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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Top weapons tester gives F-35 an 'F'

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon's top weapons tester has condemned aspects of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program in a new report, raising questions about the \$1.5 trillion effort's ability to meet its already-slipped production schedule, to synthesize information on the battlefield and to keep aircraft available to fly.

The 82-page report was distributed to Congress last month and was released publicly this week. It was completed by Michael Gilmore, the Pentagon's director of operational test and evaluation. He reports directly to Defense Secretary Ash Carter and carries out independent assessments for both Carter and members of Congress.

The report raises serious questions about whether the Pentagon should initiate a three-

year "block buy" of up to 450 fighter jets beginning in 2018, something that was floated last year in the Defense Department as a way to save money. Doing so would drive down the cost of each single-seat, single-engine aircraft and would increase fielding of the jet to both the U.S. military and international partners like Australia and Britain, defense officials said.

"Depending on the timing, it is possible a commitment to the 'block buy' would be made before operational testing is complete," the report said. It added that there are still "significant discoveries requiring correction before F-35s are used in combat," and questioned whether buying a large number of aircraft so soon would motivate the prime contractor, Lockheed Martin, to "correct an already substantial list of deficiencies in performance, a list that

will only lengthen as ... testing continues."

The top officer leading the F-35 program, Air Force Lt. Gen. Chris Bogdan, said in a two-page response that everything in Gilmore's report is accurate, but that it "does not fully address efforts to resolve known technical challenges and schedule risks." It's the F-35 joint program office's job to do so, Bogdan said.

"As a reminder, the F-35 program is still in its developmental phase. This is the time when issues are expected to be discovered and solutions are implemented to maximize the F-35's capability for the warfighter," the general said. "While the developmental program is 80 percent complete, we recognize there are known deficiencies that must be corrected and there remains the potential for future findings. Our commit-

ment to overcoming challenges is unwavering."

The F-35 program currently calls for the fielding of 1,763 aircraft to the Air Force, 680 to the Navy and Marine Corps, 138 to Great Britain, 100 each to Australia and Turkey, 60 to Italy, 37 to the Netherlands, 52 to Norway and 30 to Denmark, according to figures released by Lockheed Martin. The majority of those are conventional F-35A models, with the Marine Corps buying a short-takeoff version known as the F-35B and the Navy buying a version for aircraft carriers known as the F-35C.

Gilmore's report found analysis of the fleet of F-35s that have been fielded between August 2012 and October 2015 "showed a weak rate of improvement of approximately 5 percent growth per year," but noted it was not consistent on a month-to-month basis.

Clock ticking for sailors, Marines to become pregnant

The (Norfolk, Va.) Virginian-Pilot

The clock is ticking for sailors to become pregnant if they want 18 weeks of maternity leave with little doubt they conceived before the most generous leave policy in the military expires later this month.

The Navy hasn't issued guidance on how sailors will prove they were pregnant before the end of February, the cutoff point for a Defense Department policy issued last week that reduces maternity leave from 18 weeks to 12 for sailors and Marines in an effort to create a uniform leave policy across the services.

Typically, Navy doctors estimate a conception date during the first trimester, said Rebecca Perron, a Portsmouth Naval Medical Center spokeswoman.

She said that estimate usually covers a week, with pregnancy possible three days before or after the date doctors estimate.

The new Defense Department policy could provide an incentive for couples to be more intimate this Valentine's Day and creates the possibility of a surge in births in Navy communities this fall. That's something the Portsmouth Naval Medical Center is prepared for — and used to — if it happens. The hospital routinely adjusts staffing for a surge in births, such as nine months following the return of an aircraft carrier strike group from deployment, Perron said.

Under Defense Secretary Ash Carter's order, all branches of the military will be granted 12

weeks of maternity leave. That's double what the Army and Air Force had offered but six weeks less than what the Navy and Marines had been providing since July. On Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson also doubled the Coast Guard's maternity leave from six weeks to 12 to keep in step with the Defense Department.

Carter said during a news conference announcing the changes that sailors and Marines who were already pregnant or those who become pregnant within 30 days of the policy's enactment will still be entitled to 18 weeks, although he didn't specify when that enactment will be.

