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New system for DOD civilian evaluations

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department on Friday began another overhaul of how it evaluates its civilian federal employees, this time with the support of employee unions whose opposition doomed the previous program.

The first stage of the new Defense Performance Management and Appraisal Program involves about 15,000 employees, many in the national capital area. That includes several relatively small components, such as the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, plus the headquarters operations of some larger ones, such as the Navy's civilian personnel branch. Over the next two years, the large majority of the 750,000 employees in the Defense Department civilian workforce will have their performance rated under the system.

The intent is to “create a fair, credible, and transparent performance appraisal process throughout the Department,” said a Pentagon memo announcing the programs and the entities in the first phase. “This program will link individual performance to Department of Defense values and organizational mission; will ensure ongoing recognition and communication between employees and supervisors throughout the appraisal cycle; and will be critical to

effective mission accomplishment and increased employee engagement.”

Federal employee performance ratings are used in decisions on promotions, financial awards, advancement up the steps of the pay ladder, and discipline, including reassignment, demotion and firing.

Because the Defense Department is the largest federal employer, its policies are watched for possible application across the federal workforce.

The new ratings program, part of a broader personnel initiative called New Beginnings, differs greatly from the National Security Personnel System, a pay-for-performance system installed by the George W. Bush administration that at one time applied to more than 200,000 employees.

Unions representing Defense Department employees opposed that program from the outset and successfully pushed for its repeal in late 2009, when the White House and Congress were under Democratic control.

The repeal law ordered Defense Department management to collaborate with employees and their unions in crafting a new ratings system, among other requirements.

That resulted in a series of town hall meetings and labor-management working groups, with much of the design work concentrated in the past two years. The department outlined the program last spring and

issued detailed guidance in early February.

“New Beginnings is about a cultural change,” said Don Hale, president of the American Federation of Government Employees local at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. “It’s about employee engagement and employee involvement in decisions that are made today and also in the future.”

The system features three ratings levels, corresponding to Levels 1, 3 and 5 of the five-level rating system commonly used in the government — in ascending order, unacceptable, fully successful and outstanding.

Employees will be involved in writing their performance expectations, which must meet certain standards, and can write self-assessments at the end of a cycle that the supervisor would have to consider in setting the final rating.

Supervisors will have to monitor performance continuously and formally meet with employees at least three times in the 12-month rating cycle. Supervisors also must watch for training or development assignments that will benefit employees and must warn them if their performance is falling below the fully successful level and help them improve.

The program is to roll out in phases so that nearly all Defense Department employees will be under it by October 2018.

NATO: Taliban, other militants may be fortifying ties

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban appear to be strengthening ties with other extremist groups, NATO spokesman Brig. Gen. Charles H. Cleveland said Tuesday, a development that could further boost the already emboldened insurgents and hinder international efforts at reconciliation.

The warning came just days after Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said “fundamental decisions” would have to be made urgently about coalition troop levels in 2017.

Cleveland, who is also the spokesman for the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, said the opaque nature of the insurgents makes it difficult to gauge when they are cooperating, “but we do see these organizations

... beginning to work more and more together.”

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the operational commander of the Haqqani Network, a group Cleveland described as “perhaps the most capable terrorist organization operating in Afghanistan,” was named deputy leader of the Taliban last year.

“We do believe that that probably indicates to us that we are going to see a bit of a closer relationship between those organizations,” Cleveland said.

He also said the military “expect al-Qaida will very likely be working more closely with the Taliban as we move forward,” after the group’s leaders swore allegiance to new Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour last summer.

By consolidating ties with other groups,

“the Taliban really does pose, in our view, a very serious and a very real threat,” Cleveland said.

The Afghan government had hoped to exploit Taliban infighting after authorities revealed that former Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar had been dead for two years, and some senior insurgent leaders opposed Mansour’s appointment as his successor.

The Taliban made impressive gains in 2015, after the international military coalition ended its combat role in Afghanistan. The insurgents have vowed to increase attacks this year, leading some analysts to predict that fighting in 2016 could be the deadliest since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001 in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Iraqi forces meet heavy resistance in Hit

Associated Press

HIT, Iraq — Iraqi forces were facing heavy resistance Tuesday as they pushed toward the center of a town held by Islamic State militants in western Anbar province, commanders at the scene said.

