

STARS AND STRIPES®

Saturday, April 4, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Plan to train forces in Syria faces obstacles

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — For months, U.S. military officials had been vetting the first unit of Syrian fighters slated to join a new force to be trained by the United States and allied nations. But when violence flared up in the unit's home area, the fighters made a decision to stay home and defend their communities, forcing U.S. military officials to line up an alternate unit.

That last-minute scramble delayed the launch of the training program by several weeks to some time in May, according to military officials. It is also a sign of the obstacles the United States and its allies face as they try to build a rebel force from a distance in the midst of Syria's civil war.

A senior military official said training preparations had been held up "due to the fluid environment in Syria," but were now moving ahead. Training sites will eventually be opened in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss military planning, said the alternate unit had been identified but not fully vetted when the first unit pulled out. "So it will take more time to prepare the support for this group," he said.

A host of challenges

On the eve of its long-awaited launch, U.S. officials acknowledge the program will have to overcome a host of challenges, including the relatively small size of the force being trained — up to about 5,000 fighters — and the fact that they will return to a multisided conflict characterized by shifting allegiances and battle lines. A similar program, run covertly by the CIA, has not resulted in a visible impact on the war.

The program also presents Washington with a diplomatic test. Although U.S. officials say the purpose of the training, in keeping with a congressional authorization and White House policy, is to enable Syrians to defend themselves and to take on the Islamic State militant group, partner nations behind the training program are most interested in toppling Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Through four years of bloody conflict, the United States has shied away from direct military confrontation against Assad, betting instead on now-stalled political talks. The White House only authorized military involvement in response to the rise of the Islamic State group,

which has grown strong amid Syria's civil war.

"The president has made clear that ISIL is our priority," said Ali Baskey, a White House spokesman, referring to the Islamic State group. "The (Pentagon training) program is an important component of our broader counter-ISIL strategy."

In February, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the program would train fighters to face both the Islamic State group and the Assad regime, underscoring U.S. and Turkish differences over Washington's reluctance to take on Assad. Officials in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both important backers of the Sunni Muslim uprising against a regime supported by Shiite Iran, share that priority.

Imperfect alignment

U.S. officials have sought to play down differences with their training partners and say that allied governments have acknowledged the U.S. focus on fighting the Islamic State group. A State Department spokesperson, who like other officials spoke on condition of anonymity, said coalition partners were united in their "long-term goal" of a peaceful post-Assad Syria.

Such differences matter because they could lead to confusion if the new force ends up in direct conflict with forces loyal to Assad and allied nations differ over what help to provide.

"If the foreign backers of this new force themselves are not in agreement about the mission before it even deploys into Syria, that is a warning that the force itself could quickly run into problems," said Robert Ford, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria under President Barack Obama.

The administration has determined that existing legal authorities provide a basis to build and arm a force to fight the Islamic State group, which has attacked Americans and their allies, but not to go on the offensive against the Syrian military.

None of the multiple armed groups fighting in Syria are close to a decisive victory. Though rebels led by the al-Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra have seized the northern city of Idlib, Assad retains a strong power base in Damascus and other parts of the country.

"My feeling is that these guys will fight whoever they come up against," a second defense official said, referring to the new U.S.-trained force.

Iraq's Tikrit, free of the Islamic State, is a city in ruins

The Associated Press

TIKRIT, Iraq — In Iraq's Tikrit, liberation from the Islamic State group comes at a heavy price, both in loss of life and in the sheer devastation the militants leave in their wake.

Much of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown and once a bustling city north of Baghdad, now lies in ruins.

Islamic State extremists captured it during a blitz last June that also seized large chunks of northern and western Iraq, along with a huge swath of land in neighboring Syria.

After a nearly 10-month Islamic State occupation, it took Iraqi forces and their allies, including Iranian-backed Shiite militias, a month of ferocious street battles to win the city back. They declared victory in Tikrit on Wednesday, and U.S.-led coalition airstrikes also helped turn the tide in the final weeks of the battle.

Today, the houses that still stand are pocked with bullet holes, and Tikrit's streets are lined with potholes where mortars slammed down. The provincial headquarters in the downtown — now adorned with Shiite militia flags in place of the Islamic State group's black banner — is burned from

fire and damaged from heavy fighting.

