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North Korea warns US it's ready for war

By KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea warned of “catastrophic consequences” if the United States attempts a pre-emptive strike, while the top U.S. commander in the South canceled a trip to Washington because of rising tensions.

President Donald Trump’s administration has signaled it will take a hard line against Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program and has called on China to do more to rein in its communist ally.

On Tuesday, Trump said he offered to sweeten a trade deal in exchange for solving the North Korean problem during last week’s summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping. He also reiterated that the United States is willing act alone if they don’t.

“North Korea is looking for trouble. If China decides to help, that would be great. If not, we will solve the problem without them! U.S.A.,” he wrote.

North Korea was reacting to the weekend announcement that a nuclear-powered U.S. aircraft carrier was returning to the waters surrounding South Korea instead of heading for planned port visits in Australia.

It will be the USS Carl Vinson’s second visit to those waters in less than a month, an unusually fast turnaround.

The strike group, which includes the destroyers USS Wayne E. Meyer and USS Michael Murphy, was in the waters off the peninsula last month to participate in annual war games with South Korea. It made a port call to the southern city of Busan on March 15.

Pyongyang sees the joint military exercises as a rehearsal for an invasion, although Washington and Seoul insist they are defensive in nature.

North Korea’s state-run news agency said the deployment proves its long-standing claims that Washington is planning an invasion and reiterated that such actions

justify its nuclear weapons program.

Trump has said President Barack Obama’s policy relying on economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure has failed. But the president has offered few details about how his policy will be different, although many saw a missile strike against the Syrian regime as a warning that Trump isn’t afraid to take unilateral military action when he deems it necessary.

U.S. national security adviser Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster told Fox News on Sunday that Trump has ordered him to prepare “a full range of options” for dealing with the growing threat from the North.

Gen. Vincent Brooks, who leads U.S. forces in South Korea as well as the Combined Forces Command, will not attend the Armed Service Committee hearings in person due to the security situation, a statement said. Instead he will provide a written statement.

USAF might pull out all stops to keep pilots

CQ Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Faced with pilots leaving the Air Force in droves for the airlines, top generals are considering the option of forcing some to stay in the service against their will, the chief of Air Mobility Command said.

Gen. Carlton Everhart said in an interview that he and other senior Air Force generals will join Gen. David Goldfein, the service’s chief of staff, alongside representatives of the other armed services in a meeting with U.S. airline executives May 18 at Joint Base Andrews, Md.

The goal of the meeting will be to find ways to solve the exodus of Air Force pilots to the industry in a way that is mutually acceptable for the U.S. military and the airlines — without the Air Force having to resort to “stop-loss,” a means of forcing

Air Force personnel to stay in the service beyond the period of their commitment.

Everhart said he has already told airline executives that stop-loss is an option. “I said to the industry ... if we can’t meet the requirements, the chief could drop in a stop-loss — and you need to understand that,” he said.

The shortages, especially in fighter pilots, are beginning to hurt the Air Force’s fight against Islamic State, Everhart said.

“If I don’t have pilots to fly, the enemy has a vote, and if I can’t put warheads on foreheads, then [ISIS] is winning,” he said.

With Air Force pilots leaving the service in great numbers, there is growing talk of boosting bonuses to retain them. But money, it turns out, is usually the least important reason a pilot stays or goes.

That doesn’t mean an increase to the \$35,000 annual enticement that is available to pilots after a decade of service would necessarily be a bad idea. But the pilot shortage — a hot topic this year in Congress’ defense committees — may be more a function of pilots being pushed out by the declining state of Air Force readiness than about the pull of big bucks in the airline industry, according to lawmakers and military leaders.

There are not enough pilots today across all the U.S. military services, but nowhere is the shortage as bad as in the active-duty Air Force, the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, which are some 1,550 short of the 20,300 required pilots, officials testified this month. An estimated 950 of the missing Air Force pilots are supposed to be in fighter jets.

But just as important as the shortage of pilots is a dearth of maintenance personnel, said Everhart, whose command oversees the Air Force’s support fleet — comprising transport, refueling, aeromedical and VIP aircraft.

The maintenance shortage has gotten far less attention than the pilot issue, but the Air Force was some 3,400 short of its required number of maintenance personnel at the end of 2016, even though the required number has dropped, officials say. In response, the service is hiring more and more maintainers with less and less experience, officials say.

And now the service is also beginning to lose other key types of skills to the civilian sector — from air traffic controllers to cyberwarriors, Everhart warns.

LGBT advocates trying to block Trump's Army secretary nominee

BY DAN LAMOTHE
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Advocacy groups for LGBT people have launched an effort on Capitol Hill to block President Donald Trump's new Army secretary nominee, saying his record of antagonism and hostility toward them is unacceptable.