The small town of Hit — which lies along the Euphrates River in a valley in the sprawling desert of Anbar — is strategically important as it sits along an Islamic State supply line that links territory controlled by the extremist Sunni group in Iraq and in Syria. Through the line, the Islamic State ferries fighters and supplies from Syria into Iraq.

Iraqi troops entered Hit on Monday under cover of heavy airstrikes and a week after launching the operation to retake the town. Their advance has been stalled as tens of thousands of civilians got trapped in the fighting.

A political crisis in Baghdad as well as poor weather conditions further slowed the push.

Iraqi commanders overseeing the operation said Tuesday the speed of the advance into Hit will depend on the fighting.

Gen. Husham al-Jabri said Iraqi counterterrorism forces were hit with a barrage of mortars and a string of suicide car bombings Tuesday morning as they pushed into Hit from the

north. He didn't give casualty figures.

"Our speed depends on the resistance we're facing," said al-Jabri, adding that they want to "keep our casualties in the lowest level."

At a makeshift base on Hit's southern edge, Iraqi troops at the front line could be heard saying over a handheld radio to commanders that the "mortars are coming down like rain."

While Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces are some of the country's most capable ground forces, they still depend heavily of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes to clear territory.

On Sunday, a rocket attack killed two Iraqi troops and

wounded four others as they entered the city's northern edge. Since Friday, al-Jabri said his forces have been hit with more than 10 suicide car bombs.

The Hit offensive comes after a string of territorial victories for Iraqi forces over the past six months. Ramadi, the Anbar provincial capital, was declared fully "liberated" by Iraqi and coalition officials in February. Coalition officials estimate the Islamic State has lost more than 40 percent of the territory it held in Iraq after the summer of 2014.

Iraq's counterterrorism forces estimate more than 20,000 civilians remain trapped inside Hit.

Leaders react to uproar over offshore accounts

Associated Press

LONDON — Governments around the world scrambled Tuesday to contain the fallout from the publication of thousands of names of rich and powerful people who conducted offshore financial activity through a Panamanian law firm.

China dismissed as "groundless" reports that relatives of current and retired politicians, including President Xi Jinping, own offshore companies. The state media are ignoring the reports, and search results for the words "Panama documents" have been blocked on websites and social media.

Iceland's prime minister has vowed to not resign despite thousands of angry protesters demanded he step down and call new elections after the leaks showed possible links to an offshore company that could represent a serious conflict of interest.

And Ukraine's president was accused of abusing his office and of tax evasion by moving his candy business offshore, possibly depriving the country

of millions of dollars in taxes.

The reports are from a global group of news organizations working with the Washington-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. They have been processing the legal records from the Mossack Fonseca law firm that were first leaked to the German Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper.

Shell companies aren't necessarily illegal. People or companies might use them to reduce their tax bill legally by benefiting from low tax rates in countries like Panama, the Cayman Islands and Bermuda. But the practice is frowned upon, particularly when used by politicians, who then face criticism for not contributing to their own countries' economies. Because offshore accounts and companies also hide the names of the ultimate owners of investments, they are often used to illegally evade taxes or launder money.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said he would not discuss the reports further and declined to say whether the individuals named would be investigated.

Trump outlines plans for funding Mexico barrier

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump says he will force Mexico to pay for a border wall as president by threatening to cut off the flow of billions of dollars in payments that immigrants send home to the country, an idea that could decimate the Mexican economy and set up an unprecedented showdown between the United States and a key diplomatic ally.

In a two-page memo to The Washington Post, Trump outlined for the first time how he would seek to force Mexico to pay for his 1,000-mile border fence, which Trump has made a cornerstone of his presidential campaign and which has been repeatedly scoffed at by current and former Mexican leaders.

The proposal would jeopardize a stream of cash that many economists say is vital for Mexico's struggling economy. But the feasibility of Trump's plan is unclear both legally and politically, and also would test the bounds of a president's execu-

tive powers in seeking to pressure another country.

