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Tsarnaev guilty on all counts in Boston Marathon bombing

The Associated Press

BOSTON — Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was convicted Wednesday in the Boston Marathon bombing by a federal jury that now must decide whether the 21-year-old former college student should be executed.

Tsarnaev kept his hands folded in front of him and looked down at the defense table as he listened to the verdict, reached after a day and a half of deliberations. He was found guilty on all 30 counts that included conspiracy and use of a weapon of mass destruction — offenses punishable by death.

His conviction was practically a foregone conclusion, given his lawyer's startling admission during opening statements that Tsarnaev carried out the attack with his now-dead older brother, Tamerlan.

The two shrapnel-packed pressure-cooker bombs that exploded near the finish line on April 15, 2013, killed three spectators and wounded more than 260 other people, turning the home stretch of the world-famous race into a scene of carnage and putting the city on edge for days.

In the next phase of the trial, the jury will hear evidence on

whether Tsarnaev should get the death penalty or spend the rest of his life in prison.

In a bid to save Tsarnaev from a death sentence, defense attorney Judy Clarke has argued that Tsarnaev, then 19, fell under the influence of his radicalized brother. Tamerlan, 26, died when he was shot by police and run over by his brother during a chaotic getaway attempt days after the bombing. Prosecutors, however, portrayed the brothers — ethnic Chechens who moved to the U.S. from Russia more than a decade ago — as full partners in a plan to punish the U.S. for its wars in Muslim countries. Jihadist writings, lectures and videos were found on both their computers.

Some of the most damning evidence included video showing Tsarnaev planting a backpack containing one of the bombs near where 8-year-old Martin Richard, who died in the explosions, was standing, and incriminating statements scrawled inside the dry-docked boat where a wounded and bleeding Tsarnaev was captured days after the tragedy.

"Stop killing our innocent people and we will stop," he wrote.

GI killed in Afghan insider attack

BY CARLO MUNOZ

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A U.S. soldier was killed and several wounded Wednesday in eastern Afghanistan in the latest insider attack against international forces, officials said.

The attack occurred after a meeting between U.S. Embassy officials and local Afghan leaders at the provincial governor's home in Jalalabad, said Hazzrat Hussain Mashraqiwal, police spokesman for Nangarhar province.

An Afghan soldier suddenly opened fire on American and NATO troops providing security for the embassy team. The gunman and a member of the security team were shot dead during the exchange, Mashraqiwal said.

Pentagon spokesman Col. Steve Warren said that the fatality was an American soldier, and that "several" U.S. soldiers were wounded.

The wounded were taken to regional medical facilities, Warren said. He said he didn't

know how seriously they were injured.

The shooting was being investigated by personnel from Operation Resolute Support, the training mission that commenced Jan. 1.

"It's a little early to tell" if it was an insider attack, Warren said, but "indications are leaning that way."

Afghan Gen. Fazel Ahmad Sherzad, who is police chief for eastern Nangarhar province where the shooting happened, said it took place immediately after the meeting in the governor's compound and the embassy official had left.

"Right after the U.S. official had left, suddenly an Afghan army soldier opened fire on the U.S. soldiers who were present in the compound," Sherzad told The Associated Press.

The American troops returned fire, killing the Afghan soldier, whom Sherzad identified as Abdul Azim.

The Associated Press, Zubair Babakarkhail and Stars and Stripes reporter Jon Harper contributed to this report.

Marine to be awarded Navy Cross for actions in Afghanistan

The Associated Press

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — The Marine Corps said Tuesday that a gunnery sergeant will receive the service's second-highest award for enduring heavy assault in Afghanistan while his team leader and another Marine were ushered to safety after being shot and seriously wounded.

Brian C. Jacklin, 32, will be awarded the Navy Cross on

Thursday at Camp Pendleton, becoming the eighth person in the Marine Special Operations Command to receive the honor since the unit was formed in 2006.

The Los Angeles native was second in command of a team that came under attack in the Upper Gereshk Valley of Helmand province in 2012. After his team leader and another Marine suffered life-threatening injuries, he es-

tablished communications with a nearby unit.

