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Internal audit faults Navy on contracts

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — An internal audit commissioned by the top brass of the U.S. Navy more than two years ago concluded the service had “significant” failures overseeing contracts that paid out hundreds of millions of dollars to vendors around the world to provide goods and services to ships when they pulled into foreign ports.

The 69-page report from the Naval Audit Service found widespread problems in how the Navy administers contracts for port services. Because of those weaknesses, auditors concluded the Navy can’t be sure it received full value on all of the servicing contracts it examined, which totaled \$686 million.

The audit was completed at the end of 2014. The San Diego Union-Tribune obtained a copy using a Freedom of Information Act request filed last year.

Auditors faulted the Navy for weak supervision in nearly every area of port services,

also known as “husbanding.” The Navy has come to rely increasingly on private contractors over the past decade to provide the services, which include pumping sewage, providing ground transportation, supplying fresh water and scores of other tasks.

“The Navy’s current model for obtaining husbanding services has significant weaknesses in a variety of critical areas,” auditors wrote, “including the funding and scheduling of port visits, the language of contracts, contract surveillance and the invoice review and payment process.”

A Navy spokesman said this week that since the audit’s completion the service has adopted many of the recommendations and changed how it oversees the contracts.

“The audit found that the Navy’s model for acquiring husbanding and port services did not have sufficient internal checks and balances to detect and deter fraud and abuse,” Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Hawkins said. “To address this, we have removed contracting authority and pay functions from ships,

increased contract oversight, standardized requirements, and created an Off Ship Bill Payment Process.”

The audit was ordered by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus in 2013, in the months after the massive bribery and fraud scandal involving Leonard Glenn “Fat Leonard” Francis first surfaced.

Francis ran his own servicing company, Glenn Defense Marine Asia, and was indicted on charges that he defrauded the government of at least \$35 million via overbilling and other fraud, over nearly a decade.

Federal prosecutors also charged eight current and former officers and sailors with accepting bribes of cash, gifts, prostitutes and hotel junkets. In exchange, they helped Francis get lucrative contracts, steered ships to ports Francis controlled in Asia and kept him apprised of internal Navy investigations.

The investigation is continuing.

Navy probe into Iran incident reaches top admirals

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The findings of the Navy’s investigation into how 10 U.S. sailors were detained by Iranian forces after drifting into the country’s territorial waters have been forwarded to the service’s top officers, moving the U.S. military closer toward disclosing more details about the case.

The incident has been under investigation since the sailors were taken captive off Farsi Island in the Persian Gulf on Jan. 12 after their two riverine command boats were surrounded at gunpoint by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

The sailors were released the following morning after Iran took a series of photographs and videos whose subsequent release angered Defense Secretary Ash Carter and prompted allegations by the Navy that the sailors had been exploited for

Iranian propaganda purposes.

The investigation was launched by the Navy’s 5th Fleet, which operates in the Middle East and has headquarters in Bahrain. Cmdr. Kevin Stephens, a 5th Fleet spokesman, said that Vice Adm. Kevin Donegan, the senior admiral in the Middle East, has reviewed the findings and forwarded them to the office of Adm. John M. Richardson, the chief of naval operations. Stephens declined additional comment.

A spokesman for Richardson’s office, Cmdr. Chris Servello, said the findings will next be reviewed by Adm. Philip S. Davidson, the commander of Fleet Forces Command, and Adm. Scott Swift, the commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet, before the investigation is reviewed more closely by Richardson and the service’s No. 2 officer, Adm. Michelle J. Howard.

It’s likely the results could be

shared with Congress by sometime in May, Servello said.

Richardson told The Washington Post last month, after returning from a trip to the Middle East, that the investigation was in the review process, and that he had seen the two boats involved while in Bahrain.

The Pentagon has said that the only equipment apparently taken from them were two digital SIM cards from satellite phones.

It isn’t clear whether the sailors involved could face any kind of criminal charges or administrative discipline.

They were using a well-traveled route in international waters from Kuwait to Bahrain when they ended up off-course. Defense officials have said it is believed they “mis-navigated” into Iranian territorial waters, and one of the boats experienced a mechanical problem as Iranian forces closed in.

