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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US training of allies a troubled tactic

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is trying to stabilize Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria using a tactic that's rarely worked: training and equipping foreign forces.

The effort to defeat terrorists and insurgencies without using American troops is failing in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and other Sunni nations have now intervened. It still faces long odds and long wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

For now, President Barack Obama is doubling down on getting other nations to fight by boosting arms sales to the Gulf states, resuming military aid to Egypt and supporting the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen.

In Afghanistan, trainers have 21 months left before Obama plans to recall them. In Iraq, U.S. advisers are rebuilding a U.S.-trained army that crumbled last year when Islamic

militants attacked. Training moderate Syrian rebels, which Congress approved last fall, has yet to begin.

Weak institutions and sectarian divisions in all three countries have imperiled the chances for success, and the U.S. military remains focused on maintaining its own combat capabilities, not developing those of uncertain allies, say former military officers and diplomats.

"We want to kill people and break things; we don't want to train, advise and equip our allies," said John Nagl, a West Point graduate, Rhodes scholar and combat veteran who calls inadequate training of Iraqi and Afghan units "the single biggest military failing of the last 15 years."

The dilemma isn't new. Almost 50 years ago, President Richard Nixon tried "Vietnamization," a failed effort to extri-

cate the U.S. from the Vietnam War by bolstering South Vietnamese forces.

The U.S. has long trained allied militaries from South Korea to Colombia and El Salvador, and Pentagon officials have cited the Philippines and, until recently, Yemen as successes.

Even so, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote in Foreign Affairs five years ago that "strategic reality demands" that the U.S. get better at training. That became a central element in the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, which concluded that "helping others to help themselves is critical to the long war."

The failures of that effort are prompting calls for change. Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said the failures of U.S.-trained units in Iraq and Mali merit a look at "institutional changes" in the

Pentagon's approach.

"A major part of U.S. national security in the future will be working with and through other security forces, and we need to learn and be as clear as we can about what works and what doesn't," Thornberry told Bloomberg reporters and editors on March 19.

Teaching foreign recruits how to wage war isn't the problem, according to current and former military officers. After all, drill sergeants in the U.S. teach civilians the rudiments of soldiering in eight to 12 weeks of basic training.

"The question is can we put a government in place that's worthy of their sacrifice?" said Richard Armitage, a former Pentagon and State Department official and Vietnam veteran. "And if we can't do that, they won't die for their country, and all the training in the world won't get you anywhere."

Militants launch attack in Iraq's Anbar province

The Washington Post

BAGDHAD — Islamic State militants launched a devastating assault on Iraqi government forces in the capital of Anbar province on Friday, wounding two senior security officers, battling troops in the city center and executing more than a dozen civilians for ties to the government.

Islamic State fighters battled Iraqi troops in new areas of the provincial capital Ramadi — just 75 miles west of Baghdad — in an offensive that brought fresh urgency to the government's plans to take on the militants in their stronghold in western Iraq.

In a visit to Habbaniyah air base in Anbar on Wednesday, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider

al-Abadi had vowed to defeat Islamic State militants in the province. Pro-government forces claimed victory over the jihadists in the northern city of Tikrit last month. It marked a serious blow to the group, which seeks to capture and hold territory to build its version of an Islamic caliphate.

But in Ramadi, the battle raged on at least two fronts on Friday, and the government was losing ground, officials said. The militants already control most of the province.

Jihadist sleeper cells in the Albu Faraj district north of the city attacked Iraqi police and army units on Thursday night, the officials said. Then, on Friday, a suicide bomber ambushed a convoy of reinforcements that included the Anbar

police chief and the head of the military's provincial operations command. Both officials were wounded, and more than 10 security personnel were killed in the attack.

In the mayhem, the Islamic State managed to capture more than half of Albu Faraj, which is less than 2 miles from the Anbar Operations Command headquarters. And as hundreds of civilians fled to central Ramadi — lugging blankets and mattresses on foot, according to videos posted on social media sites — the jihadis executed 15 relatives of local police officers, including women and children.

"They attacked from inside and outside the area, and now they control more than half of Albu Faraj," said provincial spokesman Suleiman Kubaysi.

Cleric says suspect in bomb plot mentally ill

TOPEKA, Kan. — A man accused of plotting a suicide bomb attack on Fort Riley, Kan., to help the Islamic State group is mentally ill and was acting strangely days before his arrest, according to a Muslim cleric who said he was counseling him at the FBI's request.