"Without hesitation, Jacklin seized control of the situation and orchestrated a counterattack," the Marines said. "He courageously led his team out of their compound and through open terrain in order to secure a landing zone. Jacklin remained in the open, raining M203 grenades on the enemy and directing the fires of his team, until the aircraft could land and

evacuate the wounded."

Jacklin, a critical-skills operator with the Pendleton-based 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion, voluntarily stayed after his unit was replaced, the Marine Corps said. During a battle that raged through the next day, he provided key intelligence, offered tactical assistance and made "deadly accurate" shots.

SC police officer faces murder charges

The Associated Press

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. — Dramatic video that shows a white South Carolina police officer shooting a fleeing black man after a traffic stop has led authorities to file a murder charge against the officer amid public outrage over a series of deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of law enforcement agents.

A protest began with about 40 to 50 people Wednesday in North Charleston, led by a group formed after the fatal shooting of a black man in Ferguson, Mo.

The video, provided to the dead man's family and law-

yer by an unidentified person who shot the footage, shows North Charleston Patrolman Michael Thomas Slager firing eight shots at the back of Walter Lamer Scott, 50, as he runs away. The man falls after the eighth shot, fired after a brief pause.

Scott's parents appeared separately on TV shows Wednesday morning, a day after the officer was charged.

Walter Scott Sr. told NBC's "Today Show" that his son may have run because he owed child support and didn't want to go back to jail.

Scott Sr. said that in the video, the officer "looked like he was trying to kill a deer run-

ning through the woods."

"I almost couldn't look at it to see my son running defenselessly, being shot. It just tore my heart to pieces," Judy Scott said on ABC's "Good Morning America."

Attorneys for the family said the man who shot the video is assisting investigators. The person has not been identified.

North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey fired Slager on Wednesday, a day after he announced the charge and said Slager had made "a bad decision." Authorities said Scott was shot after the officer had already hit the man with a stun gun after a traffic stop Saturday that began over a faulty

brake light.

"When you're wrong, you're wrong," Summey said. "When you make a bad decision, don't care if you're behind the shield or a citizen on the street, you have to live with that decision."

Slager, who had been with the North Charleston police for five years, was denied bond at a first appearance hearing Tuesday. He was not accompanied by a lawyer. If convicted, he could face 30 years to life in prison.

Scott's family and their attorney, L. Chris Stewart, called for calm and peaceful protests. They said the murder charge showed that the justice system is working in this case.

Study finds sleep deprivation rates higher in military

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

For 65 years, the hapless Beetle Bailey has been trying to get some sleep in his comic strip, the grouchy Sarge ever foiling the private's on-the-sly shuteye.

Turns out that today's military is teeming with sleep-deprived Baileys.

A Rand Corp. study released Monday found that about half of all servicemembers sur-

veyed said they slept poorly, compared with about a third of the general population.

A third of servicemembers reported getting five hours of sleep or less per night — as compared with only 8 percent of the general public coping with that little sleep.

Another third got by with just six hours of sleep a night.

About 18 percent of those surveyed said they used sleep aids such as sleeping pills. An

almost equal percentage reported that lack of sleep impaired their ability to function.

The report noted that there were surprisingly few differences in sleep-related problems based upon servicemembers' deployment history.

"Rather, sleep problems, including poor sleep quality, short sleep duration, and fatigue, were prevalent regardless of deployment history," the report said. "This suggests that sleep

problems may be endemic to military culture and not solely the result of being deployed."

The report, sponsored by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, recommends the Defense Department take steps to prevent sleep problems, such as increased identification and diagnosis and better management of sleep disorders by clinicians.

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NORAD: N. Korean missile ready

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — North Korea has an operational road-mobile missile that could carry nuclear weapons to the United States, according to the commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command.

The KN-08 intercontinental ballistic missile was first paraded in North Korea in 2012. Many analysts suspected at the time that the missiles on display were mock-ups and doubted that the country had actually developed the weapon.

