

STARS AND STRIPES®

Sunday, March 15, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

7 Marines killed in Fla. helo crash named

The Associated Press

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. — The Black Hawk helicopter that crashed in dense fog during a training mission in Florida was carrying seven special operations Marines based in North Carolina, along with four National Guard soldiers from Louisiana. All were killed.

Military officials on Friday released the names of the Marines killed. All were from the 2nd Special Operations Battalion of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command at Camp Lejeune.

Here are their stories:

■ **Staff Sgt. Andrew Seif.** On March 6, just days before the helicopter crash, Seif was awarded the Silver Star Medal for facing enemy fire to save a mortally wounded friend in Afghanistan in July 2012.

The Camp Lejeune Globe reported that Seif, born in Fairbanks, Alaska, lived in Holland, Mich. He grew up playing soldier in his backyard and joined the Marines just weeks after graduating from high school.

By 2012, he was a critical-skills operator with the 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalion, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command. Seif and his team-

mate, Sgt. Justin Hansen, were closing in on one of western Afghanistan's bomb experts, according to the paper. They came under fire, and Hansen was hit. Seif moved Hansen to a safer position, treated his teammate's wounds and returned fire.

"The fact that [Seif] continued to fight through the objective to get Sgt. Hansen taken care of, putting himself in the line of fire, speaks volumes to who he is and demonstrates that he would never leave a Marine behind," said Maj. Gen. Joseph L. Osterman.

■ **Staff Sgt. Trevor Blaylock.** Born in Lake Orion, Mich., Blaylock swam on the varsity swim team. Upon graduation, he attended Henry Ford Community College.

In 2006, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and was previously stationed at Camp Pendleton in California.

He served in Operation Iraqi Freedom in Al Anbar province.

■ **Master Sgt. Thomas Saunders.** Saunders was born in Bonn, Germany, and enlisted in the Marines after graduating from high school in Virginia. Following basic training in 1999, he was assigned to Camp Lejeune.

He deployed in Kosovo and

served in Operation Iraqi Freedom with a special operations task force.

■ **Staff Sgt. Liam A. Flynn.** Born in Reading, England, Flynn moved to Queens, N.Y., in 2002.

He enlisted in the Marine Corps that year. After boot camp, he was assigned to Camp LeJeune.

He served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

■ **Capt. Stanford Henry Shaw III.** Shaw was from Basking Ridge, N.J., and attended Ridge High School, where he was student government president and captain of the varsity lacrosse team.

He attended the United States Naval Academy and upon his graduation in 2006 became a commissioned Marine officer. After graduating from the infantry officer course, he was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

He served two tours of duty in Iraq, according to information provided by the Marines at Camp Lejeune.

■ **Staff Sgt. Marcus Bawol.** From Warren, Mich., Bawol, 27, "loved everything about the military," said his sister, Brandy Peek. "He couldn't wait to join," she said. "He wanted to fight

for our country and was always striving to be the best Marine he could be."

He graduated in 2006 from Warren Mott High School. Bawol played baseball and football and was a member of the school's swim team, according to district Superintendent Robert Livernois.

Bawol attended Olivet College for a year, where he was a catcher on the baseball team.

He had planned to marry his fiancée in October, Peek said.

■ **Staff Sgt. Kerry Kemp.** Kemp was the proud father of a baby just shy of her first birthday, and he loved horsing around with his nephews.

"He would wrestle with them," said his sister-in-law, Lora Waraksa. "He really got into that, the wrestling and playing. He'd carry them around on his back."

He was a "proud Marine, a loving husband and most wonderful father," she said. He also loved golfing and the ocean — he often took his nephews out to hunt for sea shells.

Born in Memphis, Tenn., Kemp met his wife, Jenna, at Port Washington High School in Wisconsin, where he was voted "best smile" by his senior class in 2005.

Marine slain by friendly fire in Vietnam to get medal

Stars and Stripes

A Marine who was one of three killed when their helicopter was shot down by friendly fire during the Vietnam War will soon be awarded a Purple Heart, culminating a decadeslong effort by the only survivor to secure the recognition for his crewmates, *The New York Times* reported Saturday.

Dan Jones, a Marine first lieutenant in 1968, was co-piloting the helicopter, which was carrying supplies to troops, when it was shot down accidentally by an American howitzer. The howitzer had been "fir-

ing continuous rounds in support of heavily engaged Marines," according to an affidavit written last year by Capt. James T. Butler, another pilot from the squadron, who investigated the crash, the *Times* reported.