John T. Booker Jr., 20, of Topeka, was charged Friday with planning a suicide attack at the Army post. Prosecutors allege he told an FBI informant he wanted to kill Americans and to engage in violent jihad on behalf of the terrorist group, and said he believed such an attack was justified because the Quran "says to kill your enemies wherever they are," according to a criminal complaint.

From The Associated Press

Obama, Castro vow at summit to pursue new future for US, Cuba

The Associated Press

PANAMA CITY, Panama — President Barack Obama on Saturday declared his refusal to refight the Cold War battles of the past, while Cuban President Raul Castro rallied to his defense, absolving Obama of fault for the U.S. blockade in a stunning reversal of more than 50 years of animosity between the United States and Cuba.

Castro, in a meandering, nearly hourlong speech to the Summit of the Americas, ran through an exhaustive history of perceived Cuban grievances against the U.S. dating back more than a century — a vivid display of how raw passions remain over American attempts to undermine Cuba's

government.

Then, in an abrupt about face, he apologized for letting his emotions get the best of him. He said many U.S. presidents were at fault for that troubled history — but that Obama isn't one of them.

"I have told President Obama that I get very emotional talking about the revolution," Castro said through a translator, noting that Obama wasn't even born when the U.S. began sanctioning the island nation. "I apologize to him because President Obama had no responsibility for this."

In a remarkable vote of confidence from a Cuban leader, Castro added: "In my opinion, President Obama is an honest

man."

Castro and Obama were expected to meet later Saturday on the sidelines of the summit — the first substantial meeting between a U.S. and Cuban president in more than five decades.

Speaking just before Castro, Obama acknowledged that deep differences between their countries would persist. Yet he said he was uninterested in getting bogged down in ideology, instead casting the thaw in relations as an opening to create "more opportunities and resources for the Cuban people."

"The United States will not be imprisoned by the past," President Barack Obama said. "We're looking to the future."

VA backs solar project after concerns from Congress

By TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs said Thursday that a Little Rock solar panel project is "operational and working well" despite reports of troubles and an inquiry by an Arkansas lawmaker.

The \$8.2 million solar panels were planned to provide energy to the John L. McClellan Memorial Veterans Hospital and were nearly completed in 2013. But contract issues have since held up the project, and the VA is now moving the panels to build a parking garage.

The department is struggling with construction and health care access issues, which have caused a series of national scandals over the past year. It relinquished control of a massive hospital project in Denver earlier this month after the price tag jumped \$830 million to a total of \$1.73 billion — one of the most expensive projects of its type in the United States — due to contract fiascoes and mismanagement.

"The North Little Rock solar panels are operational and working well with \$107,000 in energy savings through October 2014," VA spokeswoman Jessica Jacobsen wrote in an email to Stars and Stripes.

However, only about 95 percent was completed in 2013 and the total cost of the project has increased by nearly \$200,000, which was added to study the system's connectivity, according to Jacobsen.

Now, the VA is planning to build a new parking garage on the same site, meaning the panels must be moved and reinstalled by a contractor.

She said the department cannot disclose the additional cost of reinstalling the 1.8 megawatt project on the parking garage because the information is considered "procurement sensitive."

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NRA event attendees get earful on Clinton

The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The prospect of Hillary Rodham Clinton's imminent presidential campaign dropped like a gift from the heavens at the National Rifle Association's annual convention Friday.

A succession of potential Republican presidential rivals slung criticism and cracked jokes about the Democratic can-

didate-to-be, and NRA leader Wayne LaPierre, never given to understatement, predicted doom for the nation if she should win.

"Hillary Rodham Clinton will bring a permanent darkness of deceit and despair forced upon the American people to endure," LaPierre said. The NRA executive vice president and CEO vowed that the powerful gun lobby would "stand shoulder to shoulder" to prevent her from

becoming the next president.

Clinton plans to announce her candidacy for the Democratic nomination on Sunday. Many speakers at the NRA convention took the opportunity to say something about it.

"Is this the ready-for-Hillary gathering?" joked Sen. Ted Cruz, of Texas.

Many in the capacity crowd at the 4,000-seat ballroom shouted back, "No!"