On Friday, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi warned that the military will start arresting and prosecuting those who loot abandoned Tikrit properties.

A satellite image of Tikrit, released in February by the United Nations, showed that at least 536 buildings in the city have been affected by the fighting. Of those, at least 137 were completely destroyed and 241 were severely damaged. The Iraqi offensive to recapture Tikrit also exacerbated previous damage, particularly in the city's southern neighborhoods where clashes were the most intense.

Special ops troops doubt women can do job

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Surveys find that men in U.S. special operations forces do not believe women can meet the physical and mental demands of their commando jobs, and they fear the Pentagon will lower standards to integrate women into their elite units, according to interviews and documents obtained by The Associated Press.

Studies that surveyed personnel found “major misconceptions” within special operations

about whether women should be brought into the male-only jobs. They also revealed concerns that department leaders would “capitulate to political pressure, allowing erosion of training standards,” according to one document.

Some of those concerns were not limited to men, researchers found, but were found among women in special operations jobs.

Dan Bland, force management director for U.S. Special Operations Command, told the

AP that the survey results have “already driven us to do some different things in terms of educating the force.”

About 68,800 people serve in the command, including 3,000 civilians. The main survey went to about 18,000 people who are in positions closed to women, and the response was about 50 percent. The high response rate, officials said, reflects the wide interest in the subject.

The studies are part of the Pentagon’s effort to open all military combat positions to

women or provide reasons why any jobs should remain closed.

One survey, by Rand Corp., reflected doubts that women could meet the overall job demands, found concerns that sexual harassment or assault could increase and cited worries about “unequal treatment” of special operations candidates and personnel. Some worried that if women were let in to some jobs, they might be treated more harshly.

Survey details have not been released.

Pa. woman accused of trying to aid terrorists

The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — A Philadelphia woman was arrested Friday on charges she tried to join and martyr herself for the Islamic State group, a day after two women in New York were charged with plotting to wage jihad by building a bomb and using it for a Boston Marathon-type attack.

Keonna Thomas, 30, was preparing to fly to Spain with hopes of reaching Syria to fight with the terror group, authorities said. Instead, she was arrested at her family’s townhouse in a public housing development, which has three small U.S. flags adorning the porch.

Authorities said she communicated with an Islamic State group fighter in Syria who asked if she wanted to be part of a martyrdom operation. She told the fighter that the opportunity “would be amazing ... A girl can only wish,” according to the documents.

A federal magistrate ordered Thomas held pending a detention hearing Wednesday. Prosecutors will oppose bail.

Last month, Thomas bought a ticket to fly to Barcelona on March 29. She likely planned to take a bus to Istanbul and then reach Syria, according to an

FBI affidavit filed in the case. Authorities put a stop to the trip when they raided her house March 27.

In court, Thomas wore a burqa as she acknowledged she understood the charge against her — attempting to provide material support and resources to a foreign terrorist organization. She was appointed a public defender, who did not comment on the charge.

Thomas appeared to show little emotion as she was led out of the house Friday morning in handcuffs, neighbor Ronni Patterson said. Patterson said she had seen investigators searching the home, where Thomas appeared to live with her mother and grandmother, a week ago.

The women in the New York case are accused of plotting to wage violent jihad by building a bomb and using it for an attack like the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. They were ordered held without bail after a brief court appearance Thursday. The lawyer for one of them said his client will plead not guilty.

Thomas is charged with attempting to provide material aid to terrorists — one of the same charges filed in 2010 against another Pennsylvania woman, Colleen LaRose, known as Jihad Jane.

Poll shows racial disparity on use of violence by police

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Whites in the United States approve of police officers hitting people in far greater numbers than blacks and Hispanics do, at a time when the country is struggling to deal with police use of deadly force against men of color, according to a major American trend survey.

Seven of 10 whites polled said they can imagine a situation in which they would approve of a police officer striking an adult male citizen, according to the 2014 General Social Survey, a long-running measurement of trends in American opinions.

When asked the same question: Are there any situations you can imagine in which you

would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen? — 42 percent of blacks and 38 percent of Hispanics said they could.