The sailors departed from Kuwait the day of the incident at 9:23 a.m., and were taken captive sometime between 2:10 and 2:45 p.m.

U.S. Naval Central Command launched an extensive search-and-rescue operation that included aircraft from the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier and the Air Force, and vessels from the Navy, Coast Guard and Royal Navy.

Two Iranian craft carrying armed troops approached the Navy boats, followed by two more. No gunfire was exchanged, but some Iranians boarded the U.S. craft while others wielded machine guns, U.S. defense officials have said.

The incident came at a sensitive time, just days before a landmark nuclear deal reached between the Obama administration and Tehran took effect.

Milley warns of disaster if Army troop levels rise

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army chief of staff said Thursday that an effort in Congress to reverse deep troop cuts will be a national “disaster” without increases in the service’s budget, a prospect that remains remote among divided lawmakers.

Gen. Mark Milley, in testimony to the Senate, said installations would be closed, soldier quality-of-life programs would be ended and modernization programs would be curbed if the service were forced to keep the tens of thousands of troops set to be culled during the next few years.

The Army unveiled plans last summer to reduce the number of active-duty soldiers from 490,000 to 450,000 due to tight budgets imposed by Congress. But the plan is widely unpopular among Republican defense hawks on Capitol Hill, and an effort is building to mandate a higher troop number.

However, Republicans brokered a deal with Democrats last fall that locks in spending amounts for two years. It is unclear whether lawmakers could give more money to the Army to keep the troops without breaking the agreement and sending the federal budget into disarray.

“If we were mandated to go

to a higher size, more soldiers, more, bigger end strength, and we didn’t have the dollars, I personally think that would be disaster for both the nation and the Army,” Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee. “At the end of the day, I think we would literally risk having a hollow Army.”

The general compared the potential fallout to the days after the Vietnam War, when many believe the service hit a low point due to shrinking funding and neglect.

“We do not have a hollow Army today, but many on the committee remember the days when we did, when people didn’t train and units weren’t filled up with appropriate levels of end strength. There were no parts off the shelf,” he said. “All of those things would start happening if we increased the size of the force without the appropriate amount of money to maintain its readiness.”

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., a member of the Armed Services Committee, said he wants a “much higher” troop number, but acknowledged the need for more funding to accompany it.

“While I certainly support a much higher end strength than we are on a path to have, I also think it is deeply inadvisable to not to match that with a concomitant budget increase,” Cotton said.

US-made bomb cited in Yemen market airstrike

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A Saudi-led coalition battling Shiite rebels and their allies in Yemen used a U.S.-supplied bomb in an airstrike last month on a market that killed at least 119 people, a human rights group said Thursday, further highlighting American involvement in the conflict.

The March 15 bombing targeting the northwestern town of Mastaba marked the second-deadliest airstrike conducted by the Saudi-helmed campaign

since it began its war in March 2015.

Condemned by the United Nations, the strike also wounded at least 47 people.

Human Rights Watch said its investigators traveled to the town in Yemen’s Hajja province, controlled by the Shiite rebels known as Houthis, and found fragments of a GBU-31 satellite-guided bomb. The group said the bomb, as well as its guidance equipment, was supplied by the U.S., matching an earlier report by British television channel ITV.

From The Associated Press

Trainers eye changes to help Army succeed

BY DAN STOUTAMIRE
Stars and Stripes

WIESBADEN, Germany — Gender integration, fundamental changes to the enlisted promotion system and an analysis of the benefits of a longer basic training period are among the items on the 2016 agenda for the U.S. Army’s Training and Doctrine Command, its commander said Thursday.

Speaking in Wiesbaden about the Army Operating Concept, a TRADOC document that lays out the Army’s vision for the future, Gen. David Perkins said that his command’s responsibility is to ensure the Army is prepared to operate in a complex world in which change is a constant.

Among those changes is gender integration in all branches and military occupational specialties, which Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced in December.

“What we’ve done in order to prepare is done what is probably the most historically in-depth look at all of our (military occupational specialties) and determined what are the critical, high-physical-demand tasks that each MOS has to perform,” Perkins said. “We’ve put together a physical assessment test that has a high correlation from somebody completing that test and the ability to do the most physically demanding

task.”