But Tuesday, Adm. Bill Gortney, head of NORAD and U.S. Northern Command, told reporters that he believes Pyongyang has achieved a breakthrough. He said North Korea has not yet tested the missile, and he declined to explain why he believes the missile is ready to go. The U.S. does not consider its weapons to be operational until they've been tested.

As the leader of NORAD and NORTHCOM, Gortney would be responsible for launching the interceptors against missiles if they threatened the U.S.

15 Mexican police die in ambush

The Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — An ambush that killed 15 state police officers in western Mexico appears to be a drug cartel's revenge attack and could herald a military-style offensive against government authorities.

The assault on a Jalisco state police convoy late Monday on a rural road between the Pacific coast resort of Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara, the state capital, followed arrests earlier in the day and over the weekend of suspected members of the

Jalisco New Generation cartel. It also came a week after a failed attempt to kill state Security Commissioner Alejandro Solorio.

The assassination attempt "was the first response by organized crime to the clash in which state security forces killed the criminal Heriberto Acevedo Cardenas, nicknamed 'El Gringo,'" Solorio said at a news conference Tuesday. He said four suspects in that attack were turned over to federal authorities on Saturday and 11 more on Monday.

UConn women win third straight title

The Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Geno Auriemma and his UConn Huskies are a perfect 10.

The Hall of Fame coach joined some elite company in UCLA's John Wooden after tying the Wizard of Westwood with his 10th NCAA Tournament title.

"Obviously it's a very significant number because that's the number that's been out there and people want to talk about it. I'll be the first to say I'm not John Wooden and I got a bunch of friends who'd tell you I'm right, I'm not," Auriemma said. "As I said the other day I just think what we've done here in the last 20 years is pretty remarkable in its own right."

"I'll let the people who write the history decide where I fit in."

Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis and Moriah

Jefferson each scored 15 points Tuesday night to lead the Huskies to a 63-53 victory over Notre Dame. It was UConn's third straight title; Auriemma and the Huskies have won all 10 of their trips to the national championship game. As has become a tradition, his team carried Auriemma off the court after dumping confetti on his head.

Breanna Stewart added 15 rebounds and eight points for UConn (38-1). The two-time AP Player of the Year has saved her best games for when the lights shined the brightest.

She earned most outstanding player of the Final Four honors for the third time, making her the first woman ever to achieve that. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was the only men's player to do it when he played for Wooden's Bruins.

"There just hasn't been a player like Stewie in the women's game in a long, long time," Auriemma said. "She might be two inches taller than Cheryl Miller and Cheryl Miller was one of best players I saw. ... Stewie's the kind of player that women's basketball probably hasn't seen."

She stated when she came to UConn that her goal was to win four championships. She's now one title away from being the first to win four straight. Stewart has been a huge reason why the Huskies have won three consecutive titles. On the podium she had tears streaming down her face.

"I think it's really surreal and I haven't had a chance to even think about that," said Stewart wearing the championship net around her neck. "I've won three na-

tional championships, but said I wanted to win four, you can't win four without winning three first."

Notre Dame coach Muffet McGraw had her team back in the championship game for the fourth time in five seasons. The Irish have come up short each time, including the last two against UConn. Notre Dame's lone title came in 2001.

"It was a great accomplishment to get here," McGraw said. "Was disappointing we weren't able to play our game."

The Irish (36-3) were able to slow the Huskies in the early going and UConn only led 31-23 at the half.

After the Irish cut it to five to start the second half, UConn scored seven straight to open up a double-digit advantage.

Pelicans move into last West playoff spot

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Anthony Davis doesn't want to carry the Pelicans into the playoffs just so they can get unceremoniously bounced in the first round by NBA-leading Golden State.

Now Davis has some proof to back him up when he claims that young, unpredictable New Orleans could pose a threat to the No. 1 seed.

Davis scored 23 of his 29 points in the second half, including two free throws with 9 seconds left, and the Pelicans moved into eighth place in the Western Conference with a 103-100 victory over the Warriors on Tuesday night.

