second career double-double with a career-high 25 points and 10 rebounds to help the host Raiders beat the Black Knights.

A Pat Moore three-pointer gave Colgate its largest lead of the game at 18, 56-38. Army responded with a 12-3 run to pull within 59-50 midway through the half.

Colgate's lead was cut to eight points with 2:47 left, but the Raiders outscored Army 11-4 down the stretch.

Lehigh 59, Navy 53: Kahron Ross had 14 points and six boards and Jesse Chuku added 12 and seven to lead the visiting Mountain Hawks past the Midshipmen.

Kempton had 12 points for the Mountain Hawks (14-11, 8-6 Patriot).

Worth Smith finished with 19 points, on 8-for-15 shooting, and Tilman Dunbar added 13 and six of Navy's 10 assists.

Wings top Blackhawks in shootout

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — When the Detroit Red Wings got off to a slow start, Jimmy Howard kept them in the game. When it went to a shootout, Howard closed the door.

Howard made 32 saves through overtime, and then denied Patrick Sharp on the final play of the tiebreaker, sending Detroit to a 3-2 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks on Wednesday night.

"We were fortunate. We had some guys really dig in for us, including Howie," Red Wings coach Mike Babcock said. "But we've got to be better than we were tonight."

Tomas Tatar and Gustav Nyquist scored in the tiebreaker for Detroit (32-14-10), which won for just the third time in 11 shootouts this season. Tatar also scored in regulation, and Darren Helm had a goal and an assist.

"The shootout is like roulette. You never know," Tatar said. "We don't have a good stat this year but we're glad to beat them. I don't get it, either. I'm surprised. With the skill potential we have, it's kind of weird."

Jonathan Toews put Chicago in front in the first round of the shootout, but Patrick Kane's backhand shot went off the crossbar, and Sharp was stopped by Howard on the final attempt.

"We'll take a point," Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville said. "We've had some success in the shootouts recently. Tonight, if Kaner's goes in, I would've liked our chances."

Brandon Saad and Kris Versteeg scored in regulation for Chicago (35-18-5), and Corey Crawford had 26 saves. The Blackhawks dropped to 2-0-3 on their season-high, eight-game homestand.

The Original Six rivals again played a close game that featured a solid performance by each goalie. They exchanged goals in a 39-second span of the second, and then a 43-second stretch of the third.

Oilers 4, Bruins 3 (SO): Martin Marincin, the Oilers defenseman from Slovakia, scored the lone shootout goal in the 12th round, and host Edmonton snapped a two game skid with a victory over struggling Boston.

Senators 4, Canadiens 2: Andrew Hammond made 42 saves in his first NHL start, helping host Ottawa to a win over Montreal.

Milan Michalek, Jean-Gabriel Pageau, Mark Stone and Kyle Turris, scored for the Senators. Defenseman Erik Karlsson had two assists for the fourth straight game.

Dustin Tokarski made 35 saves, and Max Pacioretty and Nathan Beaulieu had goals for the Canadiens.

Wild 3, Flames 2 (OT): Mikko Koivu scored 1:50 into overtime to give Minnesota a victory over host Calgary.

Alone in the slot, Koivu took a pass from Charlie Coyle and moved in on Jonas Hiller. Koivu put a shot over the goalie's shoulder for his ninth goal this season. Devan Dubnyk made 35 saves to improve to 11-2-1 since being acquired from Arizona.

Lightning 4, Ducks 1: Steven Stamkos capped his team's four-goal second period with his 31st of the season, and Tampa Bay stormed past host Anaheim.

Kings 4, Avalanche 1: Jeff Carter scored twice and Jonathan Quick stopped 42 shots, helping visiting Los Angeles extend its winning streak to six games with a victory over Colorado.

As NBA soars, labor trouble looms

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA is soaring higher than ever.

With a growing global reach and international players dotting most rosters, a group of marketable rising young superstars led by Stephen Curry, more competitive balance, financial stability, and an upcoming infusion of \$24 billion from a television deal, the league is bouncing beautifully.

The state of the game couldn't be much better. However, everyone knows good times can fade fast.

There's a pivotal play developing over the next few years that could threaten the thriving league again. As the movers and shakers in the pro basketball industry gathered this past weekend for All-Star festivities celebrating the league's past and present, there were watchful eyes on an uncertain future.

With players and owners able to opt out of the current collective bargaining agreement after the 2016-17 season, a labor battle looms — and players plan to be prepared.

The NBA Players Association unanimously elected LeBron James as vice president last week at its annual meeting. James' presence on the executive committee — and perhaps at the bargaining table — is a sign the union means business.

"We had a lockout before when I was in the league and our game was really good at that time, too," James told The Associated Press during the NBA's mid-season showcase. "Hopefully, we don't have to reach that point because both sides love where we're at and what we're doing."

On the surface, it's hard to find many flaws with the league's current status.

Ratings are high, the value of franchises

has exploded and Commissioner Adam Silver has taken the ball from David Stern and powered forward. Silver, who recently celebrated one year on the job, has skillfully navigated around some sticky issues, including the racial remarks made by former Clippers owner Donald Sterling that could've divided players and ended up uniting them.

Silver acted quickly in removing Sterling, and his swift punishment strengthened a relationship with players that will undoubtedly be tested in the years ahead. Those potentially crippling issues are out of sight now, and a widening international audience is tuning in to see NBA action.

"The game is bigger than ever," said James, Cleveland's star who is now in his 12th season. "The money that's generated is bigger than ever and our athletes and our guys are doing what they need to do on the floor and off it to represent the game at a high level. So hopefully we don't have to come to the point that we were in 2011-12, when we had the lockout. The process is going to get started and we don't have to come to that."

Following the 2010-11 season, owners were able to negotiate a CBA that was more in their favor, cutting the players' share of basketball-related income from 57 percent to roughly 50, costing them millions in annual salaries. That contract runs through 2021, but with the economic boost — \$2.6 billion per year — coming from the TV contract, players will fight harder for a larger portion of the pie.

Silver has listened to the players on several fronts already, and he promised last weekend to take a harder look at scheduling and reducing the number of back-to-back games and the grueling, four-games-in-five-nights stretches to help keep players — "our partners," he calls them — fresh and the product crisp. Silver, too, will consider a makeover of the playoff format so that the best teams qualify.

Silver is concerned with keeping the

game relevant amid stiff competition from other sports. It's vital to stay affordable and attractive to an aging population as well as the next generation of hoop fans. It's entertainment, after all, and Silver wants to keep the NBA in the center of the spotlight.

Silver sees other ways the NBA can increase profit margins.

He's the first commissioner of a major professional sports league in the U.S. to publicly support legalizing sports betting outside of Nevada. He wants Congress to change the federal ban on sports gambling and craft a structure that allows states to legalize and regulate betting.

On the court, the game has been pure basketball bliss.

There has been a return to team play with the Golden State Warriors and Atlanta Hawks — the conference leaders at the break — picking up where the San Antonio Spurs left off in last year's Finals when their selfless style dismantled the Miami Heat.

Teams are breaking away from isolation play and trying to copy San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich's pace-and-space system. Leading the way is a pair of Popovich's coaching protégés, Golden State's Steve Kerr and Atlanta's Mike Budenholzer, whose emphasis on ball movement is spreading rapidly.

"Five guys touching the ball and playing defense together," Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins said. "It's the way basketball was meant to be played."

The hope, for now, is that the togetherness continues, but both sides sense a bigger game coming off the court in 2017.

"We'll take care of that once we get there," reigning MVP Kevin Durant said. "We're preparing now for anything."