10 police officers on leave after Calif. beating

The Associated Press

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. — Ten sheriff's deputies in Southern California have been put on leave after several of them were shown on video kicking and punching a man following a 2½-hour chase involving a stolen horse.

San Bernardino County Sheriff John McMahon said Friday that the video "disturbed and

troubled" him and appeared to show an excessive use of force.

McMahon announced the action after Francis Pusok, 30, was arrested Thursday by deputies in a violent encounter filmed by a KNBC-TV helicopter. Pusok fled by car and then on the horse, traveling several miles while deputies chased him on foot after trying to serve a search warrant in an identity-theft investigation.

The video shows Pusok, dressed in bright red clothing, falling from the horse as a deputy ran up and fired a Taser.

As pursuing deputies reached him, Pusok was face down with his arms and legs outstretched and hands behind his back. One deputy kicked him in the head or shoulder area and punched him, and another kicked him in the crotch. Other deputies arrived moments later.

Spieth sets 36-hole record

The Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Jordan Spieth made Friday feel like Sunday at the Masters.

Fans rose to their feet and applauded when Spieth walked onto the 12th tee, and for the next two hours, ovations greeted him on tee boxes and greens. The red number next to his name on the leaderboard — 14-under par — was better than 11 of the last 13 winners.

It was easy to forget the Masters was only half over.

When the 21-year-old Texan tapped in for par and a 6-under 66, he broke the 36-hole record at the Masters that had stood for 39 years. Spieth was at 14-under 130, a two-day total matched by only three other players in major championship history.

And his five-shot lead over Charley Hoffman looked even larger considering that Spieth was a runner-up in his Masters debut last year, and he came to Augusta this year as the hottest player in golf.

"I got standing ovations walking to multiple greens," Spieth said. "I mean, that's something you can only dream about. It's Friday, too. I'd like to have the same thing happening on Sunday. Got a lot of work to do before that happens."

Hoffman tried to keep pace with Spieth and ran off three birdies on the back nine until closing with a bogey for a 68. He was five shots behind at 135, a score that would have been leading at 36 holes in the last three Masters. Hoffman didn't care about that.

"It's this year. It's not any other year,"

he said. "I'm just playing golf and I've only played 36 holes. And we've got a lot of golf left."

Dustin Johnson opened with a double bogey, and then became the first player in Masters history to make three eagles in one round. A bogey from the trees on the last hole gave him a 67, and he was seven shots behind, along with Justin Rose (70) and Paul Casey (68). Phil Mickelson (68) was eight behind.

One score that didn't matter belonged to Ben Crenshaw, a two-time Masters champion playing in his 44th and final competitive round on the course. He missed the cut and in a poignant moment, longtime Augusta caddy Carl Jackson came onto the 18th green for a long, warm embrace.

"I feel like I've won the tournament," Crenshaw said.

Rory McIlroy certainly didn't feel that way.

The career Grand Slam might have to wait for McIlroy, though he stayed alive for a green jacket this week — mathematically, anyway — by making the cut. He went out in 40 and fell below the cut line, only to answer with a 31 on the back nine for another 71.

Even so, he was 12 shots behind at 2-under 142.

"I'm proud of myself the way I fought back," McIlroy said. "I'm going to need four more nines like that to have a chance, it looks like. Jordan has played a phenomenal two rounds of golf and doesn't look like he's going to let up."

Tiger Woods was on the same score as McIlroy and had a different outlook.

The four-time Masters champion made

only one bogey in his round of 69 — ending a streak of nine straight rounds at Augusta without breaking 70 — and said a few putts falling is all that has kept him from being closer.

"And I'm still right there," Woods said. "I'm 12 back, but there's not a lot of guys ahead of me. And with 36 holes here to go, anything can happen — '96 proved that. So we have a long way to go."

He was referring to Greg Norman losing a six-shot lead on the final day in 1996.

Spieth might find confidence in another reference.

The three other players who had a five-shot lead after 36 holes at Augusta — Herman Keiser in 1946, Jack Nicklaus in 1975 and Raymond Floyd in 1976. All went on to win. Floyd previously had the 36-hole record of 131 at the Masters in that 1976 wire-to-wire victory.

Perhaps even more valuable was Spieth's experience last year. He was tied for the lead with Bubba Watson and two shots ahead with 11 holes to play when he fell behind and never caught up to Watson. What he learned that day was to be patient.

