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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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B-52s deploy to bomb militants

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

IRBIL, Iraq — The U.S. has sent B-52 Stratofortress bombers to the Middle East on their first operational deployment in 26 years to join the air war against the Islamic State group, the military said Saturday.

The aircraft, from Barksdale Air Force Base, La., arrived at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, on Saturday in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the operation to eliminate the Islamic State group from Iraq and Syria, the Air Force said in a statement. Al Udeid is the regional nerve center for the air war against the Islamic State group.

The B-52 is a long-range, heavy bomber that can perform a variety of missions including

strategic attack, close-air support, air interdiction, and maritime operations. Crews will be available to carry out missions in both Iraq and Syria as needed, the statement said.

The deployment is the first basing of the B-52s in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in 26 years, according to the Air Force statement. B-52s were based in Saudi Arabia supporting Operation Desert Storm, the operation to liberate Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion in 1990, it said.

The strategic bomber, which has been in service since the 1950s, is replacing a contingent of B-1 Lancer swing-wing bombers that left the region in January for maintenance and a series of upgrades to its elec-

tronics and other systems.

Air Force spokesman Lt. Col. Chris Karns said in an email that, for operational reasons, he was unable to disclose the number of B-52s deployed to the Middle East.

“The B-52 will prove its precision, persistence, and offer a payload that affords options to the coalition,” he said. The coalition against the Islamic State has conducted more than 33,000 air power missions in support of Operation Inherent Resolve.

Russia, too, has used its long-range, strategic bombers to hit Islamic State targets in Syria since it started bombing the militants in September. These included Tu-22 Backfires, Tu-95 Bears and swing-wing Tu-160 Blackjacks, according to Russian military reports.

Navy officer charged with espionage

The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK — A Navy officer assigned to a patrol-and-reconnaissance group has been charged in military court with two counts of espionage.

The lieutenant commander is being held at the brig in Chesapeake and appeared at the military equivalent of a preliminary hearing at Norfolk Naval Station on Friday, according to the Navy. The officer's identity has not been released.

The charge sheets say the officer communicated secret information “relating to the national defense to representatives of a foreign government.” The documents do not specify what information was provided, when it was provided nor which nation it was provided to.

The officer belongs to a unit that provides airborne anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, and maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations from planes such as the P-8A Poseidon, P-3C Orion and unmanned MQ-4C Triton. The command is headquartered at Hampton Roads Naval Support Activity, although it's not clear if he was stationed there.

The Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force is organized into three air wings at Jacksonville Naval Air Station in Florida, Whidbey Island Naval Air Station in Washington, and Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station in Hawaii.

The officer also is charged with three counts of attempted espionage, three counts of making false official statements, five counts of communicating defense information, prostitution-patronizing, adultery, and multiple violations of a lawful general order and failure to obey a lawful order.

Kerry prods Afghans during visit

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday committed to pushing reforms after his picks for attorney general and interior minister won long-sought Cabinet confirmation, while U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry pleaded with the government's power-sharing leaders to bury their “factional divisions” for the good of the country.

Yet Ghani could not cite progress toward ending a bitter feud with Afghanistan's chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, that has hobbled the Kabul government for 18 months. The unwieldy arrangement, which Kerry helped to forge, has left interim ministers in critical positions while the U.S. ally struggles to confront lawlessness, corruption and the Taliban's insurgency.

At a news conference, Ghani hailed the Cabinet votes in parliament as a turning point. Progress on that front “assures us there will be fundamental, comprehensive reforms,” Ghani said through an interpreter.

Kerry, during a brief stopover in Afghanistan on his way to Japan for a meeting of foreign ministers, backed him up and stressed the need for a unified approach between the competing Ghani

and Abdullah camps.

In the coming months, NATO and international donor summits could define long-term security and aid commitments critical to the Afghan government's survival, so Kerry sought clarity on Afghanistan's direction.

Kerry called on the Taliban to re-engage in peace talks dormant for almost a year and said there was no change now in President Barack Obama's plans for troop levels in Afghanistan.

There are 9,800 U.S. forces on the ground in Afghanistan, and that number is set to fall to 5,500 next year.

“But he always has said he will listen to his commanders on the ground,” Kerry said.

Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, is reviewing needs; Kerry said that would guide Obama's final decision.

Ghani declined to weigh in on what he said was a U.S. matter.

Kerry met alone with Ghani and then included Abdullah in a lengthy, three-way discussion on a porch in the presidential compound.

Kerry also participated in separate talks with the foreign minister on security, governance and economic development.

US missile defense planned for South Korea

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Friday that the proposed placement of a U.S. missile defense system in South Korea is “going to happen” despite Chinese opposition.

Washington and Seoul began talks last month on deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, system to combat the threat of North Korean missiles, following a recent nuclear test and a launch of a long-range rocket by Pyongyang.

Carter was speaking Friday on U.S. defense policy toward the Asia-Pacific region ahead of a trip to India and the Philippines. He was asked if the THAAD deployment

was going to happen.

“It’s going to happen,” Carter told the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. “No, it’s a necessary thing. It’s between us and the South Koreans. It’s part of protecting our own forces on the Korean Peninsula and protecting South Korea. It has nothing to do with the Chinese.”

Carter added that he hoped China would work more effectively with North Korea to head off the missile threat.

“We need to defend our own people. We need to defend our own allies, and we’re going to do that,” Carter said in his remarks, which were webcast.

Both China and Russia oppose the de-

ployment of the THAAD system on South Korean soil. China has expressed concern that it would allow U.S. radar to penetrate into Chinese territory.

The U.S. says the system is intended purely to counter the threat of North Korean missiles and would not undermine China’s strategic deterrence.

North Korea said Saturday that it had successfully conducted an engine test of a new intercontinental ballistic rocket it claims will strengthen its ability to stage nuclear strikes on the United States. But South Korean officials still say North Korea doesn’t yet have a reliable intercontinental ballistic missile, let alone the ability to arm it with a nuclear warhead.

Gunman faced disciplinary proceeding

San Antonio Express-News

The shooting that left an airman and a squadron commander dead Friday occurred after the airman, accompanied by a first sergeant, was brought into the commander’s office for a disciplinary proceeding, according to multiple sources.

An Air Force technical sergeant armed with two handguns killed the officer and himself at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland’s Medina Annex on Friday morning.

Joint Base San Antonio wouldn’t identify the men nor provide details about how the

incident unfolded, but multiple sources spoke to the Express-News about the incident.

The Washington Post reported the gunman was Tech. Sgt. Steven D. Bellino, 41. The newspaper said Bellino served a brief stint as an FBI agent before entering the service.

The newspaper said Bellino was a student with the 342nd Training Squadron, which provides training and screening in skills used by elite units in Air Force Special Operations Command.

A source familiar with Friday’s incident said the techni-

cal sergeant’s meeting with the commander was brief.

The NCO, armed with two Glock handguns, shot the officer and then killed himself.

Sheriff’s Office spokesman James Keith described the shooting as a murder-suicide.

Authorities said the incident was not an act of terrorism.

Air Force officials declined to identify the shooter or victim or to confirm that the incident was a murder-suicide.

A few minutes after a 911 call at 8:40 a.m., Bexar County sheriff’s deputies, guns drawn, swarmed the building, search-

ing for gunmen and survivors.

The lockdown quickly took effect across Lackland, a major Air Force instructional hub and long home to the service’s basic military training course.

A basic training graduation parade abruptly stopped after an active-shooter alert was issued, and an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 airmen and visitors quickly moved from the parade field.

Lackland, like most U.S. military installations, prohibits the private possession of firearms but does not screen the thousands of vehicles that enter and exit daily.

Prosecutors detail accusations against ex-Rep. Hastert

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Dennis Hastert agreed to pay \$3.5 million to a person the former House speaker sexually abused when the victim was a 14-year-old wrestler on a team coached by Hastert, prosecutors said in a filing detailing allegations by five former students.

The filing Friday night is the first time prosecutors have confirmed Hastert paid hush-money to conceal sex abuse. It chronicles a chain of deception that began with Hastert exploiting his position of trust as a teacher and coach, and carried on years later to include lying to bank officials and making false claims of extortion to the FBI.

The filing recommends a federal judge sentence Hastert to up to six months in prison for violating banking laws as he sought to pay one of his victims, identified in court documents as “Individual A,” to ensure the person kept quiet.