Defense Department spokesman Matthew Allen said in an email to *The Virginian-Pilot* this week that Carter signed the

policy Jan. 29, and the "maternity leave window is 18 weeks for 30 days after that date."

Figures weren't readily available for how many women have taken advantage of the 18 weeks of maternity leave since Navy Secretary Ray Mabus announced the policy change for the Navy and the Marines in July. There are more than 60,000 women in the Navy, constituting about 16 percent of the force.

Mabus said at the time that anyone who had given birth in 2015 would be entitled to 18 weeks of leave, even if they already had returned to work. Mabus extended maternity leave for women from six weeks to 18 weeks as a way to retain top performers.

Nicholson confirmed to lead in Afghanistan

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lt. Gen. John “Mick” Nicholson will be the new commander of United States forces in Afghanistan following a quick confirmation vote in the Senate on Thursday.

Nicholson, who has advocated an enduring presence in Afghanistan, is taking over for Gen. John Campbell at a time of great concern over stability and resurgent attacks by the Taliban and al-Qaida, as well as a growing threat from the Islamic State group. The new commander likely will play a key role in determining how many U.S. troops remain in the country, which is again under review by President Barack Obama’s administration.

The Afghanistan war — the longest in American history — was officially ended in 2014 and

Obama had hoped to withdraw to a small embassy presence, but instead planned to keep 9,800 troops in the country through the end of 2016 to help the Afghan government stabilize itself. Spikes in violence, such as the recent Taliban seizure of Kunduz, and warnings from Campbell that 2016 could see more enemy activity are testing that revised plan.

“Gen. Nicholson’s leadership is urgently needed at a time of complex challenges to the security and stability in Afghanistan,” said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee that vetted the general. “I encourage him to do what is necessary to empower American troops and our allied partners to confront a diverse array of terrorist threats in the region and sustain our hard-fought gains.”

US preparing for possible aid air drops over Syria

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is preparing for possible air drops of humanitarian relief over besieged areas of Syria, where hundreds of thousands of people have been cut off for months from food and medicine and are at risk of starvation.

Administration officials emphasized that air-dropped relief is only in the planning stages and has not yet been approved. But U.S. forces, who have conducted similar operations in northern Iraq and Syria, could move within days to implement a decision.

U.S. and coalition aircraft began bombing Islamic State-held areas elsewhere in Syria 18 months ago. But approval of the air-drop plan, while a non-combat operation, would mark the first time American planes

have flown directly into the contested areas of Syria’s civil war.

Consideration of the effort comes as a blizzard of Russian airstrikes in and around the city of Aleppo this week have cut rebel and humanitarian supply lines from Turkey. United Nations efforts to deliver relief on the ground to besieged areas have been slowed to a trickle. U.N.-led peace talks, including a cease-fire, were suspended Wednesday in Geneva.

Russia’s foreign ministry said Thursday that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry, during telephone conversations this week, had “agreed to coordinate possible measures to deliver humanitarian aid to the appropriate districts of Syria by air, using military-transport aircraft.”

Navy could kick out Ex-USS Anzio skipper

The (Norfolk, Va.) Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK, Va. — The former commanding officer of the USS Anzio could be kicked out of the Navy for sexual harassment, abusive sexual contact and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman after a night of heavy drinking with his crew while he was in charge of the guided missile cruiser.

Officials relieved Capt. Brian K. Sorenson of command in September following a preliminary investigation into the misconduct allegations. On Thursday, the Navy released the final 126-page report in a response to a Freedom of Information Act request by *The Virginian-Pilot*.

Investigators found that Sorenson was drunk in public, used alcohol and had personal firearms aboard the Anzio, created a hostile work environment, used indecent language, sexually harassed female officers and misused government vehicles.

The Navy said Rear Adm. Bret Batchelder, commander of Carrier Strike Group Eight,

took Sorenson to an administrative admiral’s mast Jan. 4 instead of bringing criminal charges.

The Navy said Batchelder requested Sorenson be detached for cause and that he also be made to show why he should stay in the Navy, one of the strongest administrative measures used in the case of officers.