The Trump administration announced Friday it was nominating Mark E. Green, a retired Army officer and Tennessee state politician with business experience. He has served most recently in the Tennessee state senate and was preparing for a run for governor.

But Green, who once interviewed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein while serving on the special operations team that captured him, has suggested

that being transgender is a disease and has sponsored legislation in Tennessee that critics say would allow businesses to discriminate against their own employees on the basis of sexual orientation. He also suggested last fall that while most millennials are accepting of transgender people, he wanted to be a "light" that set the record straight.

Officials with the Human Rights Campaign and the American Military Partners Association said in a joint conference call with journalists Monday that Green's views are radical and outdated and that they are rallying support against him. Stephen Peters, the national press secretary for Human Rights Campaign, said he found it "appalling" that Green was

selected and found him to be an unacceptable choice. Green has "gone out of his way" to target LGBT people, he said.

The Trump administration and Green did not respond to requests for comment.

Trump's Air Force secretary nominee, Heather A. Wilson has also prompted some concerns among LGBT advocates, primarily because when she was a congresswoman she opposed a bill intended to reduce bullying against LGBT people. At the time, Wilson said people who face bullying should be "comfortable with themselves" and stand strong. She also said that she tolerated LGBT people, but (I) "do not approve" of their actions.

Fleet of Navy jets remains grounded

Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — The U.S. Navy is keeping a fleet of training jets on the ground as it tries to determine why pilots have increasingly suffered from a lack of oxygen in the cockpit.

A steady spike in "physiological episodes" has been reported among personnel who fly in the T-45C Goshawk, a two-seat trainer plane for future Navy and Marine fighter pilots.

Symptoms of low oxygen can range from tingling fingers to cloudy judgment and even passing out, although Navy officials said conditions in the trainer jets haven't been very severe.

Cmdr. Jeanette Groeneveld, a Navy spokeswoman, said nine people out of more than 100 affected since 2012 have been required to wear oxygen masks after a flight.

But late last month, concerned pilots declined to fly on more than 90 flights. In response, the Navy initially grounded the fleet for three days starting April 5. Vice Adm. Mike Shoemaker extended the operational pause on Sunday for at least another week.

The Navy operates nearly 200 of the training planes at three naval air stations in the Southern U.S. They are NAS Meridian in Mississippi, NAS Kingsville in Texas and NAS Pensacola in Florida.

Groeneveld said the number of physiological episodes began to spike in 2015 with 28. Last year saw 34. There have been 20 in 2017 so far. But it's hard to pinpoint the cause, according to congressional testimony submitted by the Navy last month.

For instance, 24 of 79 examined instances were caused by contamination in the cockpit breathing system, the Navy said. A dozen more were blamed on component failure in the oxygen generating system. The T-45C was built by Boeing based on a British design. It has been operational since 1991.

No charges to be pursued in Calif. drowning of SEAL during training

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The Navy will not pursue criminal charges in the drowning of a sailor who was repeatedly pushed underwater by an instructor during Navy SEAL basic training in California, authorities said.

Cmdr. Liam Hulin, head of the Naval Special Warfare Basic Training Command, found that no crime occurred during the training that killed Seaman James Derek Lovelace, a Navy statement said Monday.

Hulin's conclusions came after his review of a Naval Criminal Investigative Service probe into Lovelace's death 11 months ago during a pool exercise in Coronado, near San Diego.

"Our thoughts and prayers remain with the Lovelace family," Hulin said in the statement. "No loss of life in training is an acceptable loss."

The San Diego County Medical Examiner ruled the death a homicide after finding Lovelace had been dunked at least twice by an instructor while struggling to tread water in full gear.

The autopsy also revealed Lovelace had an enlarged heart that contributed to his death. The medical examiner also found that Lovelace had an abnormal coronary artery that has been as-

sociated with sudden cardiac death, especially in athletes.

It's unclear from the autopsy report how much Lovelace's heart abnormalities contributed to his death.

Lovelace would have undergone a medical exam and physical fitness test before being allowed to take part in SEAL basic training, a six-month program so grueling that 75 percent of candidates drop out by the end of the first month.

Sailors who want to become SEAL candidates must be able to pass a test that includes swimming 500 yards in 12½ minutes, doing 50 push-ups in two minutes and completing 50 curl-ups in two minutes. During basic training, they run, climb, swim in frigid waters and perform other drills, often on little or no sleep.

The Navy did not elaborate on the details of the investigation but emphasized that SEAL training must be as close to real warfare as possible.

"To honor those who have fallen in combat we must provide the most realistic and operationally relevant training possible," Capt. Jay Hennessey, commander of the Naval Special Warfare Training Center, said in a statement.

Tillerson: Russia must choose Assad or US

Associated Press

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrived in Moscow Tuesday with an ultimatum for Russia: Side with the U.S. and likeminded countries on Syria, or embrace Iran, militant group Hezbollah and embattled Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

It wasn't clear what the punishment would be for a Russian government that has used its military might to help Assad and his array of allies score a series of battlefield successes in their six-year war with Syrian opposition groups.

Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately showed that he wouldn't back down, say-

ing Russia knew about planned "provocations" to blame Syria's government for using chemical weapons. He said the U.N. should first investigate the attack.

"It reminds me of the events in 2003 when U.S. envoys to the Security Council were demonstrating what they said were chemical weapons found in Iraq," Putin told reporters on Tuesday. "We have seen it all already."

Tillerson is in Moscow to meet with Russian officials about the Syria civil war. It is the first official trip to Russia by a member of President Donald Trump's Cabinet. It's unclear if Putin and Tillerson will meet.

Before heading to Russia, Tillerson told reporters that Moscow had either failed to take seriously its obligation to rid Syria of chemical weapons, or had been incompetent. But, he said, the distinction "doesn't much matter to the dead."

"We cannot let this happen again," Tillerson said of the chemical attack.

"We want to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people. Russia can be a part of that future and play an important role," Tillerson added in remarks to reporters. "Or Russia can maintain its alliance" with Syria and Iran.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it hoped for "productive talks." It said

the outcome of the discussions is important not only for the U.S.-Russian relationship, but "for the overall atmosphere on the world stage."

The Trump administration has offered mixed messages about whether Assad must surrender power — and when. Tillerson said it was clear the U.S. saw no role for Assad in Syria's future, given that he had lost legitimacy.

"It is clear to all of us that the reign of the Assad family is coming to an end," he said. "But the question of how that ends and the transition itself could be very important in our view to the durability, the stability inside of a unified Syria."

US official says Russia knew of chemical attack in advance

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States has concluded that Russia knew ahead of time that Syria would launch a chemical weapons attack last week, a senior U.S. official says.

The official offered circumstantial elements to back up his claim, but no concrete proof. Others in the Trump administration cautioned that no final American determination had been made that Russia had advance knowledge of the attack, which killed more than 80 people and prompted retaliatory U.S. cruise missile strikes.

The senior official said Monday that a drone operated by Russians was flying over a hospital as victims of the attack were rushing to get treatment. Hours after the drone left, a Russian-made fighter jet bombed the hospital in what American officials believe was an attempt to cover up the usage of chemical weapons.

The presence of the surveillance drone over the hospital couldn't have been a coincidence, the senior U.S. official said, arguing that Russia must have known the chemical weapons attack was coming

and that victims were seeking treatment.

The official, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly on intelligence matters and demanded anonymity, didn't give precise timing for when the drone was in the area. The official also didn't provide details for the military and intelligence information that form the basis of what the Pentagon now believes.

A senior White House official later said there is "no U.S. intelligence community consensus" yet on when Russia might have known of the attack. That official refused to be quoted by name, even though President Donald Trump has criticized media for citing anonymous sources.

The allegation of Russian foreknowledge is grave, even by the standards of the currently dismal U.S.-Russian relations. And it is being made as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson travels to Moscow for talks on Syria and other matters.

Although Russia has steadfastly supported Syrian President Bashar Assad's government, and they've coordinated military attacks together, Washington has

never previously accused Moscow of complicity in any attack that involved the gassing of innocent civilians, including children. The former Cold War foes even worked together in 2013 to remove and destroy more than 1,300 tons of Syrian chemical weapons and agents.

Until Monday, U.S. officials had said they weren't sure whether Russia or Syria operated the drone. The official said the U.S. is now convinced Russia controlled the drone. The official said it still isn't clear who was flying the jet that bombed the hospital, because the Syrians also fly Russian-made aircraft.

U.S. officials previously have said Russians routinely work with Syrians at the Shayrat air base where the attack is supposed to have originated. U.S. officials say the chemical weapons were stored there and that those elements add to the conclusion that Russia was complicit in the attack.

Last Thursday 59 Tomahawk missiles were fired on the government-controlled base in the United States' first direct military action against Assad's forces.

Family sues US over midair collision

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. — The family of a father and son killed when their small plane was hit by an Air Force jet nearly two years ago is suing the federal government.

The Post and Courier of Charleston reported the lawsuit contends the Federal Aviation Administration's air traffic controller failed to respond appropriately before the crash in South Carolina.

Michael Johnson, 68, and Joseph Johnson, 30, died when their Cessna was hit by an F-16 jet fighter on July 15, 2015, over Berkeley County. The fighter pilot ejected safely.

The lawsuit says the air traffic controller failed to act urgently enough to have the fighter avoid the smaller plane.

Attorney Jim Brauchle said the family of the victims feels forgotten. He said six months of negotiations have failed to reach an agreement with the federal government.