In the memo, Trump said he would threaten to change a rule under the USA Patriot Act anti-terrorism law to cut off a portion of the funds sent to Mexico through money transfers, commonly known as remittances. The threat would be withdrawn if Mexico made "a one-time payment of \$5-10 billion" to pay for the border wall, he wrote.

"It's an easy decision for Mexico," Trump said in the memo, which was written on campaign stationery emblazoned with "TRUMP Make America Great Again."

After the wall is funded, Trump wrote, transfer payments could continue "to flow into their country year after year." He gave the memo to the Post in response to a written question provided to him before an interview last week.

Nearly \$25 billion was sent home by Mexicans living abroad in 2015, mostly in the form of money transfers, according to the Mexican central bank.

Villanova wins national title

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Kris Jenkins is one of those players who believes every shot is going in.

Sometimes, it feels so right to be right. The Villanova junior answered a double-clutch, game-tying three-pointer by North Carolina's Marcus Paige with a buzzer-beating three of his own Monday night to lift the Wildcats to a 77-74 victory and the national championship.

One good shot deserved another.

And Jenkins wasn't about to be outdone.

"I think every shot's going in," he said, "and this one was no different."

The shot came on a play Villanova works on every day in practice: Jenkins inbounds the ball to Ryan Arcidiacono, he works it up court and forward Daniel Ochefu sets a pick near halfcourt to clutter things up, then Arcidiacono creates.

This time, the senior point guard made an underhanded flip to Jenkins, who spotted up a pace or two behind the arc and swished it with Carolina's Isaiah Hicks running at him.

Or, as Jenkins put it: "One, two step, shoot 'em up, sleep in the streets."

Jenkins had to come up big after Paige collected a pass on the top right side of the arc and, with Arcidiacono running at him, double clutched and pumped it in to tie the game at 74 with 4.7 seconds left.

It completed a Carolina comeback from six points down with 1:52 left.

Coach Jay Wright called timeout and called the play the Wildcats (33-5) have worked on all season.

"I didn't have to say anything in the huddle," he said. "We have a name for it, that's what we're going to do. Just put everybody in their spots."

He knew the shot was going in, too.

"Bang," Wright said as he watched it fall, then calmly walked to shake Carolina

coach Roy Williams' hand. Confetti flew. The refs looked at the replay to make sure the shot got off in time. It did. The points went up on the scoreboard. Celebration on.

Jenkins finished with 14 points — the last three as memorable as any that have been scored in the history of this tournament.

After being thrown to the floor by his teammates, Jenkins got up, leaped over press row, hugged his birth mom — a college basketball coach who helped him hone his shot — and shouted, "They said we couldn't, they said we couldn't, they said we couldn't."

Oh yes, they could.

This adds to the title Villanova won in 1985, when Rollie Massimino, who was on hand Monday night, coaxed a miracle out of his eighth-seeded underdogs for a victory over star-studded Georgetown.

Hard to top this one, though.

Jenkins, who was adopted by the family of North Carolina guard Nate Britt when his mother moved to take a coaching job, now has a spot alongside — and probably above — Keith Smart, Lorenzo Charles, Christian Laettner and everyone else who ever made a late game-winner to win a big one in March Madness.

Paige finished with 21 and Joel Berry II had 20 for the Heels (33-7), the only No. 1 seed to make the Final Four. They came one agonizing shot short of giving Williams his third national title.

Not surprisingly, the tears flowed from the 65-year-old coach who, some speculate, could have worked his last game on the sideline; the entire sports program at Chapel Hill is under NCAA scrutiny and awaiting possible penalties for a long-running academic-fraud case.

"I'm not very good because I can't take away the hurt," Williams said. "I told them I loved them. I told them I wish I could have helped them more."

His thought when he saw the last shot

fly: "It was helpless. It was not a good feeling."

Even MJ felt the pain. In the stands with the thousands of Carolina Blue-wearing fans, Michael Jordan simply nodded, smiled, looked at his buddy Ahmad Rashad and said, "Good shot, good shot."