If the commander of Navy Personnel Command accepts Batchelder’s recommendations, he could direct a board of inquiry to recommend whether Sorenson should be separated. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus ultimately will determine whether Sorenson remains in the Navy and, if not, at what pay grade he’ll retire.

“Capt. Sorenson has an exemplary service record and has provided 25 years of outstanding Naval service to our country. We look forward to this legal process, which will provide a forum for the truth to prevail,” Sorenson’s civilian attorney, Greg McCormack, said in an emailed statement.

Police: Fort Bragg soldier forced into prostitution

The Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer

From August until December, police say, a Fayetteville, N.C., man forced a 19-year-old Fort Bragg soldier into prostitution.

The man charged with exploiting the soldier, Jibri Qandel Thomas, turned himself in to Fayetteville detectives on Jan. 11.

He faces several state and federal charges related to prostitution and human trafficking.

Fayetteville police said he forced the soldier into prostitution between August and De-

ember of last year. The soldier was living in barracks on Fort Bragg at the time.

When first arrested, Thomas, 23, was charged with promoting and advancing prostitution.

Three days later, while still in the Cumberland County Detention Center, he was charged with human trafficking.

Both crimes are related to Thomas’ exploitation of the soldier, according to police.

Law enforcement alleges that Thomas is a suspect in other human trafficking cases on the East Coast.

Broncos' gamble paying off

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — It's hard to know who took the bigger risk when the Denver Broncos hired Gary Kubiak as head coach.

Was it the Broncos, who were hiring a coach with recent health problems and a penchant for not making the most of available talent?

Or was it the Kubiak, who signed on with a team that had just fired a coach with a winning record because he came short of the only goal that mattered — capturing the Super Bowl?

The coach, hired by his loyal friend and Denver general manager John Elway, changed his ways, in part because he couldn't keep up the pace that caused him to have a mini-stroke while he was coaching the Houston Texans.

The team, now built on defense and nowhere near as dependent on veteran quarterback Peyton Manning, is a win away from its first title in 17 years.

"The hot seat Gary stepped into was hotter than any seat in the league," Elway said.

Elway said he recognized the coach Kubiak might be someday from the time they both joined the Broncos, after the 1983 draft. The two quarterbacks were roommates, who talked a lot of football in between the endless loop of "Andy

Griffith" and "Gilligan's Island" reruns on their TV.

"Very bright, a very hard worker, a great offensive mind," Elway said.

All that said, this was a hiring that only made sense in Denver.

The Broncos had parted ways with John Fox, who went 49-22 and took the team to four straight playoff appearances, only to flop big-time in season finales. Denver was outscored 150-66 in those four games.

Kubiak, meanwhile, could've been easily perceived as damaged goods. Not so much because of the health scare that marred the last of his eight seasons with the Texans — or even the 11-game losing streak in 2013 that led to his dismissal.

There were just as many questions about 2011 and 2012, when Houston was loaded and started the season with Super Bowl expectations, but struggled at the end, losing three straight to close out 2011 and three of four in 2012, en route to early playoff exits.

"Did I think I would get another opportunity? I don't know," Kubiak said. "But I knew I loved the work."

To do it, though, he would have to change. He'd have to delegate more. The scene on the field during a November 2013 game against Indianapolis — Kubiak collapsed and was taken off on a stretcher — made clear how the stress had taken its toll.

"I ran myself into the ground," Kubiak said.

Instead of taking a year off, Kubiak became offensive coordinator at Baltimore, and then the Broncos made their move.

Elway wanted teams that, even if they lost, would go down "kicking and screaming." It was the way he played. Nobody understood that better than Kubiak, who backed him up for nine years, then worked with him as Denver's offensive coordinator for four more, including when the Broncos won Super Bowls in 1998 and '99.

Kubiak's first delicate task was to build an offense that would mesh his style with what was comfortable for Manning. It wasn't perfect. The last four of Manning's career-high 17 interceptions came on a day in which the quarterback shouldn't have been playing because of an ever-worsening foot injury. Kubiak had pulled Manning from the game, then took the blame for letting the quarterback talk him into playing.

Manning spent six weeks on the bench and was replaced by Brock Osweiler, who performed strongly until giving up five turnovers in the last game of the regular season.