Gunman fatally shoots wife, pupil at school

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A brief marriage and quick estrangement came before a man walked into his wife's elementary school class and opened fire without saying a word, killing her and an 8-year-old student and wounding a 9-year-old student before fatally shooting himself, authorities said.

Some six weeks earlier, Cedric Anderson, 53, was a newlywed calling his wife Karen Smith, 53, an "angel" in one of many social media posts professing his love.

San Bernardino police have

said nothing of what might have motivated Anderson to open fire in the special-education classroom at North Park Elementary School on Monday.

"No one has come forward to say they saw this coming," police Chief Jarrod Burguan said, though Anderson had a history of weapons, domestic violence and possible drug charges that predated the marriage.

What appears to be his Facebook page features many public declarations of his love for Smith between statements of religious devotion before his last public post on March 15.

Anderson had posted that he "loved being married to Karen Smith-Anderson!" and posted a photo of the two of them on March 4 in what he described as a date night.

The page also had several photos of his wedding to Smith and their honeymoon among the scenic red rocks of Sedona, Ariz.

But Smith left him about a month and a half after their late-January marriage, police and family members said.

Smith's mother, Irma Sykes, said her daughter had been friends with Anderson for

about four years before they got married.

"She thought she had a wonderful husband, but she found out he was not wonderful at all," Sykes told the Los Angeles Times. "She left him and that's where the trouble began."

School staffers knew Anderson, who followed the proper protocol and got into the school through the front office by saying he had to drop something off for Smith, school officials said.

Smith was his target and the two boys were hit as he was firing at her, Police Chief Jarrod Burguan said.

Ala.'s second female governor takes reins

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — With Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley resigning one step ahead of an impeachment hearing related to an alleged affair, his successor becomes the state's second female governor and the first to rise through the political ranks on her own.

Kay Ivey, the first Republican woman elected lieutenant governor of Alabama, was also the first Republican to hold that office for two straight terms.

She entered the Old Senate Chamber for her swearing-in ceremony to a thunderous round of applause but bluntly

stated the challenges ahead of her as the state's new governor in a brief speech.

"Today is both a dark day for Alabama, yet also one of opportunity," Ivey said, adding that her "administration will be open, it will be transparent and it will be honest."

Alabama's first female governor was Lurleen Wallace, wife of four-term Gov. George C. Wallace. She ran as a surrogate for her still-powerful husband in 1966 when he couldn't seek re-election because of term limits. She won, but died in office in 1968. Her husband regained the governor's seat in

1970.

The 72-year-old Ivey is from Wilcox County, the same rural area where U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions grew up. First elected lieutenant governor in 2010, she was re-elected in 2014.

Ivey's biography shows her as an accomplished stateswoman who got her start in Alabama politics as a House clerk and later became the first Republican elected treasurer since Reconstruction. Although her former position carried respect, it wielded little constitutional power besides being next in line to the executive office. Now, as governor, she

has catapulted from a position of largely ceremonial duties to the highest elected seat in the state.

As the Senate's president and presiding officer, Ivey acted as a moderator who didn't offer opinions on legislation but instead directed the procedural flow in her signature honey-dripping drawl, cutting off senators whose speeches have gone on too long or namedropping distinguished guests in the gallery.

Ivey, who immediately assumed the role of the governor after Bentley's resignation, will hold that position until the next general election in 2018.

Texas moves to add arsenal of objects as official symbols

The Washington Post

Texas has state symbols, from official state crustacean (the Texas gulf shrimp) to folk dance (the square dance) to footwear (the cowboy boot, of course).

Soon, it might add an armory's worth of weapons to that list, including a cannon, an 1847 Colt Walker pistol and a Bowie knife.

Last Thursday, a resolution to designate the cannon as Texas' official state gun passed a Sen-

ate committee.

That resolution, authored by Republican state Sens. Don Huffines and Lois Kolkhorst, argues that "the cannon has been an important weapon in the state's fight for liberty and independence as well as a symbol of the defiance and determination of its people."

The resolution described the Battle of Gonzales, the first fight of the Texas revolution, which Huffines wrote "was fought over a cannon" on Oct. 2, 1835.

Meanwhile, a resolution to denote the 1847 Colt Walker pistol as the state's official handgun is before the House Culture, Recreation and Tourism Committee.

Authored by Republican Rep. Mike Lang, the resolution argues that the "pistol was historically crucial to the early survival of the great State of Texas."

The pistol was the "first revolver ever purchased by the Army Ordnance Department," according to the National Mu-

seum of American History. Produced only during a short run in 1847, the gun was the brainchild of firearms magnate Samuel Colt and Capt. Samuel Hamilton Walker, a hero of the Mexican-American War.

Lawmakers also are trying to name an official state knife. A resolution, authored by Republican Rep. Drew Springer, to give the Bowie knife that honor passed the House Culture, Recreation and Tourism Committee on Thursday.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ruby red slippers are due for conservation

DC WASHINGTON — There's no place like home. And there's no place like the Smithsonian Museum of American History if you want to see the ruby red slippers from "The Wizard of Oz."