The poll results don’t surprise experts on American attitudes toward police, who say experiences and history with law enforcement shape opinions about the use of violence by officers.

“Whites are significantly more likely to give police officers the benefit of the doubt, either because they have never had an altercation with a police officer or because they tend to see the police as allies in the fight against crime,” said Ronald Weitzer, a George Washington University sociology professor.

Severe storms spread across several states

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Kentucky was swamped by wave after wave of heavy rain, unleashing flash flooding that swept a mother and child into a creek, stranded a school bus and resulted in more than 160 rescues in Louisville.

As rain pushed through parts of the South and Midwest, severe thunderstorms were also

blamed for the death of a woman who was camping with her family at Natural Bridge State Resort Park in eastern Kentucky.

Meanwhile, thousands of people in south central Kansas lost power amid winds that reached nearly 90 mph, downed trees and damaged buildings overnight and early Friday. A possible tornado was being investigated in Oklahoma.

From The Associated Press

Time for six-man rotations?

The Associated Press

Now this was definitely a deep rotation. In manager Joe Girardi's office at spring training, the March calendar was posted on a big whiteboard. Inside each box, he wrote the initials of the starting pitcher that day.

At one point, the succession of New York Yankees arms stretched past a week: Chase Whitley, Chris Capuano, Masahiro Tanaka, Adam Warren, Michael Pineda, Esmil Rogers, Nathan Eovaldi, CC Sabathia.

Eight games, eight different starters.

OK, maybe not so strange in exhibition play. Still, in this era when big league teams are trying to protect their pitchers from tight triceps, twisted shoulders and Tommy John surgery, could it be time to consider a six-man rotation?

"In a perfect world, it's something that's a great concept," Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said.

"You hear many times the interest level in having a six-man rotation, and there's a lot of positives from that," he said. "But it's hard to pull off."

For more than three decades, a five-man rotation has been the standard in the majors. The Los Angeles Dodgers often are credited with doing it first, in the early 1970s with a staff that, in fact, included Tommy John.

Over the years, there have been exceptions.

Jim Tracy tried a four-man rotation — with a 75-pitch limit — for a while with Colorado in 2012. The Rockies set a franchise record for losses and Tracy lost his job.

In 2011, Chicago White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen briefly went with a six-man rotation. His team finished with a losing record and he, too, was gone.

Truth is, most teams have trouble finding just a few solid starters. And keeping them healthy, that's a whole other story.

Yu Darvish and Zack Wheeler already are out for the season, Cliff Lee and Justin Verlander are ailing, Matt Harvey and Jose

Fernandez are coming back after major surgery. Plenty more on those lists.

Could an extra starter mean extra rest and a diminished workload, and possibly fewer injuries?

"There's no guarantee that a six-man rotation, for example, which implies fewer innings pitched with more days off, is going to have any impact on certain cases," Mets general manager Sandy Alderson said soon after Wheeler's damaged elbow was diagnosed.

"Six-man rotations, more days off, more spot starts by pitchers in your minor league system, there are lots of ways it can be addressed," he said. "But ultimately some elbows are going to break down and some are not."

To Toronto knuckleballer R.A. Dickey, a six-man setup "would certainly cut down wear and tear on pitchers."

"But it's hard enough to find five starters right now that can do the job. It's very difficult to start. I think that would mean giving some of your best guys less opportunity to help win games, and I don't think anybody is going to do that," he said.

Put Baltimore opening day starter Chris Tillman in that camp.

"It's like the more off days you have, the rustier you get," he said. "We did it a little bit last year. At first it got to me a little bit. I wasn't a fan, but we pitched well, and we kind of got it going, so you can't hate it. If it was my preference, I would not have it."

Even so, the idea of six starters is "a very strong trend," St. Louis manager Mike Matheny said.

"There are a lot of pitchers, ours included, that don't like the thought of it at all. But this game is constantly evolving," he said.

Change certainly doesn't come swiftly on the field.

It took more than 100 years before pronounced defensive shifts became commonplace. The concept of one-out relievers or pitchers batting eighth or five-man rotations also took a while.