"The hardest thing to do is put aside wanting to win so bad, and just kind of going through the motion and letting my ball striking and putting happen," Spieth said. "I got off to a great start and had a chance to win last year on Sunday. I'd like to have that same opportunity this year. Again, this is only the halfway point and I'm aware of that. I'm going to try and stay ... very patient these last two days and understand it's going to feel like a whole 'nother tournament."

Hamilton's return to Angels uncertain

The Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Los Angeles Angels owner Arte Moreno isn't certain Josh Hamilton will play for the team again after his latest relapse into substance abuse.

Moreno also said the outfielder's contract contains language protecting the team against a relapse by Hamilton, apparently contradicting his previous statements. The players' association later issued a statement denying Moreno's claims.

Moreno spoke briefly to reporters on the field at Angel Stadium before the club's home opener against Kansas City on Friday night.

When asked if Hamilton definitely would play again for Los Angeles, Moreno replied: "I will not say that."

Moreno's comments are the latest development in an uncomfortable divide between the Angels and Hamilton, a five-time All-Star who hasn't come close to justifying his \$125 million contract in his first two seasons.

Hamilton isn't with the team while undergoing rehabilitation on his surgically repaired shoulder, and he isn't expected to be ready to play again until May.

Moreno also claimed that the Angels have language in Hamilton's contract protecting them against a relapse by the troubled outfielder. He said the team was exploring whether to use that protection, although he wasn't specific.

The MLBPA responded swiftly with a statement that it "emphatically denies" Moreno's assertion that he had "requested and received the approval of the union" to put such language in a contract.

"To the contrary, the collectively bargained provisions of the (Joint Drug Agreement) and the Basic Agreement supersede all other player contract provisions and explicitly prevent clubs from exactly the type of action Mr. Moreno alluded to," the statement read.

Hamilton, who turns 34 next month, has three years and \$83 million left on his deal with the Angels. The 2010 AL MVP has been largely ineffective in two injury-marred seasons in Orange County, managing just 31 homers and 123 RBIs.

Major League Baseball will not discipline Hamilton for his self-reported relapse after a ruling last week by an arbitrator appointed under MLB's joint drug program with the players' association. The Angels reacted angrily to the decision, with President John Carpino saying the ruling "defies logic."

The Angels could have saved millions if Hamilton had been suspended, but the free-spending Moreno insists he isn't trying to pinch pennies two years after making the decision to spend nine figures on a 30-something slugger with a well-documented history of substance abuse.

"It's not about money," Moreno said. "Nothing about money."

Red Sox top Yankees in 19-inning epic

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — In one of the classic games of their long and illustrious rivalry, the Boston Red Sox finally outlasted the New York Yankees 6-5 in 19 innings early Saturday when the game-ending double play was turned at 2:13 a.m.

In the first meeting of the year between the teams, Boston at last went ahead for good on a sacrifice fly by Mookie Betts of Esmil Rogers (0-1). Xander Bogaerts scored the decisive run after reaching on his fourth hit in extra innings.

Chase Headley and Mark Teixeira hit tying home runs for the Yankees in an early-season epic interrupted by a power outage for 16 minutes in the 12th. That's why the official time of game was 6 hours, 49 minutes — even though it took more than 7 hours to complete.

Reds 5, Cardinals 4: With Joey Votto playing like an MVP again, host Cincinnati Reds have stayed unbeaten.

Votto hit a pair of two-run homers — the strongest indication yet that he's fully back in form — as the Reds improved to 4-0 for the first time since 2011.

Astros 5, Rangers 1: Jed Lowrie and Colby Rasmus each homered for Houston, which beat injury-plagued Texas to spoil the home debut of new Texas manager

Jeff Banister.

Rangers starter Derek Holland (0-1) left after only one inning because of tightness in left shoulder. The left-hander will be out at least six weeks, and maybe more, after being diagnosed as a strained subscapularis muscle.

Royals 4, Angels 2: Kendrys Morales homered, Lorenzo Cain drove in two runs and visiting Kansas City remained unbeaten with a victory over Los Angeles.

Rockies 5, Cubs 1: Host Colorado tied the best start in franchise history, beating Chicago behind Troy Tulowitzki's two-run double and Justin Morneau's solo homer.