Manning returned and the Broncos played defense-first, ball-control football in the playoffs. They won two close games, and find themselves one win away from the title they crave.

Manziel's ex-girlfriend tells police he hit her

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Johnny Manziel's ex-girlfriend told police the Cleveland Browns quarterback hit her during an argument last weekend and said he appeared to be on drugs, according to a police report released Thursday.

The report released by Fort Worth police provides the first details of the altercation that took place Saturday between Manziel and Colleen Crowley. Manziel is being investigated for a possible assault on Crowley. He has not been arrested.

Crowley told police that Manziel was "aggressive" toward her after they were out with friends at the Zaza Hotel in Dallas. She said he struck her, including once in the left ear, before they drove back to her Fort Worth apartment.

Crowley said Manziel, the 2012 Heisman Trophy winner as college football's top player, struck her several times on the trip to Fort Worth. According to the police report, Crowley was "somewhat vague on the details of the assault."

Crowley said she later fled her apartment and ran to a neighbor's for help in an attempt to get away from Manziel, who fled the scene on foot.

After Crowley informed police she was concerned for Manziel's well-being, they used a helicopter to try to locate the 23-year-old. Police also tried calling both Manziel and his parents, who could not be reached. An officer finally contacted Manziel's father, Paul, who said he had seen his son and that "he was doing fine."

The police blacked out several details in their report.

BMX rider, X Games star Mirra commits suicide

GREENVILLE, N.C. — Police say veteran X Games biker Dave Mirra has died in North Carolina. He was 41.

Greenville police said Thursday night that Mirra's body was found earlier in the day with an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Authorities say they responded to an apparent suicide and discovered his body in a truck. They say he had been visiting friends in the area.

Mayor Allen Thomas called Mirra "a great friend and wonderful human being."

Mirra was an accomplished BMX rider and one of the most decorated athletes in X Games history, medaling every year from 1995 to 2008 and winning 14 gold medals. His one-time record of 24 career medals was broken in 2013 by Bob Burnquist.

He also hosted MTV's "Real World/Road Rules Challenge" and two video games carried his name.

Louisville self-imposes postseason ban

Associated Press

Signing day went much like this past SLOUISVILLE, Ky. — Louisville has announced a postseason ban for its men's basketball team amid ongoing investigations into a sex scandal in which an escort alleged that a former staffer paid her and other dancers to strip and have sex with recruits and players.

University President James Ramsey said Friday at a press conference that an athletic department investigation has revealed that some violations did occur. Ramsey said the ban is for the NCAA Tournament and the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament.

Athletic director Tom Jurich and men's basketball coach Rick Pitino also attended the press conference.

The Cardinals (18-4, 7-2 ACC) are currently ranked No. 19 and scheduled to play Boston College on Saturday. They would have been a lock for a tournament berth if they had not won the league title.

The 63-year-old Pitino has denied knowledge of allegations in a book by Katina Powell that former director of men's basketball operations Andre McGee paid \$10,000 for 22 shows performed by her and other strippers, including three of her daughters.

Powell's allegations in her tell-all book rocked the Louisville community and led to four separate investigations into Pitino's program.

Louisville notified the NCAA about the al-

legations in late August and immediately launched its own investigation. The athletic department hired former NCAA investigator Chuck Smrt of The Compliance Group to look into the allegations.

Within a week following the book's initial release, campus police chief Wayne Hall announced that his department would work with Louisville Metro Police and the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office to review the allegations for possible criminal conduct. The University of Louisville Foundation announced the hiring of a law firm to review the allegations two days later.

Powell's book, "Breaking Cardinal Rules: Basketball and the Escort Queen" was released online Oct. 3 and in hardcover 17 days later. On Oct. 20, Powell said in interviews with ESPN's "Outside The Lines" that she had no proof that Pitino knew about the shows that took place in the players' Billy Minardi Hall dormitory from 2010-14.

But Powell said that with "a boatload" of recruits and dancers, "loud music, alcohol, security, cameras" in a campus dormitory, "how could Rick not know?"

The NCAA hasn't accepted coaches' explanations that they didn't know about violations or illegal activities. The sports governing body has at times viewed ignorance as a sign of lack of institutional control in penalizing programs.