This test — known as an Occupational Physical Assessment Test — will include standing long jumps, dead lifts, interval runs and seated power throws designed to simulate physically demanding tasks such as loading artillery ammunition. Perkins said this assessment would be done when receiving new male and female recruits.

Perkins and his team also have been considering the idea of extending basic combat training, but he said no decision has been made.

Finally, TRADOC is on the front lines in the new enlisted promotion system — known as Select, Train, Educate, Promote.

Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport, the senior non-commissioned officer in the command, said the number of NCOs without the proper degree of military education was not ideal.

“We had over 14,000 non-commissioned officers that had not received the (education) for the grade they were wearing, and of those, more than 4,000 had been in grade for three or more years,” he said.

“Deferments were a huge problem.”

Under the new system, NCOs are “not going to get promoted until you attend your institutional training,” Davenport said.

Greece to migrants: Move voluntarily or be forced

PIRAEUS, Greece — Authorities in Greece say thousands of migrants and refugees camped out at the country’s largest port near Athens have been given two weeks to move to army-built camps voluntarily or be expelled by force.

The warning issued Thursday came as nearly a third of

the 52,000 migrants stranded in Greece by European border closures are refusing to move to organized shelters and remain camped out at the port of Piraeus and at the northern border with Macedonia.

More than 4,000 migrants remain at Piraeus — an important site for Greece’s vital tourism industry.

From The Associated Press

'Other three' seek first Slam

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The modern "Big Three" have won five of the last six majors going into the Masters.

The other "Big Three" can only hope they are next.

That would be the trio of top players — Dustin Johnson, Henrik Stenson and Rickie Fowler — who have done everything right over the past several years except for those four weeks that define careers.

All of them are among the top 10 in the world. All of them have had their close calls in the majors, which motivates them even more.

"I still feel like my time is coming," Johnson said Monday. "I've just got to keep putting myself in position to have a chance to win. One of these days, I will get it done."

The label of "best to have never won a major" has been around for at least three decades, and most of those players eventually won one, whether it was Tom Kite or Corey Pavin, Davis Love III or Phil Mickelson. And then there was Colin Montgomerie, who never did, and Sergio Garcia and Lee Westwood, who have to wonder if they ever will.

The list of current candidates is growing.

And with Rory McIlroy, Jordan Spieth and Jason Day taking turns winning majors and trading time at No. 1 in the world, it's getting tougher.

"It's never been easy to predict winners in golf, but it's certainly not getting any easier," Stenson said.

Stenson, who turned 40 on Tuesday, might feel the greatest sense of urgency.

He has reached as high as No. 2 in the world. He was runner-up at Muirfield in the British Open and tied for third in the PGA Championship three years ago. His closest call was in 2014 in the PGA Championship at Valhalla, when he was among four players tied for the lead on the back nine and tied for third.

Frustrating? Yes. Hopeless? Not even close.

"I know I've got a game that fits well for major championship golf, and I've just got to keep on putting myself in the final groups, or in the last couple of groups," Stenson said. "The more times I do that, the better the chances are for the outcome that I want to have. ... I'm certainly motivated to make it happen."

To make that happen at Augusta, history is not on his side. That goes for Johnson and Fowler, too.

Stenson believes Augusta National suits him well, even though he has yet to record a top 10 in the Masters. Johnson finally cracked the top 10 last year with a tie for sixth — nine shots behind Spieth.

Fowler tied for fifth in 2014, though he took himself out of the picture early in the final round.

Fowler is the youngest of the group at 27, though he joined an elite group two years ago by finishing in the top five at all the majors. He's starting to win with more regularity, piling up four wins against strong fields over the last 12 months.

Mickelson was 34 when he finally won his first major in 2004 at the Masters.

"It was difficult to be patient," Mickelson

said. "But I always believed and knew that I would end up winning a major. In fact, I knew I would win multiple. So it was never a hurdle. It was more of when this happens, it's going to take off. And not that five is a ton, but it's a lot more than zero where I was at."

Mickelson considers The Players Championship, which Fowler won last year, to be a precursor.