"We look at ourselves as an elite team. We feel like we can play with anybody and we can beat anybody on any given night," said Davis, who also grabbed 10 rebounds. "We just got to go out there and play that way."

The Pelicans moved back into the West's last playoff spot by a half-game over Oklahoma City, which lost to San Antonio. But nothing was secure until Stephen Curry, who scored 25 points, saw his shot that would have tied the game go in and out as time expired.

Now New Orleans, which has not participated in the postseason since 2011, has five games left to hold on to a playoff spot and owns a tie-breaker over the Thunder.

Thunder 113, Spurs 88: Kawhi Leonard matched a career high with 26 points, and San Antonio rolled past host Oklahoma City for its eighth straight victory.

The defending NBA champions have won each game during their streak by double digits, and by an average of 20.9 points. Tim Duncan had 12 points, nine rebounds and four blocks for the Spurs.

Heat 105, Hornets 100: Goran Dragic scored 28 points, his most since coming to Miami in a February trade, and the Heat helped their playoff chances by topping visiting Charlotte.

Luol Deng scored 21 for the Heat, who snapped a four-game losing streak. Dwyane Wade had 19 for Miami.

Hawks 96, Suns 69: Atlanta set a single-season franchise high with its 58th victory, getting 16 points each from DeMarre Carroll and Jeff Teague in a win over visiting Phoenix.

The 1986-87 and 1993-94 Hawks each won 57 games.

Clippers 105, Lakers 100: Blake Griffin and J.J. Redick scored 27 points apiece and the host Clippers completed a 4-0 season sweep of their downtrodden Staples Center co-tenant.

Chris Paul had 19 to go over 13,000 in his career for the Clippers, who have won four in a row and 11 of 12.

Kings 116, Timberwolves 111: Omri Casspi scored 16 of his career-high 31 points in the third quarter and host Sacramento overcame a sluggish start to beat Minnesota.

Sim Bhullar, Sacramento's 7-foot-5 center, made history when he checked in for the final 16.1 seconds, becoming the first player of Indian descent to play in an NBA game.

Rangers get past Devils, win Presidents' Trophy

The Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — There wasn't much celebrating after the New York Rangers won the Presidents' Trophy for the best regular-season record for the third time in franchise history.

The postgame activity after the Rangers 4-2 win over the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night was businesslike, from congratulating goaltender Cam Talbot on the ice to talking about heading into the playoffs with home-ice advantage. It was good to get the job done, but there is more to do.

"It's not an easy thing to do," coach Alain Vigneault said. "You look at the teams still fighting to get into the playoffs. It's a challenging thing. For our group, it's one thing in the direction that we're looking to get to. I'm very proud of our group but we all know that we are going to be judged by what we do in the playoffs. So this is a first step and we're going to get ready for the next one."

New York won't know who it will face in the opening round of the Eastern Conference playoffs, but Game 1 will be at Madison Square Garden next week.

The Rangers never trailed against the Devils after getting goals from Kevin Hayes and Ryan McDonagh in a 47-second span in the first period. Talbot made 19 saves and James Sheppard and Carl Hagelin added third-period goals as the Rangers swept the four-game season series with New Jersey.

The win was the Rangers' fifth straight, and it improved their record to 52-21-7 for 111 points. The 52-wins ties the franchise record and the point total is one less than that franchise mark, both set in 1993-94, the last time they won the Stanley Cup.

Senators 4, Penguins 3 (OT): Mark Stone scored 2:43 into overtime to cap host Ottawa's comeback from three goals down, preserving the Senators' playoff hopes.

The Senators moved into a tie with Boston for the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. Ottawa trails Pittsburgh, which holds the first wild-card spot, by one point.

Flyers 5, Islanders 4: Brayden Schenn capped a wild final 2 minutes with the winning goal with 2.1

seconds left to lift host Philadelphia.

With a playoff berth at stake, the Islanders wiped out a 4-1 deficit in the third period and nearly sent the game into overtime. Johnny Boychuk scored with 1:44 remaining in the game to make it 4-3 and Anders Lee tied it with 28 seconds to go.