Jones was informed while recovering from severe injuries that his three dead crewmates — 1st Lt. Glenn J. Zamorski, who was in command on the flight; Sgt. Raymond W. Templeton, the crew chief; and Cpl. Conrad Lerman, who was manning a .50-caliber machine gun — would not be awarded Purple Heart medals, the *Times* reported. Jones twice asked the Marines to

issue the medals for his dead comrades, but was told that victims of "friendly fire" were excluded.

But last year, George Ross, another fellow pilot from the squadron, called Jones after submitting documents to the Marine Corps to tell him the entire crew would be awarded Purple Hearts.

Jones and two of his crew have since been awarded the medal, the *Times* reported. Lerman's medal is likely to be presented during a family reunion in the summer, the *Times* quoted Maj. Rob Dolan, a Marine Corps spokesman, as saying.

Medal recipient Meyer, Bristol Palin engaged

San Antonio Express-News

Dakota Meyer, the Marine Corps' first living Medal of Honor recipient since the Vietnam War, announced Saturday that he is engaged to Bristol Palin.

"I always heard people say 'when you meet the right one, you'll know,'" Meyer wrote on his Facebook page under the headline "Engaged!" "I never understood that until now."

Famous for drinking a beer with President Barack Obama, Meyer posted a Facebook notice early Saturday about the engagement with Palin, daughter of former Alaska governor

and GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, writing, "I'm definitely the luckiest guy ever to be able to spend the rest of my life with @bsmp2 #shesaidyes."

Meyer, who hails from Columbia, Ky., was in Las Vegas as the weekend began and could not be reached. His father, who is with him, said he was racing.

Bristol Palin wrote that the two met filming on set of "Amazing America" and have flown back and forth from Alaska to Kentucky to see each other since. She said Meyer proposed Friday at a Rascal

Flatts concert following the band dedicating a song to the couple.

"It's amazing to see what happens when you place everything in life in God's hands," Palin wrote. "He really is good and His plans are so much greater than our own."

Meyer has been active on social media since announcing in 2013 his intentions to run for Congress in 2016. Many of his posts of late relate to veterans issues, gun rights and radical Islam.

Obama presented him with the Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony.

His grandfather, Dwight Meyer, 84, said Meyer popped the question Friday night. He didn't know details of how it happened.

"He asked her to marry him last night," he said. "I think it's fine. I'm happy. He'd been going with her and he just asked her, wanted Bristol for his wife so he asked her last night and she accepted."

Dozens of Facebook friends liked the announcement and weighed in with their good wishes.

"So rad," one man wrote.

Stars and Stripes reporter James Kimber contributed to this report.

Iraqi Kurds: Islamic State used chemical weapons

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Kurdish authorities in Iraq said Saturday they have evidence that the Islamic State group used chlorine gas as a chemical weapon against peshmerga fighters, the latest alleged atrocity carried out by the extremist organization now under attack in Tikrit.

The allegation by the Kurdistan Region Security Council, stemming from a Jan. 23 suicide truck bomb attack in northern Iraq, did not immediately draw a reaction from the Islamic State group, which holds a third of Iraq and neighboring Syria in its self-declared

caliphate. However, Iraqi officials and Kurds fighting in Syria have made similar allegations about the militants using the low-grade chemical weapons against them.

In a statement, the council said the alleged chemical attack took place on a road between Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, and the Syrian border, as peshmerga forces fought to seize a vital supply line used by the Sunni militants. It said its fighters later found "around 20 gas canisters" that had been loaded onto the truck involved in the attack.

Cyclone Pam leaves Vanuatu in chaos

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Officials struggled Sunday to determine the scale of the devastation wrought by a monstrous cyclone that tore through the tiny South Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu, with death counts varying in the single digits but expected to rise once communications are restored with outlying islands.

Cyclone Pam tore through Vanuatu early Saturday, packing winds of 168 mph and leaving a trail of destruction and unconfirmed reports of dozens of deaths.

Two people were confirmed dead in the capital, Port Vila, with another 20 injured there, said Paolo Malatu, coordinator for the National Disaster Management Office.

From The Associated Press

Littoral ship makes its presence felt in exercise

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

BUSAN, South Korea — The USS Fort Worth's participation in a bilateral exercise with South Korea last week begins what the Navy envisions will be regular visits by faster, shallow-draft ships to Northeast Asia.