College athletics' governing body has recently cited Hall of Famers such as Syracuse's Jim Boeheim and SMU's Larry Brown, suspending both coaches nine

games each for violations they contended occurred outside of their view.

Powell has said many of the shows took place in the players' Billy Minardi Hall dormitory, which Pitino named after his late brother-in-law who was killed in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

Powell wrote that McGee paid her \$10,000 plus tips during that period for her and dancers to strip and have sex with Louisville recruits and some of their fathers, along with some Cardinals players.

Pitino said McGee denied the allegations when brought to his attention in August, and he said other assistants weren't aware of the activities described in the 104-page book.

As successful as the defense-minded Pitino has been at winning college basketball games, he has also been at the center of some embarrassing episodes of sexual misconduct.

The first occurred in 2010 when Karen Sypher, the ex-wife of former assistant Tim Sypher, was convicted of trying to extort money from Pitino to keep secret their 2003 tryst on a restaurant table. She is serving a seven-year sentence for the crime in a Florida prison.

Last February, Pitino dismissed senior guard Chris Jones from the team just before his arrest for rape and sodomy of two women in a campus dorm. A grand jury declined to indict Jones and two other men in the incident.



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Ovechkin leads Caps by Isles

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Braden Holtby began feeling like he was playing the first game after a summer off, and Alex Ovechkin needed a few shifts to get back into a rhythm. Once they got going, the Washington Capitals were back to normal.

Ovechkin scored the winning goal in his return from a one-game suspension and Holtby made several key saves on a late penalty kill as the NHL-best Capitals beat the New York Islanders 3-2 on Thursday night.

"With both those not going, it tends to be a recipe for disaster," Capitals right winger T.J. Oshie said. "Getting those two guys back is huge. I think tonight everyone was going, so it was good to see."

Neither player had participated in a regular-season game in more than a week because of the All-Star break. Holtby got a rest Tuesday against the Florida Panthers, while Ovechkin was suspended for skipping the All-Star Game because of an injury.

Those players got off to a slow start against the Islanders, but put together a heck of a finish with Holtby slamming the door and Ovechkin scoring on a one-timer with 2:40 left.

"Obviously it feels a little bit hard in the first period," Ovechkin said. "Practicing is one thing, but when you're playing, it's a totally different thing, a different level. It was a little bit hard, but at the end, I just kept rolling and we did our job."

Ovechkin's 29th of the season followed goals by Oshie and Andre Burakovsky as Washington avoided what would have been its first three-game skid. The Capitals still haven't lost consecutive games in regulation, something Ovechkin credited to the team's mentality.

That mentality could have been shaken after a snowstorm and the All-Star break threw off the Capitals' schedule. A 5-2 loss to the Panthers without Ovechkin

and Holtby wasn't pretty.

But instead of letting things snowball, the Capitals matched the Islanders' intensity in a game that had intensity reminiscent of their playoff series last spring. There was jawing back and forth, some extra pushing and shoving and some big hits.

"It was a great game to play in. We did a lot of good things, the intensity's high," said New York captain John Tavares, who was leveled by Washington defenseman Matt Niskanen in the third period. "It was tight, not too many power plays, physical, (the) teams were skating well."

Mikhail Grabovski scored against one of his former teams, and Josh Bailey also had a goal for the Islanders, who got 20 saves from Jaroslav Halak. At the other end of the ice, Holtby stopped 24 of the 26 shots he faced for his league-leading 31st win of the season.

It was the Islanders' first trip back at Verizon Center since Game 7 of the first-round series in April. Coach Jack Capuano was proud of his team's play, but not the result.

"One of the best games we've played in this building and still come away with no points," Capuano said. "Hard-fought game, it's tough to come away with nothing."

A lot of opponents have left Washington with zero points this season, as the Capitals improved to 19-4-2 at home. This one was thanks to their captain and leading goal scorer, who found plenty of open space in the high slot for Nicklas Backstrom to dish the puck to him with the game on the line.

Ovechkin made it count.

"He's a goal scorer," Holtby said of Ovechkin. "That's what we need him to do. He came through in the right time. That's the way our team is, is every guy has their role and everyone seems to be doing it. That's Ovi's role, and he did it tonight."