High praise from the Great One. And what a night for Villanova — a second-seeded team full of scrappers, grinders and also-rans, who proved you don't have to have a roster full of NBA-bound one-and-doners to win a title. More people in the ESPN bracket contest picked 'Nova to lose to a No. 15 seed in the first round than to win the whole thing. This team flamed out early in the last two tournaments despite big expectations.

Not this time.

Before Jenkins did his thing, it was unheralded sophomore Phil Booth — who isn't unheralded on that Villanova squad? — pouring in a career high 20 points to give the Cats their late six-point lead.

Booth forced a turnaround jumper with the shot-clock blaring to give 'Nova a 69-64 lead at the 3:03 mark. With 1:52 left, a free throw from Josh Hart pushed the lead to six.

But Carolina never quits. Paige sandwiched a three-pointer and a putback around a bucket from Brice Johnson (14 points, eight rebounds) to help the Tar Heels stay within striking range. Then, he took a bounce pass, scooted by the diving Ochefu, twisted past Arcidiacono and hit his double-clutch.

Carolina fans went wild, and it looked like overtime.

Only, it wasn't.

"If I could get a shot, I was going to shoot it," said Arcidiacono, who finished with 16 points and two assists, one more memorable than the other. "But I heard someone screaming in the back of my head. It was Kris. I just gave it to him and he let it go with confidence."

4th hole tough test at Masters

Associated Press

In the 79 years the Masters has been played, only one player has made a hole-in-one on the long and deceptively difficult par-3 fourth hole.

The golf ball remains in a special place. "I gave the ball to my mother," Jeff Sluman said. "She still has it in her grave."

The first par 3 at Augusta National doesn't get nearly as much attention as the last two par 3s, mainly because it is so early in the round and because it has neither water (Nos. 12 and 16) or steep elevation (No. 6). It is simply as stern a test as there is on the golf course.

Sluman was surprised that no one had ever made a hole-in-one until he came through in the first round of 1992. He birdied the opening two holes, made a par on No. 3, and then faced what was then a 212-yard shot to a back left pin on wide green with a deep bunker in front, another bunker to the left and trouble over the back.

"Sometimes you can make a hole-in-one on a crappy shot," Sluman said. "This was the prettiest shot you'd ever want to see. I hit a soft, cut 4-iron that hit the bottom of the slope and looked like a 1-footer going in."

That no one has made a hole-in-one since then? Not so surprising.

"I think that might be as difficult a hole as Augusta has," Sluman said.

The fourth hole is called "Flowering Crab Apple," even though it is the only hole on the course that has a palm tree. No. 4 has gone through only one significant change since the Masters began in 1934. That was in 2006, when the championship tee was moved back 35 yards to make it play at 240 yards. This was to restore Bobby Jones' belief that a long iron or even a fairway metal should be used off the tee.

The fourth hole has given Adam Scott fits to the point he has contemplated whether he should purposely play short of the green and take his chances getting up-and-down.

"It's not the worst idea," he said. "It's a bit out there. But that's how difficult it is. If you go over the back, things get tricky."

So why hasn't he tried it before?

"The fact I've played with a lot of confidence the last few years, and I'm a good long iron player," Scott said. "And I haven't had any real disasters. In the big scheme of 72 holes, if you took two 3s and two 4s, that's not going to lose you the tournament. But a couple of 5s could."

Maybe he was thinking about Phil Mickelson.

Mickelson was in the final group on Sunday in 2012 when his tee shot on the fourth caromed off the grandstands and into the woods. Instead of taking a penalty shot and playing his third from the tee, Lefty tried two right-handed shots to punch it out, eventually got into a bunker and made a triple-bogey 6. He finished two shots out of a playoff.

"You'd have to put it as the hardest par 3," Scott said.

Arcidiacono takes home MOP award

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Ryan Arcidiacono grew up outside Philadelphia as a Villanova fan, and then played more games than anyone else ever has for the Wildcats.

In his 144th and last game for Villanova, with his last pass, he became a national champion and the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player.