Until last week's Foal Eagle exercise started, the Fort Worth had operated primarily in Southeast Asia, where up to four littoral combat ships may be scheduled for long-term rotations by 2018.

The Fort Worth's participation in the exercise has stirred South Korean media interest, especially in light of North Korea's Rodong Sinmun newspaper's singling the ship out as purported evidence that Foal Eagle is a prelude to an attack. U.S. officials said they notified North Korea about the exercises and its planned dates in advance, and repeatedly have stated that the annual exercise is defense-oriented.

"I don't see these exercises as provocations," Rear Adm. Lisa Franchetti, commander of Naval Forces Korea, said

while aboard the Fort Worth on Saturday.

North Korea's claim that the LCS is attack-focused comes despite the Fort Worth's light armament, at least compared with the U.S. and South Korean destroyers participating in Foal Eagle. The ship's strengths are its maximum speed of more than 45 mph and its ability to move into shallow, coastal waters that would ground larger ships, Navy officials said.

The service plans to build up to 16 Freedom-class ships, including the Fort Worth, and another 16 trimaran-hulled Independence-class ships, though a few among each class may receive modifications.

Another 20 "light frigates" are planned based on the LCS frame, but with more weapons and bulk to address concerns in Congress and the Pentagon about not having enough ships in the fleet built for high-intensity conflict.

By 2028, LCS variants would constitute about one-sixth of the fleet under the Navy's present shipbuilding plan.

slavin.erik@stripes.com
Twitter:@eslavin_stripes

OKC's Westbrook playing at MVP level

The Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Russell Westbrook is playing the best basketball of his career, and he's helping new teammate Enes Kanter do the same.

Utah sent Kanter to Oklahoma City at the trade deadline, and Westbrook stepped forward to connect with the young center. Soon Kanter and Westbrook were running the pick-and-roll like they'd been playing together for years.

A rejuvenated Kanter is averaging 15.5 points and 9.4 rebounds while shooting 55 percent from the field since being traded. His smile broadens while he raves about his new point guard and mentor.

"I have no words," Kanter said. "He has been unbelievable. He is helping his teammates, he is scoring the ball, and he is rebounding. He has been really good."

This season, in an 11-game stretch that reigning MVP Kevin Durant has missed with pain in his surgically repaired right foot, Westbrook has scored 30 points or more seven times and posted six triple-doubles to force his way into this year's MVP discussion.

If this sounds familiar, it should: A year ago, it was Westbrook who was out. Durant went on a glorious two-month run, averaging 35 points while Westbrook recovered from knee surgery, on the way to the MVP award.

Since the All-Star break, Westbrook has averaged a triple-double — 32.9 points, 10.1 rebounds and 11.1 assists — and taken the league's scoring lead from Houston's James Harden. This mind-blowing run followed his 41-point outburst in the All-Star Game that earned him MVP honors.

Westbrook has used his rare athletic

ability and sheer will to keep his team in the playoff hunt as it prepares for Durant's scheduled return in a week or two. He will get a chance to strengthen his MVP resume before a national television audience when the Thunder host the Chicago Bulls on Sunday afternoon.

"Westbrook is playing at a high level," Milwaukee Bucks coach Jason Kidd said. "I don't know if people really understand what he's doing. The way he's filling up the stat sheet and winning ball games with some key guys out — what he is doing on a nightly basis is very impressive, and puts him in that MVP category."

Westbrook was the Western Conference Player of the Month in February. The Thunder went 9-3, despite Durant missing seven of those games.

"I don't know if anybody's playing better," Los Angeles Clippers coach Doc Rivers said of Westbrook. "He has to be (in the MVP conversation). He's dominant. He's carried a team, for the most part, all year. K.D.'s (Kevin Durant) been in and out, which is very difficult for a team to ever get their rhythm during that time period. And yet, they keep winning."

Westbrook insists his role isn't much different without Durant — he does the same things, but more of them. Oklahoma City is battling with New Orleans for the No. 8 spot in the Western Conference standings. Westbrook said his focus remains on leading the team and winning.

"My mindset's the same as it's been since I came into the league," he said. "Play hard every night, give it all I have, regardless of what's going on and how many injuries we have."