"It's just a minor step below a major," Mickelson said. "I feel that the way he drives the golf ball and the way he's striking it now, it's inevitable."

Johnson still gets the most attention of the current crop of those trying to win their first major. Most of that is because of sheer skill, and some because of the wounds he has accumulated.

He had a three-shot lead in the 2010 U.S. Open and closed with an 82. Later that year, he was knocked out of a playoff in the PGA Championship because of a two-shot penalty for grounding his club in sand without realizing it was one of the thousand bunkers at Whistling Straits. He was closing in on the lead at the British Open the following year until hitting 2-iron out-of-bounds. And then last year at the U.S. Open, he went from a chance to win to runner-up with three putts from 12 feet.

What helps is that Johnson, 31, has a short memory. He sees his failures in the majors as learning experiences, and the label of "best to have never won a major" as a compliment.

"If your name is getting mentioned as best player ... whatever comes after that, you're usually pretty good," he said.

USWNT crushes Colombia

Associated Press

EAST HARTFORD, Conn. — Allie Long scored her first two international goals, and the United States routed Colombia 7-0 Wednesday night in the Americans' first exhibition since five players filed a wage-discrimination action against the U.S. Soccer Federation.

Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Hope Solo, Megan Rapinoe and Becky Sauerbrunn filed an action last week with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accusing the USSF of unlawfully paying them less than members of the U.S. men's national team. The union for the women's national team is in a legal battle with the USSF, claiming it can terminate its labor contract. The USSF claims the deal runs through December.

"We weren't really thinking about all that stuff, because at the end of the day that stuff will work itself out," Lloyd said. "We have to continue to make sure we are putting a good result out on the field."

The U.S. team was not the only one fighting money issues. The Colombian team has not been paid in two months, Philly.com reported last week.

"What happens, if we get money or if we don't get money, that's not important now," Colombia midfielder Rincon said.

Crystal Dunn, Mallory Pugh, Lloyd, Tobin Heath and Christen Press also scored for the Americans, who are preparing for this summer's Olympics, where they will try to win their fourth straight gold medal.

"This team has always done a wonderful job of managing to compartmentalize," U.S. coach Jill Ellis said. "I don't think in any way shape or form we let anything spill over to the training ground or the pitch tonight. I think it was a really good team performance, the crowd was fantastic and I admire them to be out in this cold weather."

Solo made two saves in her eighth shut-out of the year, and the U.S. improved to 10-0 this year going into Sunday's match against Colombia at Chester, Pa. Morgan (hip) and Morgan Brian (hamstring) did not suit up but are expected to be available for Sunday.

The U.S. outshot Colombia 24-6, including 14-2 in shots on goal.

"I have great respect for Colombia, I always have," said Solo, who was part of last year's team that beat Colombia 2-0 in the World Cup's round of 16. "I'm a little bit surprised that the score was 7-0. I expected more from them. It was a pretty combative game in the World Cup, but tonight we looked pretty good."

Dunn put the Americans ahead in the 27th, beating goalkeeper Catalina Perez. Long, a 28-year-old midfielder, doubled the lead in the 32nd with a header off a pass from Portland teammate Lindsey Horan.

"She had a good week of training," Ellis said of Long. "We are still making sure we are looking for depth and she did well. She made some good decisions, got a couple goals and was impactful."

Sixers hire Colangelo to replace Hinkie

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia 76ers' front office has suddenly turned into the home of a Colangelo family reunion.

The NBA-worst Sixers are set to hire former NBA executive of the year Bryan Colangelo as their general manager, according to a person with knowledge of the hiring.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because Colangelo's hiring was not official on Wednesday night.

He will work with his father, Jerry Colangelo, Philadelphia's chairman of basketball operations, to bring the forlorn franchise their first NBA championship since 1983.

Colangelo takes over in the wake of general manager Sam Hinkie's sudden resignation on Wednesday night, bolting the Sixers after he turned them into one of the worst organizations in NBA history.

Hinkie didn't even last three full seasons and left the Sixers with the worst record in the league at 10-68.

Team owner Josh Harris says he was disappointed in Hinkie's decision but that, "Sam's work has put us in a very strong position to take advantage of numerous opportunities for an exciting future."