The unselfish point guard was dribbling toward the basket with the clock winding down and defenders nearby when he heard Kris Jenkins calling for the ball from behind. Arcidiacono passed to his open teammate, whose three-pointer beat the buzzer for a 77-74 victory over North Carolina on Monday night.

"I wanted to be aggressive. If I could get a shot, I was going to shoot it. But I heard someone screaming in the back of my head. It was Kris," Arcidiacono said. "I just gave it to him and he let it go with confidence."

The Pennsylvania kid born nine years after Villanova's only other title in 1985

scored 16 points against North Carolina after posting 15 in the team's record semifinal rout of Oklahoma.

And all with the coach of the 1985 team, Rollie Massimino, watching the Wildcats win another championship.

"Ryan Arcidiacono, he's one of the best players I've ever played with," Jenkins said. "For a senior to get the ball and make the right play and not try to shoot the ball in double coverage just shows a lot about him and what he's about and how he's just all about winning."

Arcidiacono savored every moment during the championship celebration on the court, hoisting the trophy above his head before he and his teammates stopped to watch the "One Shining Moment" video montage when it was shown inside the stadium. Before walking off the podium, the guard scooped up two big handfuls of confetti, tossed them into the air and enjoyed another shower of the colorful strips as he walked down the steps.

The senior guard hugged numerous people and took pictures with Villanova fam-

ily and friends. He eventually cut off the last piece of the championship net, and was the one carrying the trophy when the team left the court. Villanova had erased a five-point halftime deficit and led by 10 with 5:29 left. The Tar Heels, the only No. 1 seed to make it to the Final Four, got even when Marcus Paige made a double-clutch three-pointer with 4.7 seconds left.

"Unbelievable shot. ... Just unbelievable," said Arcidiacono, who is from Langhorne, Pa.

The Wildcats called timeout, but little had to be said before they went back on the court. Everybody in the huddle knew what play they would run.

"We work on that play every single day in practice. I'm always the one with the ball. I think Coach has confidence in me and my teammates have confidence in me. I was trying to be aggressive," Arcidiacono said. "It's not about me taking the right shot, it's about me making the right read. I think I just did that."

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Cubs open with 9-0 rout of Angels

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Thousands of Chicago Cubs fans filled the stands at Angel Stadium with raucous chants and cheers, the usual optimism of Opening Day compounded by unusual excitement for their talent-laden team.

Jake Arrieta and his lineup of heavy hitters gave those fans every reason to hope they had just watched the start of something special.

Arrieta yielded two hits in seven dominant innings, Miguel Montero homered and drove in three runs, and the Cubs began a season of high expectations with a 9-0 victory over the Los Angeles Angels on Monday night.

"I think we set the tone pretty nicely for ourselves," Arrieta said.

Anthony Rizzo and Jorge Soler drove in early runs and Matt Szczur added a three-run double in the ninth for the Cubs, who excelled in every area. Chicago couldn't wait to get going again after an exciting 97-win season ended with a dismal four-game loss to the Mets in the NL Championship Series last fall.

"We've prepared for this for a long time," said Arrieta, who has a 29-inning scoreless streak stretching to last season. "The last game we played was in the NLCS. We were ready for this moment. Guys came into camp ready, with a game plan. Everybody executed appropriately."

Chicago's anguished fans believe this team really might end the franchise's 108-year championship drought this season, and they packed the seats in Orange County to herald an auspicious start to

the quest.

"We travel well," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "It's exciting to see everybody out there. It's the Cubs, man. It's pretty cool."

And after just the sixth opening day shutout in franchise history, the Cubs say they're ready for all expectations.

"All those feelings came right back," Rizzo said. "Right after the first at-bat, we were back. [The fan support] is huge. It's what our city is about."

Arrieta (1-0) returned from his 22-victory Cy Young Award season with another gem. In his first Opening Day start since 2012, the right-hander gave up two singles and a walk, never allowing the over-matched Angels to reach second base.

The Angels managed just three hits while getting shut out on Opening Day for the first time since 2002 — the year of their only World Series championship. The Angels had never lost an opener by more than seven runs.