In 1971, 13 pitchers made at least 38 starts, with Mickey Lolich leading with 45

(and 376 innings).

No one has made as many as 37 starts in the majors since Greg Maddux in 1991. Dickey and Tillman were among 10 pitchers who tied for the major league lead with 34 starts last season.

Tanaka's first season in the majors was interrupted by a small tear in his right elbow. He started his pro career in Japan, where six-man rotations are the norm.

"If you have six days in between starts, needless to say you get to have more rest time, so that's always a plus for a pitcher," he said through a translator.

The Yankees have a string of 30 games in 31 days, beginning in mid-April, and are looking at using a sixth starter during that period.

"I think it's a result of some of the stuff that's gone on over the last few years, not just here but everywhere," pitching coach Larry Rothschild said.

Washington pitching coach Steve McCatty remembers playing for Oakland under Billy Martin. In 1980, McCatty and four other starters combined for 93 complete games.

The pitching-rich Nationals might have the talent to use six starters, but McCatty isn't sure it would be worthwhile.

"I know everybody talks about it, but you want to take away, what, four or five starts from your No. 1 and No. 2 guys by having that?" he said.

"Sure, it would make some guys a little fresher at the end, but is that better than being able to use your guys more often?" he said.

Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon has never shied away from trying something new. He wouldn't mind seeing a six-man rotation — on the opposing team, that is.

"The groups that are going for the six-man rotation, that's great, if you get six guys you dig," he said.

"I mean because I tell you what, from the other dugout, when you're playing the other team and here comes 5 and 6, and they're not like 1, 2, 3, 4, I'd like to be the team that's grabbing those guys all the time."

Calipari, Kaminsky take home AP awards

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — John Calipari has been dealing with detractors for years.

They call him the embodiment of everything that's wrong in the one-and-done world of college basketball. He's a crook who landed two programs on probation, a snake-oil salesman who only won a national title because he was able to sell Kentucky to some top prospects.

Perhaps that perception has finally started to change.

After molding a roster full of McDonald's All-Americans into a 38-0 juggernaut that's two wins shy of another championship, Calipari was voted AP coach of the year on Friday.

He received 40 first-place votes from the 65-member national media panel. Tony Bennett of Virginia was runner-up with nine votes and Notre Dame's Mike Brey got five.

Meanwhile, Wisconsin forward Frank Kaminsky was honored as the AP player of the year.

Calapari's achievement this season was getting what could have been a mess of egos to play as a team.

Players accustomed to being the stars decided that in basketball-mad Kentucky, they would eschew any individual spotlight so the Wildcats could chase something greater: The first perfect season since Indiana's in 1976.

In that respect, this may have been Calipari's toughest coaching job yet.

His most masterful job, too.

"I know this, I'm the same guy I've always been," Calipari said, when asked whether opinions of him — particularly those in the media — have softened over the years.

"Well, not really. A lot of things change as you get older. My heart's the same," Calipari added. "Hopefully I've matured and grown up a little bit. That's questionable also, I hear."

Speaking of growing up, Kaminsky has certainly done that the past couple of years. After averaging 10 minutes a game as a sophomore, then having a breakout junior campaign, Kaminsky took another step forward in guiding the Badgers back to the Final Four.

The senior was rewarded with 58 first-place votes. Duke freshman Jahliil Okafor received five, and Willie Cauley-Stein of Kentucky and Jerian Grant of Notre Dame each received one.

"I thought about it a little bit," Kaminsky said of winning the award. "Obviously, wasn't one of my main priorities. Getting back to the Final Four was it. But being here and being honored by the AP is awesome."

It's hardly surprising that Kaminsky was such an overwhelming pick.

Besides being a dominant inside-outside threat, the fuzzy 7-footer also has a wicked sense of humor. He's become one of the ringleaders on the fun-loving Badgers, his effervescent personality endearing himself to coaches, players and fans alike.

Twins' Santana gets 80-game PED ban

The Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Minnesota Twins spent \$55 million on Ervin Santana to bring some much-needed talent and experience to their beleaguered starting rotation.

Now, thanks to an 80-game suspension for testing positive for a banned substance, the Twins will be without their biggest offseason acquisition for half the season. And their pitching staff has become a major question mark once again.