Diamondbacks 4, Dodgers 3 (10): Ender Inciarte had a game-ending single with one out in the bottom of the 10th inning, leading host Arizona to a victory over Los Angeles.

Twins 6, White Sox 0: Tommy Milone pitched two-hit ball into the eighth inning and visiting Minnesota got its first win under manager Paul Molitor, beating Chicago in its home opener.

Blue Jays 12, Orioles 5: Jose Bautista broke out of an early-season slump by going 3-for-3 and scoring four runs as Toronto ruined Baltimore's home opener.

Phillies 4, Nationals 1: Cesar Hernandez had a go-ahead, two-run single in a wild four-run seventh and Freddy Galvis

had three hits and an RBI, leading host Philadelphia to a victory over Washington.

Tigers 8, Indians 4: Alfredo Simon took a shutout into the sixth in his debut and Nick Castellanos hit a two-run homer as Detroit won its fourth straight, spoiling Cleveland's home opener.

Marlins 10, Rays 9 (10): Christian Yelich had a game-ending RBI single in the bottom of the 10th inning and drove in three runs to lift host Miami beat Tampa Bay and earn its first win.

Pirates 6, Brewers 2: Pedro Alvarez homered and drove in two runs, Neil Walker had three hits and visiting Pittsburgh avoided its first 0-4 start in nine years with a win over Milwaukee.

Braves 5, Mets 3: Phil Gosselin had a tiebreaking two-run single in the eighth inning, Cameron Maybin homered and Atlanta won its home opener with a victory over sloppy New York.

Athletics 12, Mariners 0: Drew Pomeranz and two relievers combined on a three-hitter, and host Oakland beat Seattle.

Padres 1, Giants 0: Wil Myers hit an RBI double off the right-field wall with one out in the eighth inning and Craig Kimbrel got his first save with San Diego, which beat visiting San Francisco.



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Jones prevails in Xfinity race

The Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Erik Jones wore a cap and gown so he could pick up his high school diploma on a stage at Texas Motor Speedway a year ago.

Holding his first Xfinity Series trophy in Victory Lane, the 18-year-old's racing suit was just fine this time.

Jones outran Sprint Cup stars Brad Keselowski and Dale Earnhardt Jr. on a restart with 25 laps remaining Friday night, winning by 1.6 seconds in his ninth career Xfinity start.

The four-time winner in the Camping World Truck Series, where Jones races full-time, turned away a strong bid from Keselowski on the restart after earlier battling Earnhardt.

Jones even bumped the popular driver from behind, eventually getting past Earnhardt before a crash brought out the caution flag and led to the duel with Keselowski, who has 32 career Xfinity wins.

"I don't know what to say right now. It's surreal," Jones said. "We beat Cup guys tonight. That's huge for us."

Keselowski was second, and Earnhardt third, with both getting quick questions after the race about Jones in the No. 20 Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing.

A year earlier, Jones ran a truck race in Texas rather than attend his high school graduation in Michigan, and track president Eddie Gossage presented him his diploma during introductions.

Jones, who became the youngest winner in the truck series when he was 17 at Phoenix in 2013, is the second-youngest Xfinity winner at Texas at 18 years, 10 months. Chase Elliott won last spring's race at 18 years, 4 months.

"I knew he was good," Earnhardt said. "Now everybody else knows."

The win also was a first for Jones' crew chief, Michael Wheeler, a former engineer for Denny Hamlin in the Cup series.

Jones acknowledged after the race that he was frustrated with Earnhardt as he tried to get around him with about 50 laps to go, figuring the veteran was trying to teach him a little patience.

"I hope he had fun," Jones said. "I knew we had a blast. Just racing hard with those guys. They've been doing it so long. They know exactly what they're doing. I'm just trying to figure it out."

Gibbs says he's figuring it out fast, saying after the race there's no question Jones is well on his way to NASCAR's top series.

"We know Erik is on a fast track," Gibbs said. "It's just a matter of when."

Elliott finished eighth, and Xfinity points leader Ty Dillon was 12th.

Formula One: If Mercedes was concerned about the progress of chief rival Ferrari this Formula One season, its drivers didn't show it during qualifying at the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai.

Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg were far ahead of the rest of the field, with Hamilton edging his Mercedes teammate for pole position with a time of 1 minute, 35.782 seconds on Saturday.

Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel was nearly a full second behind in third place.