In the first game after the All-Star break without Durant, Westbrook scored 33

points in a victory at Charlotte. The next game, he had 21 points, a career-high 17 assists and eight rebounds in a win against Denver. He had 10 assists in the second quarter, the most by any player in any quarter in more than a year, and he did it in just 8 minutes and 40 seconds.

He had triple doubles against Indiana and Phoenix, then had 40 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists in a loss at Portland on Feb. 27. He broke a bone in his right cheek late in the Portland game when teammate Andre Roberson accidentally kneed him in the face, but he only missed one game after surgery. When he returned, donning a protective mask, he posted 49 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists in a win over the Philadelphia 76ers.

It was the most points in a triple-double since Larry Bird scored 49 in 1992. It also was his fourth straight triple-double, the most since Michael Jordan had seven straight in 1989. The back-to-back 40-point triple-doubles were the first pair since Jordan accomplished the feat in 1989.

After the triple-double streak ended in a 43-point game at Chicago, Westbrook scored 30 points, matched a career high with 17 assists and snagged 11 rebounds in a 108-104 win over Toronto. His latest triple-double was a 29-point, 12-assist, 10-rebound effort in a 113-99 win over Minnesota on Friday night.

"If you find somebody who has slowed him down, let me know," Raptors guard DeMar DeRozan said. "It's definitely tough. You got to give him credit. Their best player is out and he's stepping up when they're fighting for a playoff spot."

Well before the All-Star break, Westbrook had been attacking the bas-

ket more, shooting fewer three-pointers and looking for his teammates more often. Westbrook offered a glimpse of what he might be capable of in January, notching a triple-double against Orlando. But before the February scoring outburst, Westbrook's stellar play was overshadowed by a back-and-forth with a local columnist during a postgame interview, racking up a league-leading technical foul total and missing 14 games with a broken bone in his left hand. As the calendar flipped, Westbrook became less confrontational and let the world focus on his game.

"I'm a normal guy, just like anybody else," Westbrook said. "Obviously, I play the game differently from anybody else in the world — with a lot of emotion. It doesn't determine who I am as a person — if you know me, you know the type of guy I am — caring, unselfish, willing guy. I just want to do the right thing."

Westbrook often has been criticized for his shot selection and decision making, so when Thunder coach Scott Brooks mentions his point guard's latest accomplishments, there often is a hint of 'I told you so' in his voice. Before the season began, Brooks boldly proclaimed Westbrook the best point guard in the NBA.

"Russell's at a high level, but he's been playing this way for a long time, for a lot of years, and every year, like all the special players do, they come back a little bit better," Brooks said.

With Westbrook doing so much, it makes the game simple for his teammates.

"The way he's playing right now is incredible," Thunder forward Serge Ibaka said. "He's making everything easy for us. Just be ready and catch the ball."

Wall leads Wizards back from 21-point deficit

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Washington Wizards coach Randy Wittman felt a little guilty about his halftime approach Saturday night.

Whatever it was, it worked.

John Wall tied his season high with 31 points and added 12 assists, Paul Pierce scored 17 points, and the Wizards rallied from a 21-point, third-quarter deficit to beat the Sacramento Kings 113-97.

"I told them, I've got to go to church tomorrow because of some of the things I said and thought at halftime," Wittman said of his response after watching his team badly outplayed for 24 minutes and trail by 64-46.

The Wizards got the message, especially Wall, who collected 20 points and 10 assists after halftime.

"In the first half there wasn't really an effort, and they basically did whatever they wanted and got whatever they wanted," Wall said. "We had to come back out and compete in the second half."

The Wizards shot 61 percent from the field in the second half, and finished 13 of 26 from three-point range.

Reserve Rasual Butler and Bradley Beal

scored 14 points apiece for the Wizards, who have won three straight and five of seven.

Ramon Sessions' three-pointer gave Washington its first lead of the night, 89-88 with 10:11 left. Butler scored five straight to make it 94-88 and Wall's three-pointer eventually capped a 16-0 run.

The Kings' DeMarcus Cousins had 30 points before fouling out with 5:34 left and watching Wall, his Kentucky teammate, close out the win.

"We want to beat one another, we want to be able to go back later on in the summer and talk trash about it," Cousins said. "He had an incredible performance. He came out and led his team in the second half."

Both teams were without starting forwards. Rudy Gay (left patellar tendon strain) sat for Sacramento and Washington's Nene (personal reasons) missed his second straight.