Santana was suspended by Major League Baseball on Friday after testing positive for the performance-enhancing substance Stanozolol.

"It's disappointing. It's difficult," Twins GM Terry Ryan said. "We had a fairly decent spring. Now we've got to regroup here and hopefully it won't affect us as

we move forward."

In a statement released through the players' union, Santana said he was surprised by the news but does not plan to appeal. New to the Twins this year, he'll miss the first half of the season.

This was the third penalty for a positive Stanozolol test reported by MLB in the last eight days, following Seattle pitcher David Rollins and Atlanta pitcher Arodys Vizcaino.

Santana signed a four-year contract with the Twins after pitching last season with Atlanta and was slotted in the No. 2 spot behind Phil Hughes in a rotation that has been among the worst in the majors the last four years. The 32-year-old righty will lose \$5,901,639 of his \$13.5 million salary this season.

In his statement, Santana issued his "deepest apologies" to his family, fans, colleagues, teammates and the Twins.

Hamilton won't be disciplined by MLB

NEW YORK — Los Angeles Angels outfielder Josh Hamilton will not be disciplined by Major League Baseball for his latest problems involving cocaine and alcohol. Team officials responded by saying they were surprised and disappointed.

Angels general manager Jerry Dipoto said he disagrees with the ruling by an arbitrator appointed under MLB's joint drug program with the players' association.

Hamilton, a five-time All-Star and the 2010 AL MVP, has played poorly during the first two years of his five-year, \$125 million contract with the Angels, who still owe him \$83 million in salary over the next three years.



Ship's Store official new car program

Exclusive Navy at-sea offers:

www.navyauto.com or nasinfo@navyauto.com

Magic snap three-game skid

The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Nikola Vucevic scored a career-high 37 points and grabbed 17 rebounds to power Orlando's 97-84 win over Minnesota.

Tobias Harris added 25 points and 12 boards to help the Magic snap a three-game skid.

Andrew Wiggins scored 22 points for the Timberwolves, who once again had only eight healthy players. The Wolves (16-60) have lost six straight games and have lost at least 60 for the ninth time in franchise history.

Pelicans 101, Kings 95: Eric Gordon scored 21 points, Tyreke Evans nearly had a triple-double and New Orleans gained ground in the playoff race by outlasting short-handed host Sacramento.

Evans finished with 19 points, 12 rebounds and nine assists against his former team as the Pelicans won their fourth straight. New Orleans (41-34) pulled with in a half-game of Oklahoma City (42-34) for the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Sacramento dropped its fourth game in a row despite Demarcus Cousins' second consecutive triple-double. The All-Star center had 24 points, 20 rebounds and a career-high 13 assists. He also blocked four shots.

Spurs 123, Nuggets 93: Danny Green scored 21 points, including 6-for-6 shooting on three-pointers, and San Antonio cruised past visiting Denver after losing Tiago Splitter to a right calf injury during a strong start.

Kawhi Leonard had 20 points and Aron

Baynes added 18 points in 19 minutes for San Antonio, which has won six straight. The Spurs (50-26) extended their league record of consecutive 50-win seasons to 16 straight.

Danilo Gallinari scored 20 points to lead Denver.

Bulls 88, Pistons 82: Pau Gasol had 26 points and 10 rebounds for his 50th double-double of the season, helping Chicago beat visiting Detroit.

Jimmy Butler scored 18 points and Joakim Noah added nine rebounds and 10 assists as the Bulls pulled ahead of Toronto for third place in the East after the Raptors' loss to Brooklyn.

Reggie Jackson had 22 points and nine assists for Detroit, which had won five of seven.

Trail Blazers 107, Lakers 77: C.J. McCollum scored a career-high 27 points, Damian Lillard added 20 and Portland celebrated its Northwest Division title with a victory over host Los Angeles.

Arron Afflalo scored 17 points for the Blazers, who clinched their first division title since 2009 earlier in the night with Oklahoma City's loss at Memphis.

Pacers 93, Hornets 74: Rodney Stuckey scored 15 points off the bench to lead host Indiana past Charlotte.