It was Hamilton's third straight pole to start the new F1 season — and his fifth overall at the Shanghai International Circuit.

"China continues to be a good place for me. I guess the circuit fits my style more than others and I enjoy driving it," Hamilton said. "There's a long race ahead

and the Ferraris are very quick once again here, so the job is far from done."

Indeed, Hamilton took the pole in his last race at the Malaysian Grand Prix two weeks ago, but it was a resurgent Vettel who was standing at the top of the podium at the end of the weekend.

Rosberg was clearly dejected by finishing behind his teammate yet again, this time by just 0.04 seconds. When his team informed him over the radio how close he was to Hamilton, Rosberg replied with an exasperated "Oh, come on guys!"

"It's just four-hundredths and that makes it even more annoying because it's just very, very close," he said.

Rosberg challenged Hamilton for the drivers' championship until the very end of last season, but he's yet to recapture that same driving form at the start of 2015.

"I've focused on race pace with my setup and I know that tires will be the decisive factor tomorrow. So I will be aiming to put a lot of pressure on Lewis ahead of me," he said.

Vettel, too, believes the Ferraris have shown enough pace in practice sessions in China to keep the pressure on Mercedes.

"We knew that it would be tough today in qualifying to be really, really close," he said. "I think for us, we're fairly happy to make sure we are right behind them."

Vettel's teammate, Kimi Raikkonen, will start in sixth position on Sunday, behind the two Williams drivers, Felipe Massa and Valtteri Bottas, who were fourth and fifth, respectively.

Rounding out the top 10 were Red Bull's Daniel Ricciardo, Lotus' Romain Grosjean and the two Sauber drivers, Felipe Nasr and Marcus Ericsson.

Isles add to Pens' misery

The Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins have spent the majority of the Sidney Crosby era treating the regular season as an 82-game exhibition until the playoffs start.

Not this year. Not by a long shot. John Tavares broke a tie with his 37th goal of the season early in the third period and the New York Islanders pulled away to beat the reeling Penguins 3-1 on Friday night. Pittsburgh has lost five straight but can still claw into the post-season through a series of scenarios, the easiest coming with a win over lowly Buffalo on Saturday night.

"That's why we play 82 games to see who (are) the best teams after that," Penguins forward Patric Hornqvist said. "Tomorrow is a hell of a game and everybody is excited. Live or die. Can't wait."

There are no such issues for the Islanders. New York clinched a spot Thursday and assured itself of at least third-place in the Metropolitan Division. The Islanders can earn home-ice in the first round with a win over Columbus on Saturday and a Washington loss to the New York Rangers.

Jaroslav Halak recovered from a horrific meltdown in a loss to Philadelphia on Tuesday night — when he allowed the winning goal on a knuckling wrist shot from 50 feet with 2 seconds left in regulation — by stopping 37 shots. Michael Grabner and Casey Cizikas also scored for the Islanders.

"They had a desperate team tonight and they were throwing everything at the net," Grabner said. "And (Halak) stood on his head. But he's been doing that all year for us and the last game, it was just bad luck. We put that behind us."

Pittsburgh appeared to grab momentum when Rob Scuderi he banged home a shot from the left circle with just 5.7 seconds to go in the second to tie the game. The defenseman's first goal in more than two years evened things, but not for long.

Tavares had little trouble flipping a rebound by Marc-Andre Fleury 2:46 into the third. Grabner added his eighth goal with less than 4 minutes remaining and Halak took care of the rest.

No matter what happens in the final regular season game ever at Nassau Coliseum on Saturday, the Islanders will at least get two more games in their outdated rink before moving to Brooklyn next season.

Blue Jackets 4, Sabres 2: Cam Atkinson scored on a rebound midway through the third period and Sergei Bobrovsky made 23 saves to help host Columbus assure Buffalo the best chance at the No. 1 pick in the NHL Draft.

The regulation loss locked up the worst overall record in the league for the Sabres (23-50-8) and the best odds of procuring gifted forward Connor McDavid or Hobe Baker winner Jack Eichel.

The Blue Jackets, who also got goals from Nick Foligno and Matt Calvert and an empty-netter from Boone Jenner, tied franchise records with their sixth consecutive home win and 12th game in a row earning at least a point (11-0-1). Todd Richards also became the Blue Jackets' leader in coaching victories with 126, one more than Ken Hitchcock.