Museum officials say April 23 is the last day to see the iconic shoes from the family movie classic before they are taken off display through next year for some behind-the-curtain conservation work. Smithsonian officials launched a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign that raised more than \$300,000 for the conservation project.

The shoes worn by Judy Garland were donated to the Smithsonian in 1979 and have been one of its most popular artifacts.

College gives degrees to 6 family members

MA BOSTON — A Boston college is presenting honorary bachelor's degrees to six members of a New Hampshire family, five of them posthumously.

Wentworth Institute of Technology said the members of the Downing family graduated with two-year degrees between 1914 and 1965.

Jonathan Downing, 72, will pick up his honorary bachelor's degree April 21. Wentworth plans to bestow degrees posthumously to his great-uncle Edward; his grandfather Lester; his father, Judson; and his uncles Richard and Philip.

The Downings attended Wentworth before it offered bachelor's and master's degrees and when graduates earned only certificates or two-year degrees.

Jonathan Downing graduated from Wentworth in 1965 with a degree in architectural engineering technology. He said he and his relatives were military veterans who worked as engineers and mechanics.

Gun dealer guilty in anti-tank rifle case

GA MACON — A Macon gun dealer has been found guilty of illegally possessing an anti-tank rifle.

News outlets reported that federal jurors found Mark Mann, owner of a gun shop called Mann's World LLC, guilty of illegally possessing a Finnish Lahti 20 mm anti-tank rifle Thursday.

The U.S. attorney general said in a news release that the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives had been contacted in 2014 by the rifle's previous owner after two of Mann's checks were returned for insufficient funds. The news release says the gun wasn't registered to Mann, who had used his status as a firearms dealer to circumvent the registry requirement.

Mann faces a maximum penalty of up to 10 years in prison and up to a \$250,000 fine.

Father, son shoot each other over dog walking

IL CHICAGO — Chicago police said a man is dead and his father critically injured after the two shot each other during a fight over who would walk the family dog.

Police said the two men were arguing in the Burnside neighborhood on the city's South Side on Sunday morning when they shot each other. Police said the 22-year-old son and his 43-year-old father were shot multi-

ple times and that two weapons were found at the scene.

The names of the men have not been released.

Cops: Dad bribed 3 siblings to beat 4th

PA SHARON — A Pennsylvania man who has four children by two women is charged with offering three of them \$100 and dinner out to beat up the fourth child, a 10-year-old boy.

The attorney for Virgil Dennison, 35, didn't immediately comment on the charges first reported by The (Sharon) Herald.

Sharon police said Dennison has two children who live with him and his fiancée and two by his ex-wife, including the alleged victim.

The boy's mother contacted police after school officials noticed bruises on him March 3. The boy told police his father offered the other children "dinner out and \$100" to attack him during a custody visit.

Police said the boy was attacked in his sleep.

Parents sue coroner over wrong cremation

CA LOS ANGELES — The parents of a man whose body was cremated by mistake are suing the Los Angeles County coroner's office for negligence.

The case involves Jorge Hernandez, 26, who overdosed on drugs and died of a heart condition in October at a Glendale hospital.

The coroner's office took his body and mistakenly cremated it. The office confused Hernandez with another man who had the same name.

Authorities said an attendant

failed to match case numbers.

Landscapers banned from using leaf blowers

NJ MAPLEWOOD — A New Jersey town has banned commercial landscapers from using gas-powered leaf blowers during the summer months.

The Maplewood Town Council unanimously approved the ban last week. It comes a year after the town approved an identical but shorter ban as part of a pilot program.

Town officials say the ban is meant to decrease noise and environmental pollution. It doesn't apply to residents or noncommercial associations and will be in effect from May 15 to Sept. 30.

Bus driver on leave after leaving boy at wrong stop

NE OMAHA — A school bus driver was placed on administrative leave and Omaha school officials have launched an investigation after a 10-year-old boy with autism was dropped off at the wrong bus stop.

The Omaha World-Herald reported that a frantic search was set off Thursday when the fifth-grader didn't arrive home from school. Officials said he was mistakenly dropped off about 4 miles from his home.

He wandered for more than two hours before he was found that evening.

School officials said a substitute driver left the boy at the wrong stop after being given an outdated route sheet. The driver is on leave pending the results of a district investigation.

From wire reports

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NHL playoff teams have varying styles

Associated Press

Catch-me-if-you-can speed, heavy pressure and frustrating, grinding hockey will all collide in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

The 16 teams that open the playoffs run the gamut of styles and the one that comes out on top in June will again set a blueprint for the rest of the NHL to follow.

It's a copycat league that tends to follow the last winner, even as the pendulum swings from year to year.