The 76ers went 19-63 on his watch in his first season and 18-64 last season.

Hinkie ran an analytics-minded front office and stripped the organization of all major talent in the hope of bottoming out in the standings and acquiring lottery picks.

His power was weakened in December when the Sixers hired Colangelo to oversee basketball operations.

Hinkie was hired in 2013 after a stint as executive vice president of basketball operations for the Houston Rockets. He failed to lead the 76ers to their first NBA championship since 1983.

He made sweeping changes from the start, trading All-Star Jrue Holiday on his first draft night and later traded Michael Carter-Williams only a half season after he was the NBA rookie of the year.

Hinkie drafted or traded for injury-prone big men Nerlens Noel and Joel Embiid. Noel sat out a season and has not developed into the cornerstone player the Sixers hoped. Embiid was drafted with the No. 3 overall pick of the 2014 draft and has to yet to play because of foot injuries.

Under Hinkie's watch over almost three seasons, the 76ers:

- lost 28 straight games stretching the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

- lost 26 straight games in the 2013-14 season.

- lost the first 17 games of the 2014-15 season.

- lost the first 18 games of the 2015-16 season.

Harris seemed to back Hinkie's approach — dubbed both "Trust The Process" by his defenders and "Tankadelphia" by critics — until the losses kept mounting in his third season. Even with rookie Jahlil Okafor playing well, the Sixers flirted with the worst record in NBA history; 9-73 set by the 1972-73 Sixers.

The 76ers beat New Orleans on Tuesday night, ensuring they would not tie their own league record for fewest victories in an 82-game season.

Embarrassed by the team's futility, the Sixers turned to Colangelo. Colangelo had a long career with the Phoenix Suns, serving as coach, CEO and general manager, among other roles.

He was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 2004 as a contributor, considered one of the most influential owners in NBA history.

"What I see here is, there's a lot that needs to be done," Colangelo said on the day he was hired.

Hinkie doesn't exactly leave behind a barren cupboard — Noel, Embiid, Okafor and overseas prospect Dario Saric still have potential on the court or as trade bait, the Sixers are flush with cash in the salary cap and they could have up to four first-round picks in the 2016 draft.



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Dodgers complete sweep of Padres

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Japanese pitcher Kenta Maeda homered in the second at-bat of his major league debut with the Los Angeles Dodgers on Wednesday and beat the Padres 7-0, making San Diego the first team in major league history to be shut out in its first three games.

So much joy and so much agony in one game.

"I'm just very happy that I got a 'W' in my major league debut," Maeda said through a translator.

There wasn't anything for the Padres to celebrate. They were outscored 25-0 in the opening three games by their biggest rivals and set MLB marks for futility.

"There is still perspective here, not to be lost," rookie manager Andy Green said. "We still do have 159 games left and we will score runs this year. And we will win series this year."

But this was bad.

The Padres were outscored 25-0 in being swept in three games by the Dodgers. They set the MLB mark with 27 straight scoreless innings to open a season. The old mark was 26 by the 1943 St. Louis Browns, according to STATS.

The Dodgers joined the 1963 Cardinals in winning their first three games by shutouts. Clayton Kershaw and Scott Kazmir had strong performances in the first two games before Maeda responded with six shutout innings of his own.

The right-hander signed an eight-year deal with the Dodgers in January after spending eight seasons with the Hiroshima Carp of the Japanese Central League.

Maeda scattered five hits in six innings,

struck out four and walked none.

Rockies 4, Diamondbacks 3: Trevor Story, the 23-year-old rookie, made baseball history by becoming the first player to hit a home run in each of his first three big-league games and visiting Colorado beat Arizona.

"It's just kind of surreal right now," he said. "It's hard to explain. I can't really put words to it."

Story also is the first player in baseball history to hit a home run for each of his first four hits, according to information provided to the Rockies by the Elias Sports Bureau.

It was a big day for Tyler Chatwood, too.

The Rockies right-hander pitched a strong 6¹/₃ innings in his first big-league appearance since recovering from a second Tommy John surgery.