C.J. Watson had 13 points and four steals, and C.J. Miles added 12 points and six rebounds for the Pacers, who had lost two in a row.

Bucks 110, Celtics 101: Ersan Ilyasova led Milwaukee's third-quarter surge from a halftime deficit with 11 points and visiting Milwaukee hurt

Boston's playoff chances with a win Friday night.

Boston dropped a half-game behind idle Miami in the competition for the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference with six games left.

Wizards 101, Knicks 87: Marcin Gortat scored 19 points, Bradley Beal added 18, and host Washington defeated New York.

Otto Porter, starting his second straight game for the Wizards, scored 17. John Wall was held to six points on 3-for-3 shooting, but had a career-high 18 assists for Washington, which has won three of four.

Nets 114, Raptors 109: Deron Williams scored a season-high 31 points, Thaddeus Young made the tiebreaking basket with 22 seconds left, and host Brooklyn beat Toronto for its season-high sixth straight victory.

Brook Lopez added 30 points and 17 rebounds for the Nets, who have surged into seventh place in the Eastern Conference. Young, acquired from Minnesota for Kevin Garnett in February, tied his season high with 29 points.

Grizzlies 100, Thunder 92: Jeff Green scored 22 points and Marc Gasol added 19 as host Memphis defeated Oklahoma City.

Green and Gasol were among six Grizzlies finishing in double figures as Memphis won its second straight and moved into a tie with Houston for the second seed in the Western Conference and top spot in the Southwest Division.

Enes Kanter led the Thunder with 24 points and 17 rebounds.

Devils top Canadiens in shootout

The Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Jacob Josefson and Patrik Elias scored in the shootout and the New Jersey Devils snapped a season-high six-game losing streak with a 3-2 victory over the Montreal Canadiens on Friday night.

Stefan Matteau and Reid Boucher, who were called up from the minors last month for a look-see with the Devils out of the playoff chase, scored for New Jersey and rookie goaltender Keith Kinkaid made 31 saves.

Tomas Plekanec and defenseman Jeff Petry scored for Montreal, which lost in a shootout for the second straight night. Dustin Tokarski made 16 saves in giving Carey Price a night off.

The point gave the Canadiens 104 for the season and a two-point lead over Tampa Bay in the Atlantic Division with three games left in the regular season.

Blackhawks 4, Sabres 3: Jonathan Toews scored two goals 47 seconds apart in the final two minutes to rally visiting Chicago to a win over last-place Buffalo.

Toews came to the rescue after the Blackhawks squandered a 2-1 lead entering the third period. He tied the game by converting a rebound off Duncan Keith's shot with 1:43 left. Then Toews capped a 2-on-1 break by accepting Brandon Saad's no-look pass and snapping a shot inside the right post with 56 seconds left.

A day after clinching their seventh consecutive playoff berth with a 3-1 home win over Vancouver, the Blackhawks are now in a position to contend for the Central Division title.

Blues 7, Stars 5: Alex Pietrangelo scored the unassisted tiebreaker and visiting St. Louis netted four third-period goals to beat Dallas.

The game also featured an NHL-record four goals within 49 seconds.

As a Blues power play was ending, Pietrangelo shot through a screen past Dallas goalie Kari Lehtonen for a 6-5 lead about halfway through the period.

The Stars' Travis Moen started the record-setting goal streak when he scored on a penalty shot at 19:49 of the first period. During the first 38 seconds of the second, St. Louis' Patrik Berglund and Schwartz and Dallas' Jamie Benn all scored.

Sharks 3, Coyotes 1: Logan Couture and Joe Pavelski scored in the opening 5 minutes and host San Jose held on for its fourth win in five games.

Matt Nieto added an insurance goal late for the Sharks, who moved within three points of Los Angeles and Winnipeg in the race for the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference. The Kings and Jets each have one game in hand over San Jose.

Antti Niemi made 20 saves in his return from an illness that forced him to miss the past two games.

Avalanche 4, Ducks 2: Matt Duchene scored the winning goal about halfway through the third period as visiting Colorado kept its slim playoff hopes alive.