Wall, who had 15 points in the third quarter, and Pierce (12) sparked a 19-2 run that pulled them within 79-77 with 2:45 left in the quarter. Wall's three-pointer cut the Kings' lead to 85-84 after three.

Kings guard Andre Miller had two points and seven assists as he returned

to Washington for the first time since a Feb. 19 trade sent him to Sacramento for Sessions. "I guess I got the bad of the stick for," said Miller. "For a guy who only played 10 minutes a game, you figure why would I be the one who got moved, but I try not to individualize it. I try to look at it as the team kind of hit stretch where we struggled a little bit."

For his part, Wall took the blame for Washington's poor play in February. "I think it all started with me," he said. "I didn't have no legs or the energy after the All-Star break. And the way I play (is) the way this team goes. I'm kind of the leader of it."

Celtics 93, Pacers 89: Tyler Zeller scored 18 points, three other Celtics added 16 and visiting Boston snapped Indiana's seven-game winning streak.

The Celtics have won four straight and moved into a tie for ninth place in the Eastern Conference, a half-game behind Charlotte for the final playoff spot. Indiana is seventh.

Grizzlies 96, Bucks 83: Courtney Lee scored 17 points, Jeff Green and Zach Randolph added 15 apiece, and host Memphis beat Milwaukee.

Beno Udrih, starting in place of the injured Mike Conley, had 14 points as Memphis ended a two-game losing streak. Marc Gasol finished with 12 points, seven rebounds and seven assists.

Warriors 125, Knicks 94: Stephen Curry dazzled for 25 points and 11 assists playing on his 27th birthday, and host Golden State beat New York for its eighth straight home victory.

Klay Thompson added 27 points with six threes, and the Splash Brothers combined for 29 points by halftime to highlight a 47-point second quarter that blew open the game.

Nets 94, 76ers 87: Thaddeus Young scored 21 points and Brooklyn ended a five-game losing streak by beating host Philadelphia.

Joe Johnson added 15 points and Jarrett Jack contributed 12 for the Nets, who moved within three games of eighth place in the Eastern Conference.

Jazz 88, Pistons 85: Derrick Favors scored 26 points and blocked four shots, and Utah beat visiting Detroit for its season-high fifth consecutive victory. The Pistons lost their 10th in a row.



Ship's Store official new car program

Exclusive Navy at-sea offers:

www.navyauto.com or nasinfo@navyauto.com

Wait nearly over for bids

The Associated Press

When the field of 68 is finally revealed Sunday evening it means the phrase “bubble watch” goes on its trip to the land of jargon until next February when it again will be around as the regular season starts to come to a close.

This year's bubble bunch took a hit Saturday when Wyoming beat San Diego State 45-43 in the Mountain West Conference Tournament championship game. The Cowboys have an RPI around 80, not good enough to get in as an at-large, and San Diego State, with an RPI around 25, will still get in despite the loss.

“We've been so close before, just seeing it slip right from our fingertips,” Wyoming senior Larry Nance Jr. said. “To know that this is ours, and there's nothing anybody can do to take that away from us, like I said, it's everything we imagined and more.”

That means one of the teams that have been declared bubble teams over the past two weeks will get bumped. Oklahoma State, Purdue, Indiana, Mississippi and LSU are all power conference teams with RPIs from 48-54 and they will all have a rough Saturday wondering if their resume is good enough to get them in the tournament.

“I do think we're in the tournament,” Purdue coach Matt Painter said after the Boilermakers' loss to Wisconsin on Saturday in the Big Ten semifinals. “We've had 13 Big Ten wins, and I do feel we're in the tournament. But we had to overcome some things. There's no doubt the way we played nonconference we had to go get — I said it when we walked out of non-conference. I just said, we've got to get 13 Big Ten wins in some way, counting the Big Ten Tournament, however you want to accumulate it, we've got to get to 13, and we were able to do that.”

Temple lost to SMU in the American Athletic Conference semifinals and will be one of the teams waiting to see their name on Sunday.

“There's great angst, great angst,” Owls coach Fran Dunphy said. “We're in an unknown area that we're not real familiar with and we just kind of have to take a step back and see what this next 24 hours brings.”

Xavier coach Chris Mack summed up the feelings of those waiting, even if they think they are a lock.

“As bad as we feel today,” he said after the Musketeers lost 69-52 to fourth-ranked Villanova in the Big East title game, “give us about 20 hours and we'll be excited to play another day.”