Prosecutors said Hastert, 74, still was abusing boys when he first decided to run for office, but the Republican managed to keep any hint of sexual misconduct quiet throughout his political career that carried him from the Illinois Legislature to the halls of Congress and eventually to the speakers’ office.

Hastert, who pleaded guilty in October to breaking banking laws, is scheduled to

be sentenced April 27. Prosecutors noted the statute of limitation on any sex-abuse charges have run out.

Individual A is one of at least four people cited in the filing as saying that Hastert sexually abused them as children. Three were wrestlers and the fourth was a student-manager on the team Hastert coached.

Prosecutors said in the filing that Hastert’s known sexual acts against Individual A and other accusers consist of “intentional touching of minors’ groin area and genitals or oral sex with a minor.”

In their filing, prosecutors said Hastert made his victims “feel alone, ashamed, guilty and devoid of dignity,” they said.

McIlroy closes gap in Masters

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The final pairing for a weekend at the Masters is what everyone wanted — Jordan Spieth and Rory McIlroy, winners at four of the last six majors.

Just nobody expected this kind of an Augusta National.

In the toughest scoring conditions at the Masters in nearly a decade, Spieth had a five-shot lead that nearly disappeared before he saved par from a bunker with a 15-foot putt on the final hole for a 2-over 74 and a one-shot lead over McIlroy.

"It was very tough to stay cool," Spieth said. "You could say, 'Looked like you got emotional out there.' I mean, you guys try it. That was a hard golf course."

McIlroy, who trailed by as much as eight shots at one point, put the career Grand Slam in clear view by making birdie on both par 5s on the back nine and picking up a bonus birdie with a 40-foot putt on the par-3 16th for a 71.

That matched the lowest round of the day, the first time since 2007 that no one broke 70 at the Masters.

"You just have to look at the scores and you can see how tough it is today," McIlroy said.

Spieth set a Masters record with his sixth straight round in the lead, and it took a few minutes for him to appreciate that after trying to survive gusts that reached 30 mph and a golf course so crusty that even 2-foot putts made him nervous.

He was at 4-under 140, the highest 36-hole to lead at Augusta since 2007. The scoring average was 75.02, also the highest in nine years.

"I'm still in the lead. I couldn't ask for

much better than leading," Spieth said.

Spieth and McIlroy will tee off in the last group Saturday — one going for his second green jacket, the other needing one to complete the ultimate collection of golf prizes.

Given the conditions — more of the same is expected Saturday — this felt more like everyone against Augusta National than Spieth vs. McIlroy.

"It would add a lot of excitement and buzz and atmosphere to the tournament, obviously," McIlroy said. "If you start to think about anyone else... I've only got the mental capacity to focus on me right now, especially how tough it is out there."

Spieth said it would be exciting to play with McIlroy and left it at that.

There was too much golf to play, too many players still in the mix.

"There's the potential tomorrow for someone to shoot a few under and move up into the lead from outside the top 25," Spieth said. "There's a potential for that with what I saw on the last six holes today, the way the course was playing. So I don't think either one of us is focused on each other. I think we're focused on the golf course."

Danny Lee bogeyed his last two holes for a 72 and was two shots behind, along with Scott Piercy (72). The only other players who remained under par were Hideki Matsuyama (72), Brandt Snedeker (72) and Soren Kjeldsen (74).

Dustin Johnson birdied all the par 5s for a 71 and was in the group at even par that included U.S. Amateur champion Bryson DeChambeau, who felt the sting of Augusta on the final hole. DeChambeau was playing the best round of the day at 3 under and just one shot out of the lead.

But he hooked his tee shot into the trees and had to return to the tee, hooked the next one and made triple bogey for a 72.

Still in the mix was Jason Day, the No. 1 player who sputtered along to a 73 but was only five shots behind.

"It almost feels like a U.S. Open where you need to survive," Day said. "And I'm trying my best to survive right now."

Spieth finished a round over par at Augusta for the first time in his three Masters appearances. Coming off his wire-to-wire victory last year, that par save on the 18th allowed him to set a record for consecutive rounds in the lead. Arnold Palmer was atop the leaderboard for six straight rounds in 1960 and the opening two rounds in 1961, though he shared the lead in those last two rounds.