If the Chicago Blackhawks win their fourth Cup in seven years or Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers shock the league to win their first since 1990, speed will continue to be in vogue.

But if someone such as the Boston Bruins or Montreal Canadiens raises the trophy, maybe size and strength is back to being the recipe for winning.

"In playoff hockey it's about all the little things: It's battles on the wall, in front of the net," New York Rangers defenseman Marc Staal said.

"All that stuff becomes magnified and there's no small plays out there. A team that can

compete and win those types of battles usually has a good chance of success."

How to win those battles and dictate the style of a game or series varies drastically. The Pittsburgh Penguins won the Cup last year relying on their depth that will again be tested in the absence of top defenseman Kris Letang, beating the bigger but still deep San Jose Sharks, who will try to shake off late-season struggles to return to the Final and break through.

Also trying to break through for the first title in franchise history are the Washington Capitals, who are built a little bit like the 2012 and 2014 Cup champion Los Angeles Kings, who forechecked hard and used their size.

But the Capitals have skill from Alex Ovechkin on down and speed throughout the lineup to play just about every kind of game out there.

"We have a blend," Capitals defenseman Matt Niskanen said. "I think our skilled guys are, generally speaking, a little bit bigger. We have good goaltending and without the puck, if we have to, with the system we play, we can lock it down

pretty well defensively, but we also have enough creative guys and speed guys that if the game turns into an up-and-down rushes type game, we have guys that can do that, as well."

On the way to the 2015 Stanley Cup Final, the Blackhawks and Tampa Bay Lightning showed that speed and skill can win even though playoff hockey has the reputation as a haven for mucking and grinding and low-scoring games.

But even those teams could lock down defensively, something any championship contender must be able to do.

"We emphasize defense first all the time," said Minnesota Wild coach Bruce Boudreau, in the playoffs for the ninth time with his third team.

"That's our whole emphasis. ... I don't know about my style. I got to believe whoever we play, they're going to fear us as much as we fear them."

Almost as much as running into a hot goaltender, the fear of facing a bad matchup is real in the playoffs even for the most talented teams.

The Columbus Blue Jackets play coach John Tortorella's structured playoff hockey that has bred success for his previ-

ous teams, but it's the Ottawa Senators' suffocating style that could prove the most frustrating for skilled opponents.

Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy called the Senators "not fun" to play against.

Under coach Guy Boucher, they clog up the neutral zone, slow things down and annoy the daylights out of teams, which winger Bobby Ryan said has "worked all year and it's driven teams crazy."

"I think we're built for playoff hockey," Ottawa defenseman Mark Borowiecki said. "If I was a team in the Eastern Conference, I don't think I'd want to be playing us in the first round. When we're on our game, we're tight, we don't give up a lot and we're tough to play against."

Ryan called the Senators' brand "patient and boring," but being tough to play against doesn't have to be that way.

The Capitals finished atop the standings for the second year in a row by throwing line after line at opponents, and that depth and adaptability makes them the favorite to come out of the Eastern Conference.

Wild's rise began with signings of Parise, Suter in 2012

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — With much of Minnesota settled in at a lake, teeing things up at a golf course or prepping the backyard grill, the Wild offices were busier than usual for a holiday morning on July 4, 2012.

Four days into free agency, general manager Chuck Fletcher and his staff were still pursuing two of the top players on the market, Zach Parise and Ryan Suter.

Some of the business-side leaders came in, too, just in case the dream scenario came true for a team mired in mediocrity since the feel-good overachievement of a Western Conference finals trip in 2003.

Shortly before lunchtime came the news that forever changed a fledgling organization, sent to the world from the Wild's official Twitter account: WE GOT 'EM.

"Honest to God, the phones started ringing like they hadn't since 1997 when the franchise was granted," chief operating officer Matt Majka said, recalling the waves of employees who retreated from recreation and relaxation to help handle the calls for tickets.

With only three appearances in the playoffs in the Wild's first 11 seasons, the departure of popular coach Jacques Lemaire three years earlier, sparkling new sports venues opening across the river in Minneapolis

and a sunken national economy, touting the team in a crowded market to customers beyond the hard-core hockey niche had become more challenging. After announcing sellouts for the first 409 games in team history, including preseason and playoffs, the streak ended on Sept. 22, 2010.

"We weren't a very good hockey team for a few years in there, so we had this perfect storm. We knew we had to do something to transform, and we were hopeful for Zach and Ryan," Majka said. "We were thankful they chose the 'State of Hockey,' and it really, literally overnight changed our world."

The Wild are about to start their fifth straight postseason

since Parise and Suter each signed 13-year, \$98 million contracts on that Independence Day. They've only won two playoff series in that span, but they'll take their best record and their deepest lineup to the playoffs this time.