Red Wings 3, Hurricanes 2: Gustav Nyquist and Pavel Datsyuk scored in the third period, and host Detroit moved closer to its 24th consecutive playoff berth.

The Red Wings' streak of playoff berths is the longest active run in the four major U.S. pro leagues.

Jets 1, Blues 0: Ondrej Pavelec stopped 30 shots for his second consecutive shutout and visiting Winnipeg strengthened its bid for a Western Conference playoff spot.

The Jets, who have won three straight, are battling Los Angeles and Calgary for the final two playoff spots in the West.

Wild 2, Blackhawks 1: Devan Dubnyk made 32 saves to help visiting Minnesota clinch a playoff spot.

Mikael Granlund and Jason Zucker scored in the third period for the Wild.

Avalanche 3, Predators 2: Joey Hishon broke a third-period tie with his first NHL goal, Semyon Varlamov stopped 40 shots and Colorado handed visiting Nashville its fourth straight loss.

Calle Jarnkrok and Ryan Ellis had scored for the Predators, who remain a point behind St. Louis for the Central Division title.

Flames 3, Coyotes 2: Sean Monahan scored the tiebreaking goal midway through the third period to lift host Calgary.

Calgary can clinch its first tip to the postseason in six years when it hosts Los Angeles.

Oilers 4, Kings 2: Matt Fraser scored a pair of goals and host Edmonton dealt a big blow to the playoff hopes of defending Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles.

Los Angeles trails Winnipeg by three points and Calgary by two points with only two games remaining for all three teams in the hunt for the final two playoff spots in the Western Conference.



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Woods returns to Masters

The Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Tiger Woods hit the ball so pure that he felt like a 14-time major champion. Before long, the swing left him and he resembled a guy who couldn't break 80. He became so frustrated that he even threw a few clubs because of a game that had never been so maddening.

This wasn't Woods playing in the Masters.

This was the last seven weeks when he was trying to decide if he should even show up.

"I worked my (tail) off," Woods said Tuesday with a smile of satisfaction. "That's the easiest way to kind of describe it. I worked hard. ... People would never understand how much work I put into it to come and do this again. But it was sunup to sundown, whenever I had free time. If the kids were asleep, I'd still be doing it. And then when they were in school, I'd still be doing it."

"So it was a lot of work."

And he got his answer.

It took nearly two months, followed by two practice rounds at Augusta National last week, before Woods decided to end his self-imposed break and play the Masters.

Woods last played the Masters two years ago. He was No. 1 in the world and the overwhelming favorite. Now he is at No. 111 in the world and Las Vegas bookies may have been generous in listing him at 40-1.

Golf's biggest star always lights up Augusta National, and such was the case when he arrived Monday afternoon.

Only now, expectations have been replaced by sheer curiosity. Never mind that he hasn't played in nearly two months and hasn't won the Masters in 10

years. When last seen at a tournament, Woods couldn't hit a simple chip shot, and the rest of his game was barely PGA Tour quality.

Adam Scott listed a half-dozen players that he could see contend for a green jacket, and he was asked why Woods was not on that short list.

"My guess is as good as yours," Scott said. "I really don't know. I have no idea what he's doing. I've listed a bunch of guys that I've watched play a little bit and followed their results. But it's a little bit unknown with Tiger because he hasn't played for a few months."

"When you're talking about a world-class player, you just don't know," he said. "I'm sure he has high hopes."

That he does.

Woods didn't look anything like the player who shot 82 at the Phoenix Open; who bladed a bunker shot over a green and into the bleachers; who walked off the course at Torrey Pines after 11 holes of the first round. During practice Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning, he looked closer to normal. There appeared to be no issues with his swing or his chipping. He looked comfortable when he hugged his two children on the practice green and in a press room with no empty seats.

Woods always said he didn't play in a tournament if he didn't expect to win. That standard hasn't changed. There are no moral victories, even for a guy who hasn't won anything since the Bridgestone Invitational in August 2013.