Despite the lead, it was hard to get past Spieth's mistakes — a four-putt double bogey on No. 5, a three-putt bogey on No. 16, and another bogey on the 17th hole.

"I was at 8 under and you finish at 4. That's kind of tough," Spieth said. "I felt like I played better than 4 over from the fourth hole on."

Spieth's par on the last hole not only kept him in the lead, it sent Phil Mickelson home for the weekend because of the 10-shot rule. Mickelson shot a career-high 79 and finished at 7-over to miss the cut.

Tom Watson missed the cut by two shots in his final Masters appearance, walking up the 18th fairway to a standing ovation and warm applause.

He parred his last four holes for a 78 and said later, "I'm glad I don't have to play that 18th hole anymore."

Spieth, McIlroy and everyone else have two more days to endure to see who claims the green jacket.

Another victory for Kyle Busch

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Kyle Busch completed a NASCAR sweep in a week.

Busch led 150 of 200 laps at Texas on Friday night for the fourth victory in five Xfinity Series starts this season. After wins in the Sprint Cup and Camping World Truck races at Martinsville last weekend, he has won in each of NASCAR's top three series in a seven-day period.

"I wouldn't say it's easy, but it's certainly rewarding," Busch said. "Definitely being able to accomplish the things that we've accomplished over the last seven days has been really good."

Busch was the polesitter at Texas and led four times, including the last 81 laps, for his Xfinity-record 80th victory — he has won 25 percent of his 316 starts in that series. It was his eighth Xfinity win at the high-banked, 1½-mile track in the Lone Star State.

Just like the Joe Gibbs Racing teammates started the race, Busch and Erik Jones were 1-2 in their Toyotas at the checkered flag. Jones finished 3.055 seconds back, with Brad Keselowski third and Chase Elliott fourth.

The 80 Xfinity wins give Busch 160 overall in the three series. He has won 35 Sprint Cup races and 45 truck races.

"Each and every event we enter, we try to win, try to do what we can, and hopefully we can again (Saturday)," said Busch, who starts 15th in Saturday night's Sprint Cup race at Texas.

Daniel Suarez, another JGR driver, held onto the Xfinity points lead despite finishing 16th. His 10-point lead over Elliott Sadler, who finished seventh, was trimmed to one point as the series returned to the track after a two-week break.

Busch has led 75 percent of the laps run (776 of 1,033) in the Xfinity Series this season, and that is even without him running the 120-lap opener at Daytona. He has led at least 119 laps in all five of his starts this season.

When he finished as the runner-up at California in the last race, he led 133 of 150 laps. He was about 2 miles from another win before a flat tire and still finished second to Austin Dillon.

Jones was leading when he came to pit road on lap 80 Friday night during a caution brought out after Suarez spun in Turn 4.

Busch led Jones off pit road, but Jones was dropped from second to 18th before the restart after a penalty for one of his crew members coming over the wall too quickly when he pulled up to his stall.

"It definitely didn't help by any means," Jones said, though insisting that the penalty didn't cost him a victory.

"I was fortunate in a way last year, I didn't have to race against Kyle in the Xfinity Series at all," Jones said. "He's back, the man to beat and in old form again. It's not frustrating. I respect what he does."

Brandon Jones finished ninth in the No. 33 Chevrolet sponsored by the Texas Rangers.

Maddon, Cubs set sights on ending drought

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Whether there was a mime leading warmups, a 1970s van blasting disco music or Chicago Cubs mingling with real cubs this spring, Joe Maddon was in top form long before the season's first pitch.

If everything falls into place, the man who brought a magician to the clubhouse last year just might pull off the ultimate trick.

Manage the Cubs to a championship? It's no longshot these days.

Maddon's second season began with huge expectations after 97 wins in 2015 and a march to the NLCS that fueled hopes among long-suffering fans that a championship drought dating to 1908 is in its final stages. It figures to be a charged atmosphere at Wrigley Field on Monday when the Cubs host Cincinnati in their home opener. And it could be that way all season on Chicago's North Side.

"We haven't won a World Series in more than a century, so there's nothing to get complacent or cocky about," Maddon said. "Bring that all on the table, talk about it, say it up front and then we'll go from there."

While Maddon and the Cubs look for-

ward, childhood friend Willie Forte could not help but look back.