Nationals 4, Braves 3 (10): Daniel Murphy was a huge hit in his Washington debut with a home run and a go-ahead double in the 10th inning as the Nationals rallied past host Atlanta in their season opener.

NL MVP Bryce Harper homered in his first plate appearance of the season as the Nationals made a winner of Dusty Baker in his first game as their manager.

Rockies 10, Diamondbacks 5: Trevor Story became the first player to hit two home runs in his major league debut on opening day, and Colorado spoiled Zack Greinke's initial start for host Arizona.

Greinke (0-1), who signed a \$206.5 million, six-year contract with the Diamondbacks, had his worst outing in nearly four years, giving up seven runs — six in one inning. He allowed three homers in a game for the first time since Aug. 19, 2009.

Dodgers 15, Padres 0: Clayton Kershaw was brilliant on opening day, holding host San Diego to one hit in seven innings and striking out nine to lead rookie manager Dave Roberts and the Los Angeles Dodgers to a record-setting 15-0 victory against the Padres on Monday.

It was the most lopsided opening day shutout in major league history. The previous mark was a 14-0 win by the Pittsburgh Pirates over the Cincinnati Reds in 1911, according to STATS.

Giants 12, Brewers 3: Denard Span homered and drove in five runs in his San Francisco debut as the Giants beat host Milwaukee in their opener despite a sluggish start from under-the-weather ace Madison Bumgarner.

Span hit a three-run shot in the eighth inning and Joe Panik and Buster Posey followed with home runs off Ariel Pena.

Rangers 3, Mariners 2: Cole Hamels handed Seattle ace Felix Hernandez his first opening day loss as host Texas managed to win with just one hit.

Prince Fielder blooped an RBI single off Hernandez during a three-run fifth inning that included three walks and two errors.

Orioles 3, Twins 2: Matt Wieters singled home the winning run with two outs in the ninth inning as Baltimore withstood two long rain delays in a season-opening

victory over visiting Minnesota.

A game that was scheduled to start at 3:05 p.m. finally ended at 8:44, even though the playing time was only 2 hours, 48 minutes.

Reds 6, Phillies 2: Zack Cozart had three hits and drove in the tying run with a sacrifice fly in the eighth inning while Joey Votto followed with a bases-loaded single that sent host Cincinnati over Philadelphia in an opener matching the majors' two worst teams from last season.

The Reds scored five times in the eighth against Philadelphia's work-in-progress bullpen. Jay Bruce completed the rally with a two-run single in front of 43,683 fans, the largest regular-season crowd in Great American Ball Park history.

Blue Jays 5, Rays 3: Josh Donaldson, Michael Saunders and Josh Thole homered to help R.A. Dickey and visting Toronto beat Tampa Bay.

All three home runs were hit off Drew Smyly (0-1), with Donaldson connecting for a solo shot in the fifth inning, Saunders delivering a two-run homer in the fourth and Thole going deep on a third-inning drive that umpires initially ruled was a double after a fan interfered by catching the ball before it reached the stands.

White Sox 4, Athletics 3: Chris Sale struck out eight in a solid season debut to build off his franchise record last year, pitching Chicago past host Oakland.

Adam Eaton hit an RBI triple and Jimmy Rollins drove in a run during a four-run third inning in his first game with the White Sox playing back home in the East Bay.

Panthers' win sets franchise record

Associated Press

TORONTO — There's no more startling one for these Florida Panthers.

Rocco Grimaldi scored twice, Aleksander Barkov got his 27th goal and Florida beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-3 Monday night to set a franchise record with its 99th point this season.

Florida clinched its fifth playoff berth Sunday and then surpassed the 98 points reached by the 1999-2000 Panthers.

"We're at step one," said Nick Bjugstad, who also scored. "We keep saying step one, keep moving on, we don't want to be satisfied."

The Panthers lead the Lightning by four points for first in the Atlantic Division. They don't think they're a surprise team any more.

"I like our team and I think coaches comment around the league that we're a good hockey team," Panthers coach Gerard Gallant said Monday morning. "We all believe that. The players believe that. You don't sneak up on people anymore. They know we're a good hockey team."