Parise has had more of an uneven season, missing 13 games to injury and illness including the mumps, and struggling to find his scoring touch before the All-Star break. He has 11 points in his last 11 games, and his grit has never gone far from his game. He has a career-high 68 blocked shots.

"I would think if I saw somebody working that hard, I'd want to work that hard, too," coach Bruce Boudreau said.

Rizzo's ninth-inning single lifts Cubs

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Anthony Rizzo sliced the ball into left field, and it was time to party — again.

Quite a night for the All-Star slugger.

Rizzo hit a game-winning single off closer Kenley Jansen in the ninth inning, and the Chicago Cubs beat the Los Angeles Dodgers 3-2 on Monday after raising a World Series championship banner for the first time at Wrigley Field.

In a fitting bit of symmetry, Rizzo had the honors from start to finish. The respected first baseman was picked to begin hoisting the 2016 flag, and then he was the player who carried the World Series trophy onto the field.

"I'll remember this day for as long as I play baseball," Rizzo said.

Pinch-hitter Jon Jay started the decisive rally with a lead-off single against Sergio Romo

(0-1). With two outs and Jay on third, Rizzo dumped a 1-1 pitch from Jansen into left field for his first RBI this season.

Wade Davis (1-0) tossed a scoreless inning for his first win with the Cubs, who blew a 2-0 lead before the dramatic finish to their rain-delayed home opener.

"It was a special night," said Jon Lester, who pitched six solid innings. "Definitely something that'll go down in my book as something that I'll remember for a long, long time."

Wet weather pushed back the start of Chicago's pregame festivities, but the sellout crowd of 41,166 didn't seem to mind one bit.

Rizzo heard wild cheers when he started the 2016 flag toward the top of a pole in right-center before handing the reins over to his smiling teammates. Rizzo then emerged from under the bleachers with the champion-

ship trophy, drawing another big ovation.

Before November's epic Game 7 win in Cleveland, the Cubs had not won the World Series since 1908. They moved into Wrigley eight years later, making Monday's celebration the first of its kind at the cozy neighborhood ballpark.

"That pregame ceremony, I wasn't expecting to get hit with that many emotions," Rizzo said. "It was amazing."

Los Angeles, which lost to Chicago in the NL Championship Series last year, committed two costly errors and left eight runners on base. Alex Wood, subbing for injured left-hander Rich Hill, lasted just 3²/₃ innings in his first start of the season.

Dodgers outfielder Franklin Gutierrez and third baseman Justin Turner also left with injuries. Gutierrez hurt his left hamstring and Turner exited

with a quadriceps injury after his hard slide into second in the eighth led to a run-scoring throwing error by shortstop Addison Russell, tying it at 2.

"I think [Turner] said it was on a dive, so I don't think it's a strain or anything like that," manager Dave Roberts said. "It might have been a charley horse or something like that."

NL MVP Kris Bryant hit an RBI double in the third and Lester drove in a run with a fielder's choice in the fourth. Los Angeles got one back on Corey Seager's double in the sixth.

The Dodgers loaded the bases with no outs in the seventh, but Justin Grimm got Joc Pederson to fly out to right and Andrew Toles bounced into an inning-ending double play.

"We take a lot of pride in coming back and making a push and staying in it," Seager said. "To lose like that hurts, for sure."

Harper's four hits lead Nationals to rout of Cardinals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — If nothing else, Nationals slugger Bryce Harper spent some quality time with Cardinals first baseman Matt Carpenter on Monday night.

Harper tied a career high with four hits, all singles, and reached base in all six plate appearances to help Washington to a 14-6 rout of St. Louis.

"I got to know Carpenter a little bit more than I have, so that was good," Harper deadpanned. "He's a great guy."

Harper drove in three runs during his first four-hit game since April 17, 2013.

Stephen Drew, Adam Eaton and Ryan Zimmerman each had three of Washington's 19 hits. Drew drove in four runs and Eaton knocked in three as the Nationals overcame four errors. They broke open the game in a seven-run eighth inning.

"It was kind of an ugly game," Washington manager

Dusty Baker said. "But when you score, it will kill most of the ills."

Tanner Roark (2-0) allowed five runs — three earned — over five innings. The right-hander worked around three errors committed behind him.

"Nobody's perfect," Roark said. "Errors are going to happen. You just do your best to try to pick up the guy that made the error."

Stephen Piscotty returned to St. Louis' lineup after missing two games with a sore left knee and knocked in two runs.

Cardinals starter Adam Wainwright (0-2) gave up six runs, five earned, and 11 hits over four-plus innings.

"Sometimes you get your tail whooped and you've got to give some credit to the other side," Wainwright said. "They hit some good pitches. They hit some not-so-good pitches."

Wainwright failed to retire any of the three batters he faced as the Nationals took the

lead with a three-run fifth. He exited after his 96th pitch, a 1-0 fastball that Drew belted to deep right for an RBI double that pulled Washington to 5-4.