Long before Maddon turned Wrigley Field into a miniature zoo with animals or had his team wear onesies on a trip home last season, long before the mime and the real cubs and the retro van, there was a Dodge. An eight-track. And, for Forte, a life-changing moment.

They were in Maddon's Dodge one night in the early 1970s when Maddon popped in an 8-track and told his buddy: "I think this guy is gonna be the biggest guy ever. I think he's gonna be a huge, huge star."

It was "The Wild, the Innocent & the E Street Shuffle," and yes, Bruce Springsteen did rather well for himself. Forte, a keyboardist, started The B Street Band, a successful cover act.

Maddon did all right, too.

He spent more than three decades in the Angels organization as a player, coach and scout. He was on manager Mike Scioscia's staff during the 2002 championship season before leaving to manage Tampa Bay after the 2005 season.

"His insights were terrific," Scioscia said. "I realized that very early. He was a guy that I definitely wanted to pick his brain and talk baseball with him."

Forte saw the leadership and vision, not

to mention a strong arm, when they were growing up in Hazelton, Pa., a onetime mining town built by immigrants.

He remembers Maddon throwing a football 40 yards and blowing everyone else away at a punt, pass and kick competition when they were 9 years old and the two striking a friendship not long after that while playing for the State Trooper Eagles youth team.

There was that time when they were about 12 or 13 and got caught with their hands in the cookie jar by their coaches during a trip to Pittsburgh. The team was staying at a school cafeteria, and the orders were clear: Don't raid the kitchen. That was all the incentive Forte, Maddon and another teammate needed to chow down.

They stuffed themselves on the next day's meals, then tried to run away when the coaches returned. The three were forced to eat the leftovers, and while Forte and the other player became ill, Maddon — calm as always — quietly consumed the equivalent of another lunch or dinner.

That's how Maddon was, rarely rattled, even in high school when he was the quarterback and captain of the offense.



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'Utley rule' call costs Astros

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — The Houston Astros huddled around video monitors in the clubhouse for extra views. Manager A.J. Hinch fumed in his office. Ace Dallas Keuchel made his frustration known on Twitter.

The Astros became the latest team in the majors to get a firsthand look at the "Chase Utley rule."

Colby Rasmus was called for interference because of the new rule, resulting in a game-ending double play and blunting Houston's ninth-inning rally in a 6-4 loss to the Milwaukee Brewers.

"My interpretation is that it's a shame. The game ends on a play that the rule isn't intended to protect," said Hinch after the game, his voice cracking.

Down 6-0, the Astros scored four times in the ninth and put runners on first and second with one out.

Jose Altuve hit a bouncer to second baseman Scooter Gennett, who threw to shortstop Jonathan Villar for the force-out. Rasmus slid past the base, and Villar didn't make a relay to first.

Second base umpire Dan Bellino called Rasmus for not trying to stay on the bag, part of the requirement under baseball's new rule governing slides on potential double plays. The call was upheld after the Astros challenged the play.

"My second base umpire determined that it was not a bona fide slide because Rasmus did not attempt to stay on the base. He could not stay on the base," crew chief Tom Hallion said. "With that, that is the rule of interference."

Keuchel had a different opinion. "Are we even playing baseball anymore??? Unbelievable," the opinionated Cy Young Award winner said on Twitter.

It was the second time this week that an "Utley rule" call ended a game. Toronto lost two runs and a potential win when Jose Bautista was called for interference at Tampa Bay.

Jeremy Jeffress was credited with his second save after getting the double play, in spite of allowing a hit and walk in the ninth.

"It's a different way to end a game," Brewers manager Craig Counsell said, "but we'll take it."

Counsell said the "Utley rule" was talked about at length during spring training, but players are still learning to adjust. Managers are still learning how to inter-

pret it.

"The rule is the rule and we're going to have to learn how to play with it," Counsell said.

Hinch said there needed to be more clarification.

"He slid through the base and didn't hang onto the base. When a play happens late, you're asking major league athletes to essentially shut it down and slide at a pace that isn't competitive," Hinch said.

Rookie Tyler White hit a three-run homer in the ninth off Sam Freeman. White also doubled and singled, and is 9-for-13 since making his major league debut this week. He set a franchise record for most hits by a player in his first four games.