The teams on the bracket fence dodged a bullet Saturday when Rhode Island lost to Dayton in the Atlantic 10 semifinals. A win by the Rams, who have an RPI around 55, would have kept them alive for an automatic bid if they could

have beaten VCU in Sunday's championship game.

Waitin' for Dayton: Eight teams get the NCAA Tournament started before the rest of the field, Tuesday and Wednesday in the first round played in Dayton, Ohio.

One game each day will be played between two of the last four of the 36 teams to receive at-large bids. The extra game is by no means a tournament death notice. VCU started its run to the Final Four in 2011 with a first-round win over Southern Cal 59-46. Four games later, the Rams beat Kansas to reach the Final Four where they lost to Butler in the semifinals.

The other two games feature teams trying to be a No. 16 seed and face the awesome task of being the first one ever to beat a No. 1 seed. It's a guarantee that Hampton, which beat Delaware State on Saturday to win the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference tournament and the league's automatic bid. The Pirates' sub-.500 record (16-17) and an RPI in the neighborhood of 260 mean they will definitely be in Dayton.

Other teams which are in the field with high RPIs include: Manhattan (163), North Florida (154), UAB (143) Coastal Carolina (129) and Texas Southern (124).

Who's No. 1? The losses Friday in the Atlantic Coast Tournament semifinals by Virginia and Duke started a lot of talk about the teams being No. 1 seeds. In the past it always seems the Tournament Selection Committee has made its mind up about the top seeds when their work first starts at midweek rather than wait until the final day when most of the housekeeping around the bracket is taken care of.

Since 2005, there have been three occasions when two teams from the same conference earned No. 1 bids. In one of those cases neither team won their conference tournament. In 2006, Villanova lost in the semifinals of the Big East Tournament and Connecticut was out a round earlier and both were No. 1 seeds.

Home cooking: UAB (19-15) took advantage of the Conference USA Tournament being played on its home court to earn its first NCAA Tournament trip since 2011 with the win over Middle Tennessee State.

Connecticut, the defending NCAA champion, can do the same Sunday with a win over SMU in the American Athletic Conference title game at the XL Center in Hartford, one of the Huskies' home courts during the regular season. It would be an upset if the Huskies, with an RPI around 75, can beat the 20th-ranked Mustangs, but they have made some magical runs to national championships.

“It's a scenario where we lose and we don't get a bid,” Huskies coach Kevin Ollie said. “You know, we feel not the pressure, but we feel the opportunity.”

Late title games mean less rest

The Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — No. 1 Kentucky's final hurdle to carrying a perfect record into the NCAA Tournament will be to cram in one more win a few hours before everyone's attention turns toward brackets, seeds and office pools.

It might mean one less day of rest for Wildcats than some of their top competition in the NCAAs, too.

While most of the conferences that wrapped up their tournaments this weekend finished Saturday, the Southeastern and Big Ten conferences were the only power-five leagues to wait until Sunday afternoon, shortly before the NCAA selection committee announced the pairings.

In the SEC, Kentucky played No. 21 Arkansas in Nashville, Tenn., and No. 6 Wisconsin faces Michigan State in Chicago for the Big Ten crown.

“Obviously, [a Saturday final] would be the best thing, but it's above my pay grade to make that decision,” Kentucky coach John Calipari said after his Wildcats rolled past Auburn in Saturday's semifinals. “So if we have to play on Sunday, we'll play on Sunday and that's fine.”

Badgers coach Bo Ryan said it's really tough to play Sunday and then open the NCAA tournament on Thursday.

“So what we ask for — I'm on the board of directors of the [National Association of Basketball Coaches] — we ask for if anybody is playing in a conference final on Sunday to not play until Friday,” Ryan said. “That's been the case most of the time.”

But not every time.

Since 2004, 21 teams have entered the NCAAs with a No. 1 seed after playing a league tournament game on a Sunday. Nine of those ended up with the shorter turnaround and

started on a Thursday, including Florida last season and 2012 champion Kentucky, according to STATS.

Most conferences don't have to worry about it.

Only five of the 19 league tournaments finishing this weekend have a Sunday title game this year, according to STATS. Three of the power-five conferences — the ACC, Big 12 and Pac-12 — finished play on Saturday.

The ACC joined the Saturday group this year, moving from its traditional Sunday afternoon finish that it had held since 1982 to a Saturday prime-time TV slot as part of the league's new look.