How good can the Panthers be in the playoffs?

"It's going to be a big challenge for us," 44-year-old Jaromir Jagr said. "It's something new for a lot of guys to make the playoffs. We'll see how we're going to react. It can scare us away or the other way around."

Al Montoya made 22 saves for the Panthers.

Rangers 4, Blue Jackets 2: Chris

Kreider and Derek Stepan each scored their 20th goals and had an assist as visiting New York hung on to beat Columbus and earn a sixth-consecutive playoff berth.

Dan Boyle and Mats Zuccarello also scored for the Rangers, who ended a three-game losing streak to move three points behind second-place Pittsburgh. They remain two points ahead of the fourth-place Islanders in the Metropolitan Division.

Blues 5, Coyotes 2: Vladimir Tarasenko's 37th goal midway through the third period was the go-ahead score for St. Louis, which scored five straight goals to beat visiting Arizona and tie for first place in the Western Conference.

Islanders 5, Lightning 2: John Tavares got his 30th goal and two assists as host New York scored three times in a 5:15 span to get a crucial victory over Tampa Bay.

New York holds the Eastern Conference's first wild-card spot and won for the third time in four games to reduce its magic number to two over Boston to secure a third straight postseason berth.

Canucks 3, Kings 2: Jared McCann scored the winner in the second period while Ryan Miller made 40 saves as host Vancouver beat Los Angeles.

Jonathan Quick stopped 21 shots for the Kings, who remain a point back of the Anaheim Ducks for first place in the Pacific Division and have three games left on their schedule.

Will Spurs play or rest stars against Warriors?

Associated Press

The biggest mystery surrounding the Golden State Warriors' run at history is how motivated San Antonio will be to stop it.

The NBA's two best teams this season will meet twice this week, perhaps the biggest remaining obstacles to the Warriors' quest for an NBA-record 73 victories.

Or, the Spurs might decide not to be much of an obstacle at all.

With less than two weeks until the playoffs and the Spurs (64-12) all but locked into the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference, coach Gregg Popovich has already begun resting his players on occasion. So it's impossible to predict who will be in uniform for San Antonio when it travels to Golden State on Thursday, or hosts the Warriors (69-8) on Sunday.

"It doesn't matter, to me, how he plays it," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said of Popovich, one of his former coaches. "His team is a little older than ours, too."

Kerr said the younger Warriors told him they don't feel they need a rest, but Popovich doesn't exactly give his players the option. When he made LaMarcus Aldridge sit out one of his first practices with the team in October, Popovich joked that he told the All-Star forward, "Welcome to the Spurs."

The Spurs will be opening a back-to-back Thursday in Oakland, so Popovich figures to sit some regulars either that night or Friday in Denver. San Antonio is then off until the Warriors visit, and follows that game with another night off before hosting Oklahoma City.

San Antonio will be 39-0 at home when

Golden State arrives, two victories from becoming the first team in NBA history to go undefeated at home for an entire season. That could motivate the Spurs to make everyone available — and leave Kerr as the one who might play the rest card.

Elsewhere in the NBA this week:

Take the night off: There were no games on the schedule Monday for the NCAA championship game. Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve are the only other nights during the season without an NBA game.

Big one in the Big D: With Dallas and Utah tied for the final Western Conference playoff spot and Houston a game back, it's a huge game in Dallas on Wednesday night when the Rockets visit.

Duncan's 1,000th: Tim Duncan's next victory will be his 1,000th in the regular season, joining Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (1,074) and Robert Parish (1,014) as the only players to reach that milestone. Duncan is already the career leader in victories with one team.

Philly futility: The 76ers have lost 12 straight games and remain stuck on nine wins. They need one more to avoid tying their own record for worst in an 82-game season, and their next chance to get it is against the injury-depleted New Orleans Pelicans on Tuesday.

Stat line of the week: Blake Griffin, Clippers: 6 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists Sunday in a 114-109 victory over Washington. The star forward started and played 25 minutes in his first game since Christmas after recovering from quadriceps and hand injuries, and sitting out a four-game suspension for punching the team's assistant equipment manager.