White said he was nervous in his first at-bat in the season opener.

"But after that, it's just baseball. It's a game. The same game I've been playing since Little League," the 25-year-old White said.

Chase Anderson (1-0) allowed four hits and struck out five in five shutout innings in his Brewers debut. He was acquired in the offseason in a deal that sent starting shortstop Jean Segura to Arizona.

Gennett had a solo homer and Chris Carter added a two-run shot later in the first off Scott Feldman (0-1).

Pirates 6, Reds 5: Starling Marte managed to stop his eyes from watering when he came to bat for the final time on a frigid, blustery night in Cincinnati. Peering through the opening in his black facemask, he swung away at the second pitch he got. Without even looking, he knew it was gone.

Marte hit his first career grand slam in the eighth inning on Friday night, connecting off new Reds closer J.J. Hoover for a 6-5 victory that kept Pittsburgh unbeaten.

The Pirates improved to 4-0 for the first time since 2003.

Padres 13, Rockies 6: Trevor Story became the first major leaguer to homer in each of his first four games, connecting two more times for host Colorado in a loss to San Diego. Story now has six home runs since making his debut on opening day.

Orioles 6, Rays 1: Baltimore hit four solo home runs off Chris Archer and defeated Tampa Bay for its first 4-0 start since 2011.

Chris Davis homered and scored three runs for the Orioles, who were coming

off a three-game sweep of Minnesota. The best start in franchise history is 5-0 in 1970.

Giants 3, Dodgers 2 (10): Ross Stripling was pulled with a no-hitter in progress after 7¹/₃ innings during his major league debut, and visiting Los Angeles lost to San Francisco in extra innings on a rainy night.

Cardinals 7, Braves 4: St. Louis set a major league record with three pinch-hit home runs while rallying from a four-run deficit to beat host Atlanta.

Mets 7, Phillies 2: Jacob deGrom maintained his focus on the mound, and New York got big hits from Neil Walker and Michael Conforto to beat Philadelphia in its home opener.

Royals 4, Twins 3: Salvador Perez had an RBI triple in the eighth inning and scored the go-ahead run on Omar Infante's sacrifice fly to help host Kansas City come back and beat Minnesota.

Red Sox 8, Blue Jays 7: Brock Holt hit his first career grand slam and drove in a career-high five runs, David Ortiz had two RBIs and Boston rallied to spoil Toronto's home opener.

Tigers 4, Yankees 0: Jordan Zimmermann was outstanding in his debut with his new team, Miguel Cabrera homered and Detroit beat New York to win its eighth straight home opener.

Indians 7, White Sox 1: Danny Salazar pitched two-hit ball into the sixth inning, and Cleveland spoiled Chicago's home opener.

Diamondbacks 3, Cubs 2: Yasmany Tomas singled home Chris Owings with two outs in the ninth inning and host Arizona rallied to give Chicago its first loss.

Athletics 3, Mariners 2: Chris Coghlan hit a solo home run with one out in the top of the ninth inning off closer Steve Cishek to give Oakland a win in Seattle's home opener.

Rangers 7, Angels 3: A.J. Griffin got the victory in his first major league appearance in more than two seasons and Rougned Odor homered, leading visiting Texas over Los Angeles.

Pistons secure berth in playoffs

Associated Press

AUBURN HILLS, Michigan — Reggie Jackson had 39 points and nine assists and the Detroit Pistons clinched their first postseason spot in seven years with a 112-99 victory over the Washington Wizards on Friday night.

Detroit's last playoff berth came in 2009 when it was swept in the first round by LeBron James and Cleveland. The Pistons are likely to face the same opponents this year.

Detroit had to overcome 29 points from Markieff Morris, who did everything possible to keep twin brother Marcus out of the postseason. Bradley Beal added 25 for the Wizards.

Marcus Morris had 17 points and nine rebounds in the clincher.

Pelicans 110, Lakers 102: Alex Ajinca and his teammates dominated Los Angeles in retiring star Kobe Bryant's final game in New Orleans.

Bryant had 14 points, had four assists and three rebounds, delighting fans who cheered his every touch of the ball. The Lakers have games in Houston and Oklahoma City before Bryant's grand finale at home Wednesday against Utah.