Duchene pulled in the puck after Corey Perry could not control it in the Avalanche zone and rocketed down the ice. Barely a step ahead of Sami Vatanen, Duchene beat John Gibson under the goalie's left leg for his 21st of the season.

That goal keeps the Avalanche mathematically alive for another day, trailing the Los Angeles Kings by six points for the final berth with only four games remaining.

Woods says he's going to play Masters

The Associated Press

Tiger Woods ended all that speculation about his game by letting everyone see for themselves.

He said Friday he will play next week in the Masters.

Golf's biggest attraction and four-time Masters champion played two practice rounds at Augusta National this week before a simple announcement on his website that he would end his two-month leave on the sport's biggest stage.

"I'm playing in the Masters," Woods said on his website. "It's obviously very important to me, and I want to be there. I've worked a lot on my game, and I'm looking forward to competing. I'm excited to get to Augusta, and I appreciate everyone's support."

Woods was last seen at a golf tournament on Feb. 5 at Torrey Pines. He hit a sand wedge some 30 yards over the green, duffed a chip coming back, bladed the next one too hard and made double bogey. One tee shot later, he withdrew because of tightness in his lower back, saying that his "glutes didn't activate" after a delay in cool, foggy weather.

Of far greater concern was the state of his game.

Woods has played in two tournaments this year and completed just 47 holes. His short game was shockingly bad at the Phoenix Open, where he shot a career-worst 82 and missed the cut by nine shots. And he didn't get out of the first round at Torrey Pines.

A week later, he said his game and his scores were unacceptable. "I enter a tournament to compete at the highest level, and when I think I'm ready, I'll be back."

Those are words by which he will be judged next week.

Woods played an 18-hole practice round Tuesday at Augusta, and he played again at the club on Friday, according to his agent.

He will have gone nine weeks without competition when he hits his opening tee shot on Thursday, which is not unprecedented for Woods. He went nearly five months without playing when he returned in 2010 from a crisis in his personal life that led to one of the greatest downfalls in sport. He tied for fourth that year.

Scrutiny might be even greater this time around.

The last time Woods took an extended break before the Masters, he had won his previous tournament at the Australian Masters and was No. 1 in the world after a seven-win season. Now, his game has been in disarray over a series of injuries, physical limitations and another change in coaching.

He hasn't won a tournament since the Bridgestone Invitational in August 2013. He hasn't finished under par in 14 months, dating to the 2014 Dubai Desert Classic. And he has plunged to No. 104 in the world, his lowest ranking since Sept. 29, 1996, a week before he won the first of his 90 professional tournaments worldwide.

Woods hasn't won the Masters in 10 years, though he has managed there even when his game was off. It's the only major where Woods has made the cut every time.

He missed the Masters last year because of back surgery to alleviate a pinched nerve, and he wound up sitting out three months. Four tournaments into his return, he again dealt with back pain and sat out the final four months of the

season to fully recover and get stronger.

But when he returned at his Hero World Challenge in December, he tied for last in an 18-man field and chipped so poorly that some analysts said he had the chipping yips. Two months of practice didn't help. During the Phoenix Open pro-am, he hit a bunker shot on the 16th hole that shot over the green and into the first row of bleachers.

Chipping and pitching at Augusta National doesn't not allow for much margin of error, and the scrutiny figures to be at a high level even by Woods' standards.

"The first little pitch shot he's got to hit — not chip shot, the first little pitch shot he's got to hit — will be microanalyzed, and he knows that," said Paul Azinger, a former PGA champion and now ESPN analyst. "There's a big microscope on that guy. I don't think he'd show up unless he feels like he solved that problem."

When he skipped the Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill, Woods said he hoped to be ready for the Masters and would continue working.

There have been secondhand reports that Woods was playing a lot at his home club, The Medalist, in South Florida. Golfweek cited a source as saying Woods shot 74 with five birdies when he played Augusta National on Tuesday.

Woods has his own practice facility in the backyard of his home in Jupiter Island, Florida. Going from a private setting to some 35,000 fans figures to be the biggest challenge.

"All we see with Tiger is the tip of the iceberg," Azinger said. "And what we don't know is what's under the tip of the iceberg. How hard has he worked on being the best player, not the best swinger? That's what we don't know."