Yankees 16, Astros 6: Starlin Castro homered and drove in five runs, Mark Teixeira had four RBIs and host New York trounced Houston for its first victory of the season.

Teixeira and Castro each hit a three-run homer. Carlos Beltran also went deep and Castro finished with four of the 17 hits for the Yankees, who chased Collin McHugh (0-1) in a six-run first inning that lasted 36 minutes.

Athletics 2, White Sox 1: Sonny Gray pitched seven strong innings, Mark Canha homered and host Oakland got its first win of the season.

Gray, scratched from the Opening Day start because of a stomach flu, gave up a run on three hits, walking four and striking out five.

Pirates 5, Cardinals 1: Juan Nicasio pitched six dominant innings in his

Pittsburgh debut and Francisco Cevalli hit a two-run double as the host Pirates completed a three-game sweep.

Nicasio gave up one run and two hits while striking out seven and walking none. Signed to a \$3 million, one-year contract as a free agent in the offseason, Nicasio pitched 15 scoreless innings during spring training with 24 strikeouts.

Orioles 4, Twins 2: Chris Davis homered to back an effective pitching performance by Yovani Gallardo in his Orioles debut.

Davis, the reigning major league home run champ, hit a solo shot to deep center off Kyle Gibson (0-1) in the third inning to put the host Orioles ahead for good.

Nationals 3, Braves 1: Pinch-hitter Matt den Dekker, recalled from the minors earlier in the day, had a tiebreaking, two-run double in a three-run seventh inning to help visiting Washington complete an opening two-game sweep.

Stephen Strasburg (1-0), starting his final season with the Nationals before becoming eligible for free agency, allowed one run and six hits in six innings.

Indians 7, Red Sox 6: Mike Napoli homered against his former Boston teammates and host Cleveland overcame David Ortiz's second homer in his farewell season.

Napoli broke a 6-all tie in the seventh with his solo shot off Junichi Tazawa (0-1). Napoli, signed as a free agent in November to give the Indians' lineup some pop, spent 2½ seasons with Boston and helped the Red Sox win the World Series in 2013. Batting just .207, they traded him to Texas in August.

Reds 3, Phillies 2: Scott Schebler doubled with the bases loaded and one

out in the ninth inning as host Cincinnati took advantage of another meltdown by Philadelphia's bullpen.

Philadelphia wasted a lead in the eighth inning of a 6-2 defeat on Opening Day. Ahead all the way until the ninth, the Phillies let another one get away.

Tigers 7, Marlins 3: Jarrod Saltalamacchia homered and drove in four runs and Francisco Rodriguez struck out Giancarlo Stanton to end the game with the bases loaded as Detroit handed Miami ace Jose Fernandez his first loss in 27 career starts at home.

Mariners 9, Rangers 5: Robinson Cano homered twice and drove in five runs, including a two-run homer that capped Seattle's five-run ninth, as the Mariners rallied to beat host Texas.

Rangers closer Shawn Tolleson (0-1) allowed all five batters he faced to reach base and score.

Brewers 4, Giants 3: Chris Carter hit his first home run for host Milwaukee, then had a tiebreaking sacrifice fly in the seventh inning.

Jeff Samardzija, making his Giants debut after signing a \$90 million, five-year contract, allowed three runs and eight hits in 5¹/₃ innings, falling to 0-5 in 10 career starts against Milwaukee.

Rays 5, Blue Jays 3: Steven Souza Jr.'s second home run of the game, a go-ahead, three-run drive in the eighth inning, lifted host Tampa Bay over Toronto.

Souza pulled Tampa Bay to 3-2 in the sixth with a solo homer off J.A. Happ. Tampa Bay has homered in a team-record 18 consecutive games dating to Sept. 20.

Trail Blazers clinch postseason spot

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — If there was an award for the NBA's most overachieving team, the Portland Trail Blazers would be heavily favored this year.

Picked by preseason pundits to finish near the bottom of the NBA standings because of drastic offseason roster turnover, Portland instead became a playoff team. The Blazers clinched a postseason berth Wednesday night with a 120-115 win over short-handed Oklahoma City.

Al-Farouq Aminu scored 27 points and C.J. McCollum 26 as six Blazers scored in double figures.