Fighting Irish coach Mike Brey said he, Pitt coach Jamie Dixon and Syracuse coach Jim Boheim worked to sell the other ACC coaches on the merits of playing a Tuesday-to-Saturday schedule like the trio knew from their days in the old Big East. Brey said they sold the buzz — both in the arena and on TV — of playing a Friday night semifinal set followed by a Saturday night championship game, along with the fact that it would get the teams a little more time to regroup after playing in the title game.

“I would think all the coaches would think it's a great benefit,” Brey said after his team upended No. 2 Duke in the semifinals before beating No. 19 North Carolina in the title game. “We also felt, and now that I'm in it, I sure would like another day to get my legs under me before we go into the NCAA tournament instead of playing Sunday afternoon. It would be nice.”

Mountain West Conference Commissioner Craig Thompson said it would also be a little easier on the NCAA selection committee. A committee member from 1996-99 and its chairman in 2000, Thompson said those Sunday games make the seeding “brutal” with the 6 p.m. deadline looming.

Tanguay, Varlamov help Avalanche hold off Flames

The Associated Press

DENVER — Alex Tanguay gave a big boost to the Colorado Avalanche's power play and, even more important, their playoff chances.

Tanguay scored with a man advantage in the second period and Semyon Varlamov stopped 29 shots, helping the Avalanche hold off the Calgary Flames 3-2 on Saturday night.

Ryan O'Reilly and John Mitchell also scored for the Avalanche, who went 2-1 on a three-game homestand to remain in the playoff chase. They have a few days off before embarking on a five-game trip.

Colorado entered the game last in the league at home on the power play. But Tanguay made sure the team capitalized on the only chance it had in the game, banking in a shot from an improbable angle.

“We were due to get a bounce coming our way and fortunately for us it went

in,” said Tanguay, who also had an assist against his former team. “It's a huge win.”

Also, another huge performance by Varlamov as he remains unbeaten in his last five starts. He made a crucial stop in the waning seconds to secure the win for Colorado, which moved to within five points of the last wild-card spot in the Western Conference with 13 games remaining.

David Jones and Lance Bouma scored for the Flames. Karri Ramo made 23 saves as he filled in for Jonas Hiller, who played the night before in a 6-3 win against Toronto. Calgary is 5-2-1 and holding onto a playoff spot after losing top defenseman Mark Giordano for the season because of a torn biceps tendon.

Bruins 2, Penguins 0: Tuukka Rask made 30 saves and visiting Boston won its fifth straight over a Pittsburgh team missing Sidney Crosby and minus Evgeni Malkin for most of the game. Crosby, the Penguins' leading scorer, was a late

scratch after he participated in the pre-game warmup.

Blackhawks 6, Sharks 2: Patrick Sharp scored his first two goals since January and Duncan Keith also broke a long scoring drought in host Chicago's victory.

Flyers 7, Red Wings 2: Brayden Schenn scored two goals to help host Philadelphia.

Rangers 2, Sabres 0: Keith Yandle's third-period goal helped lift New York over host Buffalo.

Panthers 2, Hurricanes 0: Dan Ellis made 27 saves for his first shutout of the season, and Brandon Pirri scored in the second period to lead visiting Florida.

Canadiens 3, Islanders 1: Tomas Plekanec and Max Pacioretty scored 2:15 apart in the second period, and Carey Price stopped 35 shots for host Montreal.

During a TV timeout late in the third period, Price skated over to the boards where a young fan in a Canadiens jersey and cap was waiting with a smartphone. Price obliged when he raised his mask

and leaned in for the snapshot.

Jets 2, Lightning 1: Drew Stafford and Blake Wheeler scored third-period goals as Winnipeg rallied to beat host Tampa Bay.

Canucks 4, Maple Leafs 1: Derek Dorsett had a goal and two assists for the first three-point game of his career to lead host Vancouver past Toronto.

Wild 3, Blues 1: Nino Niederreiter and Kyle Brodziak scored just 17 seconds apart late in the third period, giving visiting Minnesota a win over St. Louis.

Devils 4, Coyotes 1: Mike Cammalleri scored his 25th goal in a three-goal third period, Cory Schneider stopped 30 shots and New Jersey avoided a winless road trip.

Predators 2, Kings 1: Viktor Stalberg got credit for the tiebreaking goal when Kings defenseman Jake Muzzin deflected the puck into his own net, and visiting Nashville slowed its March skid with a victory over Los Angeles.