"No, I still feel the same way. I want to win," Woods said. "The whole idea is to prepare and do that. And I feel like my game is finally ready to go and do that again."

So many others are coming into the Masters in better form.

Rory McIlroy won early in the year at Dubai and began showing progress toward the end of the Florida swing. Jordan Spieth won at Innisbrook, was runner-up at the Texas Open and lost in a playoff at the Houston Open in his last three starts. He is eager at another shot at Augusta National, where last year he played in the final group at age 20.

Bubba Watson is the defending champion and going after his third green jacket in four years. Only Jack Nicklaus won so many Masters at that rate.

"I think everyone is just curious to see how he comes back," McIlroy said. "I don't think you should ever underestimate it him. He's done things on the golf course that are pretty special. But you know, just as a golf fan in general, I'm sort of interested to see how he does when he comes back. I had a good chat with him on the putting green today. He feels good. He's been working hard. He's got the motivation to keep at it."

"And just like everyone else," McIlroy added, "I'll be looking for his score and seeing what he's doing."

Woods said he would have skipped the Masters if he didn't feel ready.

There was no epiphany on the practice range at home. The goal was to be better at the end of each day. He worked with his new coach, Chris Como, and never lost hope that his game would not return. That's not to say there weren't a few trying moments.

"It would come in flashes," Woods said. "I would get in these modes where it would come for 10 minutes and I would just have it, just dialed in. And then I'd lose it for an hour. And then I'd get it back. And next thing you know, I'd flip to having it for an hour to 10 minutes of losing it. And then it got to a point where it was just there."

Padres top Dodgers with 4-run 9th inning

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Wil Myers keyed a four-run ninth inning with a tiebreaking single that sent the San Diego Padres to a rain-delayed 7-3 victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers on Tuesday night.

Clint Barmes led off the ninth against Chris Hatcher with a single. Barmes went to third when catcher Yasmani Grandal overran a sacrifice bunt to the right of the plate by pinch-hitter Cory Spangenberg that had a lot of backspin on it, and hit him in the back with his throw to first.

Myers grounded the next pitch to right field to put San Diego ahead. Derek Norris followed with a two-run double, and Will Middlebrooks capped the rally with an RBI single.

Joaquin Benoit (1-0) got the victory despite giving up the tying run on an eighth-inning homer by Adrian Gonzalez — his second in two days.

Braves 12, Marlins 2: Atlanta scored seven runs in the first inning off Mat Latos and beat host Miami for the second straight day.

Latos (0-1), acquired in the offseason, lasted only two-thirds of an inning in the shortest outing of his career. He was booed as he left the game, his first for his hometown team, with an ERA of 94.50.

Freddie Freeman, Christian Bethancourt and Chris Johnson hit RBI doubles in the first.

Orioles 6, Rays 5: Adam Jones hit a two-run double during visiting Baltimore's four-run first inning off Nathan Karns, who gave up six runs in 5²/₃ innings.

Steve Pearce homered for the second straight game, a two-run drive in the second that made it 6-0.

Angels 2, Mariners 0: At Seattle, C.J. Wilson allowed two hits in eight innings and David Freese prevented all the offense with a two-run homer for Los Angeles.

Wilson (1-0) wriggled out of a second-inning jam and retired the final 17 batters he faced. The left-hander allowed three baserunners and needed only two strikeouts to shut down the Mariners.

Albert Pujols doubled with one out in the fourth, and Freese followed with a shot to right-center that barely cleared the fence.

Rangers 3, Athletics 1: A healthy Prince Fielder hit a pair of run-scoring singles to help Jeff Banister earn his first victory as a major league manager, and visiting Texas bounced back to beat Oakland.

Colby Lewis (1-0) shut down his former club for six sharp innings in his season debut. Texas snapped a scoreless streak of 21 regular-season innings when Fielder punched a single to shallow center in the third.

Rockies 5, Brewers 2: At Milwaukee, Jordan Lyles pitched six effective innings and Colorado hit six doubles for the second consecutive game.