Brian Gionta had a goal and an assist and Mikhail Grigorenko also scored for the Sabres.

Mavericks outlast Nuggets in double OT

The Associated Press

DENVER — Between a sprained right ankle and a suspension, this has been a trying season for Raymond Felton.

But when the Dallas Mavericks needed a basket, Felton delivered. And when they needed a crucial stop, he came through again.

Felton hit a layup with 1.5 seconds remaining in double overtime, then blocked a last-second shot to help Dallas beat the Denver Nuggets 144-143 on Friday night after the Mavericks squandered a 23-point lead.

Felton has dealt with an ankle sprain that caused him to miss 26 games, and also sat out the first four contests after his guilty plea in a New York gun case.

In the second overtime, with the other starters on the bench, Felton stepped up his game. He drove past Randy Foye and banked in a shot high off the glass. He then got a piece of Kenneth Faried's jumper at the buzzer, causing the ball to wind up short.

Celtics 99, Cavaliers 93: Marcus Smart scored 19 points, and Boston boosted its playoff hopes with a big road win over Cleveland.

The Celtics had five players score in double figures. Isaiah Thomas had 17 points, Avery Bradley scored 15 and Tyler Zeller finished with 13.

Nets 117, Wizards 80: Brook Lopez scored 26 points, Bojan Bogdanovic added 22 and host Brooklyn cruised to the easy victory over Washington.

The Nets' 37-point margin was their biggest at Barclays Center, where they've won six of their last seven and 10 of 13

overall.

Pacers 107, Pistons 103: Rodney Stuckey scored 24 points, including three straight jumpers down the stretch, and visiting Indiana kept up its playoff push.

Indiana (36-43) has won four in a row and is one game behind Brooklyn and Boston for the last two Eastern Conference playoff spots.

Grizzlies 89, Jazz 88: Marc Gasol had 22 points, seven rebounds and six assists, and Memphis held on for the road win against Utah.

The Grizzlies closed the game on a 16-6 run, but had to wait out a few anxious moments at the end. Gasol was called for a foul on a three-point attempt by Gordon Hayward with .01 seconds remaining. Hayward buried the first two free throws, but missed the third that likely would have forced overtime.

Pelicans 90, Suns 75: Anthony Davis had 19 points and nine rebounds to lead host New Orleans past Phoenix.

Eric Gordon scored 15 points and Tyreke Evans had 14 to help the Pelicans keep pace with Oklahoma City for the eighth and final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Thunder 116, Kings 103: Russell Westbrook had 27 points and 10 assists, and host Oklahoma City remained even with New Orleans for the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

The Thunder expanded a six-point lead at the end of three quarters into a 17-point margin down the stretch. Anthony Morrow helped put the game away with a pair of fourth-quarter threes as Oklahoma City broke a four-game losing streak.

Bucks 99, Knicks 91: Giannis

Antetokounmpo returned to the lineup with 23 points and moved visiting Milwaukee to the verge of a playoff spot.

The Bucks lowered their magic number to one for clinching a playoff berth, which would complete a remarkable turnaround from an NBA-worst 15-67 record last season.

Hawks 104, Hornets 80: Mike Muscala scored 17 points, and host Atlanta reached 60 wins for the first time in franchise history.

Kyle Korver had 16 points for Atlanta (60-19), and Al Horford finished with 15 points and eight rebounds. Muscala was 8-for-9 from the field in 25½ minutes while filling in for injured forward Paul Millsap.

Lakers 106, Timberwolves 98: Ryan Kelly scored 21 points, rookie Jabari Brown added 20 points and seven assists, and host Los Angeles snapped a five-game losing streak.

Each of the Lakers' starters scored in double figures, including rookie point guard Jordan Clarkson, who had 18 points, nine assists and six rebounds.

Raptors 101, Magic 99: Lou Williams made a three-pointer with 9.9 seconds left, lifting visiting Toronto to its 11th straight win over Orlando.

DeMar DeRozan led the Raptors with 29 points. Tyler Hansbrough had 16 points, and Williams finished with 13.

Spurs 104, Rockets 103: Tim Duncan had 29 points and blocked James Harden's layup with 2.9 seconds left to give visiting San Antonio its 10th straight victory.

San Antonio jumped into the third spot in the Western Conference and Houston dropped from third to sixth.