Raptors 111, Pacers 98: Rookie Norman Powell scored a season-high 27 points and Toronto spoiled visiting Indiana's, chance to clinch a playoff spot.

The Pacers need one more win or a Chicago loss to qualify for the postseason. They will clinch if the Bulls lose to Cleveland on Saturday night, or by beating Brooklyn on Sunday.

Magic 112, Heat 109: Nikola Vucevic scored 29 points and Evan Fournier added 28 to help host Orlando beat Miami.

The loss snapped a two-game winning streak for the Heat and made their fight to remain in the hunt for a top-four seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs that much tougher.

Nuggets 102, Spurs 98: Jusuf Nurkic scored a career-high 21 points, Gary Harris had two pivotal defensive plays in the waning seconds and Denver snapped a 10-game skid to visiting San Antonio.

Emmanuel Mudiay added 20 for the Nuggets, who knocked off San Antonio for the first time since April 10, 2013. They're the only team this season to beat both Golden State and San Antonio.

Clippers 102, Jazz 99 (OT): Jamal Crawford made a three-pointer with 0.2 seconds left and finished with 30 points in Los Angeles' victory over host Utah.

Mavericks 103, Grizzlies 93: Dirk Nowitzki scored 21 points and host Dallas overcame an injury to sparkplug J.J. Barea while moving to the brink of another playoff spot.

Celtics 124, Bucks 109: Tyler Zeller tied his career high with 26 points and Boston continued its playoff push with a victory over visiting Milwaukee.

Hornets 113, Nets 99: Kemba Walker scored 22 points, Troy Daniels made his first five three-point attempts and finished with 17 points, and host Charlotte completed a four-game season sweep of Brooklyn.

Knicks 109, 76ers 102: Carmelo Anthony scored 20 points and Robin Lopez had 24 points and 15 rebounds to lead New York past host Philadelphia.

Blue Jackets down Sabres, look to future

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno can look beyond the frustration of Columbus closing yet another season out of playoff contention and see a brighter future.

It began with rookie Joonas Korpisalo stopping 34 shots, including 17 in the second period. And it continued with Brandon Saad scoring his 30th goal as part of a 4-1 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Friday night in a matchup of two teams out of playoff contention.

"You need to see your youth be able to contribute, especially when you're not where you want to be," said Foligno, who broke a 1-1 tie with 4:44 left in the second period. "It's only going to bode well for us going forward as an organization."

Saad's goal provided the Blue Jackets a franchise first. The fifth-year player tied Boone Jenner for the team lead, and marked the first time Columbus has had two players score 30 goals in one season.

"He's a huge part of our team and I'm glad," coach John Tortorella said of Saad. "Although we're done after tomorrow, it's nice for those guys to have those types of milestones. And we expect more of it when we get going next year."

It hasn't been an easy season for the Blue Jackets, who opened with an eight-game losing skid that cost coach Todd Richards his job. The overhaul continued with the team trading top-line forward Ryan Johansen to Nashville on Jan. 6.

Matt Calvert and Dalton Prout also scored for Columbus, which closes hosting Chicago on Saturday. The Blue Jackets moved into 27th in the standings, a point ahead of Vancouver, and won two in a row for the first time since Feb. 23-27.

Rookie Sam Reinhart scored for the Sabres in their home finale. Buffalo (34-36-11), which closes at the New York Islanders on Saturday, had a three-game winning streak snapped and blew an opportunity to finish a season with as many regulation wins as losses.

The Sabres can finish no higher than 22nd, though it still marks a significant improvement for a rebuilding team that finished last in the standings in each of the past two seasons.

"Not the way wanted to finish," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "I think at times our starts, we're asleep at times."

The game turned late in the second period when Foligno and Prout scored 2:09 apart, and shortly after Reinhart scored a power-play goal to tie the game at 1.

Foligno scored a goal that began with teammate Josh Anderson forcing a turnover with a hard hit on Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges along the right boards. Jenner then made a diving stab at the loose puck to nudge into the left circle and up Foligno.

Prout's goal came off an odd-man rush, after Buffalo defender Jake McCabe was caught deep in the Columbus zone. William Karlsson broke up the left wing and fed Prout, who snapped a shot from the high slot to beat Jason Kasdorf.