Rockies hitters have 12 doubles in the first two games of the season, matching a major league record set by the New York Giants in 1912.

Colorado pitchers retired their final 13 batters, and LaTroy Hawkins got the save.

Diamondbacks 7, Giants 6: At Phoenix, Jake Lamb and David Peralta each hit a three-run homer to power Arizona past San Francisco.

Giants pitcher Matt Cain was placed on the 15-day disabled list before the game with a right forearm injury.

Watson looks to win third green jacket

The Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Bubba Watson was strolling up to the ninth green, toward the Augusta National clubhouse and that towering oak tree, when he was struck by a fact that still seems a bit unreal.

He's won the Masters not just once, but twice.

"I can't even believe it," Watson told his caddie, Ted Scott, during a practice round. "I'm still trying to get over 2012, and I haven't even got to 2014 yet."

Yet here he is, a champion two of the last three years, now trying to become only the fourth golfer in Masters history to defend his title. It's a very exclusive club, currently limited to three giants of the game: Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo and Tiger Woods.

Somehow, it just doesn't seem right — not even to Watson — that a good ol' boy from the Florida Panhandle, who taught himself to swing a golf club and approaches the game with a decidedly unconventional attitude, could even have a shot at joining such a list.

Bubba and the Golden Bear?

Bubba and Sir Nick?

Bubba and Tiger?

C'mon, get real.

"How does a guy from my background make it?" Watson marveled. "How does a guy from my background actually win it, and then win it again?"

When he captured his first green jacket three years ago, it was with a daring hook off the pine straw on the second playoff hole. "Bubba Golf," he called it, the sort of audacious shot most pros wouldn't even consider, much less attempt.

Watson's victory a year ago was much

less dramatic, though no less impressive. He overcame a three-shot deficit to Jordan Spieth with back-to-back birdies at the eighth and ninth holes, was steady as can be on the back side, and pulled away for a three-stroke victory.

"To have the green jacket twice wrapped around me, I still can't believe it," he said.

Not that it's a fluke.

Watson's unorthodox game sets up well for Augusta National. There are only three holes — Nos. 1, 7 and 18 — that give him some trouble off the tee. Most of the others are quite manageable for a left-hander who likes to cut it off the tee with that trademark pink driver and doesn't mind taking some chances.

"All of the other holes look good to my eye," he said. "The trees outline the fairway pretty good, so it's easy for me to envision the shot I want to hit."

While his game has never been better — Watson earned his seventh career victory at the World Golf Championship in November, was a runner-up this year at Phoenix, and comes into Augusta ranked third in the world — he remains a polarizing figure, a guy with an insular view of the world and not always a man of the people.

That reputation tailed him all the way to the Masters, when ESPN released a survey that showed he's easily the least popular player among his fellow PGA Tour competitors.

Watson didn't dispute that he's had some "mess-ups" along the way. He said he hopes to use the criticism to become a better person.

There's no lack of respect for his game. He's clearly one of the favorites this

week, a popular choice along with Rory McIlroy — who's trying to complete a career Grand Slam — and rising star Spieth, someone clearly on the verge of winning his first major title.

"You can imagine what Bubba must feel like," said Adam Scott, whose 2013 victory is sandwiched between Watson's two titles. Augusta National "is seemingly made for his kind of game, and he's playing nicely as well."

Watson shrugged off those who would anoint him a favorite. But he conceded that he's feeling a lot more comfortable defending his title this time around, compared to the way it went down two years ago, when he broke par only once and finished in a tie for 50th.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said. "I mean, I'm scared to death of the Champions Dinner in '13 because you're talking about great champions across the board, old and young, and now I'm getting to sit and have dinner with them and I'm making sure they like the food I picked out. The media attention, the atmosphere — even a year later — you're excited about your win. Sometimes you get away from your routine or you just use your energy in a different way. That's what I did."

"This time, I know what to expect. Doesn't mean I'm going to play better, just I know what to expect."

Watson would love to win a few more green jackets.

If he doesn't, there won't be any complaints.

"If I never win again," Watson said, "it's a good place to win twice."