Portland (43-37) won for the sixth time in seven games and became the first team in NBA history to earn a playoff berth while returning a roster that had two or fewer players with 1,000 or more minutes from the previous season (Damian Lillard, Chris Kaman).

Lillard, who scored 11 points, repeatedly used the word "satisfying" to describe the team's feelings about clinching a playoff berth.

"Because there was so much doubt," he said. "It wasn't just people saying they're not going to be a playoff team. People said we wouldn't win 20 games."

Pacers 123, Cavaliers 109: Paul George scored 29 points and C.J. Miles added 21, helping host Indiana blow out Cleveland — with LeBron James getting

the night off — on Wednesday night.

Indiana still leads eighth-place Detroit by a half-game. Ninth-place Chicago, still vying for one of the final two playoff spots in the East, is now three games behind the Pacers.

Hornets 111, Knicks 97: Kemba Walker scored 34 points, Al Jefferson had 24 and visiting Charlotte bounced back from consecutive losses to the Eastern Conference's top teams by beating New York Knicks.

Wizards 121, Nets 103: Ramon Sessions scored 18 points and had a season-high 13 assists while starting in place of the injured John Wall to help host Washington defeat Brooklyn.

Celtics 104, Pelicans 97: Isaiah Thomas scored 32 points to help host Boston fend off short-handed New Orleans.

Pistons 108, Magic 104: Reggie Jackson scored 24 points and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 18 to help lead visiting Detroit over Orlando.

Mavericks 88, Rockets 86: J.J. Barea scored 27 points and host Dallas kept a slim cushion over Utah and Houston in the race for the last two Western Conference playoff spots.

Clippers 91, Lakers 81: DeAndre Jordan and J.J. Redick scored 15 points apiece in the Clippers' victory over the Lakers, spoiling the penultimate home game of Kobe Bryant's career.

Red Wings top Flyers, close in on playoff berth

Associated Press

DETROIT — If the Detroit Red Wings make the playoffs for a 25th straight year, they can thank Jimmy Howard.

Howard made 30 saves, Darren Helm, Andreas Athanasiou and Kyle Quincey scored for Detroit, and the Red Wings took a step toward another postseason appearance with a 3-0 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Wednesday night.

The Red Wings (93 points) lead Boston (91) in the race for third place in the Atlantic Division. Philadelphia (91) is tied with the Bruins for the second wild card.

"I think it's just the paying attention to detail," Howard said. "We've been a lot smarter with the puck — not forcing things, and just taking what's given."

While teammate Petr Mrazek has struggled in net, Howard has won all three of his starts this month. Wednesday was his second shutout of the season.

The Flyers have three games remaining, while Detroit and Boston have two each. The Bruins were to host the Red Wings on Thursday, and a win would put Detroit in the playoffs.

"From day one, we've had to grind out wins. Everything's been close," Red Wings coach Jeff Blashill said. "We've never been truly comfortable in a playoff spot. At times, we've been on the outside looking in."

Helm scored in the first period and Athanasiou added a short-handed goal

in the second for Detroit, which hasn't missed the postseason since 1990. Quincey's goal was an empty-netter.

The Flyers' Steve Mason made 23 saves. His most impressive sequence came in the second when he stopped a breakaway by Helm, then recovered in time to deny Luke Glendening's follow-up attempt.

Quincey's empty-net goal with 1:43 left in the game was a strange one. Skating near his own net, he tried to slam the puck around the glass to clear it. The puck bounced out at a weird angle and slid all the way down into the goal.

Oilers 6, Canucks 2: Patrick Maroon scored twice and Edmonton won at Rexall Place for the final time, beating Vancouver.

It was the final NHL game scheduled to be played at Rexall, with the Oilers moving into a new downtown arena in the fall.

The Oilers have played in the building since 1974 when they were in the World Hockey Association.

Blue Jackets 5, Maple Leafs 1: Brandon Dubinsky scored two goals and Brandon Saad added a goal and assist and Columbus beat host Toronto.

Matt Calvert had a goal and two assists. Oliver Bjorkstrand had a goal and assist for Columbus.

Sergei Bobrovsky made 26 saves for the Blue Jackets.