Panthers 6, Red Wings 3: Vincent Trocheck scored twice and added an

assist, and Jaromir Jagr had a goal and two assists in host Florida's victory over Detroit.

Blackhawks 5, Coyotes 4 (OT): Jonathan Toews scored his second goal of the night in overtime in his return from a one-game suspension, lifting visiting Chicago over Arizona.

Ducks 4, Kings 2: David Perron had a goal and two assists, and Ryan Getzlaf added a goal and his 500th career assist to help streaking Anaheim defeat host Los Angeles.

Sharks 3, Blues 1: Joonas Donskoi and Joe Thornton scored in the second period, Martin Jones made 26 saves and visiting San Jose beat St. Louis.

Bruins 3, Sabres 2 (SO): Ryan Spooner scored in regulation and the shootout to lead visiting Boston over Buffalo.

Rangers 4, Wild 2: Derick Brassard set up the tying goal and scored the game-winner early in the third period as host New York rallied from a two-goal deficit to beat struggling Minnesota.

Stars 4, Avalanche 3 (OT): John Klingberg scored 35 seconds into overtime, Antti Niemi stopped a pivotal penalty shot in the third period and visiting Dallas snapped an eight-game skid against Colorado.

Maple Leafs 3, Devils 2 (SO): P.A. Parenteau's shootout goal lifted host Toronto over New Jersey, giving coach Mike Babcock a reason to celebrate his 1,000th NHL game.

Oilers 7, Senators 2: Jordan Eberle scored twice and added an assist to help visiting Edmonton open its four-game road trip with a victory over Ottawa.

Flyers 6, Predators 3: Wayne Simmonds had two goals and an assist, and Claude Giroux also scored twice to lead visiting Philadelphia past Nashville.

Blue Jackets 2, Canucks 1 (SO): Alex Wennberg scored the only goal in a shootout to lift visiting Columbus over Vancouver.

Vanderbilt knocks off Texas A&M

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Vanderbilt was tired of the constant criticism.

So the Commodores took it out on No. 8 Texas A&M as Jeff Roberson scored a career-high 20 points, leading Vanderbilt to a 77-60 upset of the Aggies for its first win over a ranked team in four years on Thursday night.

"I'm very disappointed that (my players) have had to listen to and hear and probably unnecessarily read a lot of the negativity that's been said about us and I'm happy they had a night like tonight," Commodores coach Kevin Stallings said. "Maybe there were some clearing of minds and clearing of hearts this week. We played like a basketball team that was hungry, we played like a basketball team that was together."

The Commodores created high expectations after starting the season ranked 18th, but they dropped out of the top 25 and lost five of their previous nine games.

Vanderbilt (13-9, 5-4 SEC) had lost its previous 13 games against ranked opponents, including six this season.

Vanderbilt's last win over a ranked opponent was in 2012 when it upset No. 1 Kentucky in the Southeastern Conference tournament final.

"Just trying to stay engaged," said Roberson, who hit 8 of 10 from the floor before fouling out with 1:05 left. "I knew if I kept playing hard Wade (Baldwin IV) would find me and things like that."

Texas A&M (18-4, 7-2) lost for the second time in three games, including a 74-71 defeat at Arkansas on Jan. 27.

Four Commodores broke into double figures, including Baldwin with 17 points, Luke Kornet with 14 points, Damian Jones with 13.

No. 16 Oregon 76, Colorado 56: Elgin Cook scored 18 points and Chris Boucher had 12 rebounds and blocked six shots to lead the Ducks past the visiting Buffaloes.

Tyler Dorsey added 13 points and Dwayne Benjamin had 11 for Oregon (19-4, 8-2 Pac-12), which won their fifth straight and 21st consecutive home game for the second-longest streak in school history.

Josh Scott led Colorado (18-5, 7-3) with 17 points, and George King had 16 and eight rebounds. Colorado had a 42-38 advantage on the boards.

The Ducks avenged a 91-87 loss to the Buffaloes on the road last month.

Southern California 77, UCLA 61: Julian Jacobs scored 17 points and the Trojans led all the way to beat UCLA for their 14th consecutive home victory that moved them into a tie for second in the Pac-12.

Elijah Stewart added 16 points and Katin Reinhardt had 13 for USC (18-5, 7-3), which tied idle Washington in the standings. The Trojans equaled the second-longest home winning streak in school history and are off to their best start since 1991-92, when they were 18-4.

Aaron Holiday led UCLA with 15 points before fouling out in the closing seconds. Tony Parker added 13 points and Thomas Welsh had 12 rebounds for the Bruins (13-10, 4-6), who have lost three of their last four. They shot a season-low 35 percent.

UCLA made one run late in the second half, scoring seven straight points to get to 62-56. Bryce Alford had a three-pointer and a free throw after Chimezie Metu received a technical for grabbing the rim, and Isaac Hamilton hit a three. Alford was held to 10 points on 3-for-13 shooting.

Bryant helps Lakers win second in row

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Kobe Bryant kept his right arm extended upward, his hand dangling as he held his follow-through on a three-point shot with a minute to go.

The shot went down, the Lakers led by six, and Bryant wagged his index finger as he made his way back up the court with a good portion of the crowd cheering wildly.

Maintaining the vintage form he recaptured in a victory earlier this week, Bryant had 27 points and 12 rebounds, hitting three pivotal three-pointers in the final 6:05, and the Los Angeles Lakers won their second straight, 99-96 over the New Orleans Pelicans on Thursday night.

"It was really special to be able to play in front of this crowd," Bryant said when asked about hearing his clutch shots cheered on the road. "It makes me feel great. It makes me feel like all the hard work I put in through the years has been worth it."

Bryant, who plans to retire after the season, noted that he'd even met a child on the sidelines named Kobe, and seemed gratified to have added such a moment to his farewell tour.

Bryant's missed free throw with 6 seconds left provided the Pelicans a chance to tie the game with a three, but Jrue Holiday's shot missed as time expired.

There were smatterings of purple and gold throughout the stands — only a small minority of it LSU gear. Lakers fans who wanted to honor Bryant in his final season showed up and made themselves heard with cheers that filled the arena each time Bryant checked into the game and when he hit shots. At one point in the first half, an "M-V-P!" chant broke out with Bryant on the foul line.

The cheers that erupted after his late baskets seemed somewhat bizarre, given that they spoiled the home team's frantic attempt to come back from a 12-point, fourth-quarter deficit.

Anthony Davis had 39 points and 11 rebounds for the Pelicans, but his missed breakaway dunk in the fourth quarter — after which he briefly pulled his jersey over his face in embarrassment — seemed to define the night for New Orleans, which lost its third straight.

The Pelicans missed a couple of dunks among a number of misses from short range. They also missed 12 of 26 free throws.

Pistons 111, Knicks 105: Anthony Tolliver and Reggie Jackson made a trio of big three-pointers late in the fourth quarter, and Detroit avoided a colossal collapse, beating visiting New York.

The Knicks rallied from a 27-point second-quarter deficit, taking a 97-95 lead on a layup by Robin Lopez. Tolliver's three-

pointer put the Pistons back ahead, and Jackson added another to make it 101-97. After a dunk by Lopez cut the margin back to two, Jackson added another three-pointer, and the Pistons were able to hold on.

Lopez had 26 points and 16 rebounds for New York, which lost for the seventh time in eight games.

Rockets 111, Suns 105: Corey Brewer scored 24 points and Trevor Ariza 22 to lead Houston past host Phoenix.

The Rockets won despite a 4-for-19 shooting night by James Harden, who finished with 17 points, more than 10 under his average. Dwight Howard grabbed 16 rebounds in the 200th meeting between the teams.

Archie Goodwin led the Suns with 22 points, while Alex Len added 12 with a career-high 18 rebounds as Phoenix lost its sixth straight.

Raptors 110, Trail Blazers 103: Kyle Lowry had 30 points, DeMar DeRozan added 29 and visiting Toronto snapped Portland's five-game winning streak.

The Raptors, who have lost only one of their last 14 games, extended their lead to 94-81 on Lowry's three with 6:52 left in the game. Toronto made 12 of 19 three-point attempts in the game, with Lowry scoring seven of them to match his season high.