Giants 4, Diamondbacks 1: Buster Posey was doing well after being struck in the helmet by a 94 mph Taijuan Walker fastball in the first inning, a frightening moment during San Francisco's victory in its home opener.

Tigers 2, Red Sox 1: Justin Verlander and Chris Sale dominated in a matchup of ace pitchers before Nicholas Castellanos singled in the go-ahead run off Sale in the eighth inning, lifting host Detroit over Boston.

Yankees 8, Rays 1: Michael Pineda retired his first 20 batters before Evan Longoria lined a double down the left-field line in New York's home opener.

Mariners 6, Astros 0: James Paxton shut down Houston for the second time in a week, pitching seven innings of four-hit ball and leading Seattle to a

win in its home opener.

Athletics 2, Royals 0: Khris Davis hit a two-run homer while Jharel Cotton shut down Kansas City's anemic offense and Oakland held on to spoil the Royals' home opener.

Padres 5, Rockies 3: Wil Myers hit a leadoff triple in the eighth inning to complete the first cycle of his career and send San Diego past host Colorado.

Mets 4, Phillies 3: Jay Bruce homered twice, including the tiebreaking shot in a testy eighth inning to lead visiting New York.

Reds 7, Pirates 1: Eugenio Suarez and Scooter Gennett homered as visiting Cincinnati took advantage of wild Pittsburgh starter Tyler Glasnow.

Making his season debut, Glasnow (0-1) failed to make it out of the second inning. The right-hander walked five — including four straight in the first — and left after throwing just 35 of his 64 pitches for strikes.

Heat stay alive with OT win over Cavs

Associated Press

MIAMI — For the Miami Heat, the season is going down to the final night.

They need a win.

They need some help.

But they still have a chance.

Tyler Johnson scored 24 points, including the game's final four from the foul line in overtime, and the Heat kept their postseason hopes alive by rallying past the Cleveland Cavaliers 124-121 on Monday night. The Heat (40-41) remained No. 9 in the Eastern Conference, a game behind No. 7 Indiana (41-40) and a tiebreaker behind No. 8 Chicago (40-41).

"We think it's meant to be," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "But we have to take care of business."

That, and get some assistance. For Miami to reach the postseason — a near-impossibility after its 11-30 start — either Indiana or Chicago must lose.

"It's win or go home," Heat

guard Josh Richardson said. "Win, and we still might go home."

Hassan Whiteside scored 23 points and grabbed 18 rebounds for Miami. Richardson scored 19 points, James Johnson had 16 and Goran Dragic added 15.

Deron Williams had a season-high 35 points, nine assists and seven rebounds for the Cavaliers, who fell to 0-7 this season when LeBron James doesn't play. The Cavs were also without Kyrie Irving and Tristan Thompson, and fell a game behind Boston for No. 1 in the East.

Celtics 114, Nets 105: Isaiah Thomas scored 27 points to help host Boston beat back a fourth-quarter charge to keep alive hopes of securing the Eastern Conference's top seed.

The Celtics clinched the Atlantic Division title and can finish with no worse than the No. 2 seed.

With Cleveland's overtime loss at Miami on Monday night, a Boston win in its regular-season finale against Milwaukee on Wednesday would give the Celtics the No. 1 seed. But if Boston loses to the Bucks and Cleveland wins its finale against Toronto, the Cavs would own the tiebreaker by virtue of their 3-1 head-to-head record with Boston.

Jazz 105, Warriors 99: Rudy Gobert had 17 points and 18 rebounds while Joe Johnson added a key three-pointer with 80 seconds remaining as visiting Utah snapped Golden State's 14-game winning streak.

Clippers 125, Rockets 96: Chris Paul scored 19 points and Blake Griffin added 18 as host Los Angeles routed Houston to remain tied with Utah in the race for the No. 4 playoff seed.

Trail Blazers 99, Spurs 98: Noah Vonleh made a layup at the buzzer as host Portland beat San Antonio despite rest-

ing starters Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum.

Pacers 120, 76ers 111: Paul George scored 17 of his 27 points in the opening quarter as visiting Indiana inched closer to clinching a berth in the NBA playoffs.

Bucks 89, Hornets 79: Tony Snell scored 16 points and Jason Terry had season highs of 15 points and five three-pointers as host Milwaukee beat Charlotte.

Bulls 122, Magic 75: Emergency starter Jerian Grant had 17 points and a career-high 11 assists as host Chicago routed Orlando to move closer to a postseason berth.

Wizards 105, Pistons 101: Bradley Beal scored 33 points as Washington beat host Detroit in the final game at the Palace of Auburn Hills.

Markieff Morris added 20 points for the Wizards, while Tobias Harris led the Pistons with 22.

US, Canada, Mexico announce joint 2026 World Cup bid

Associated Press

Far from impeding a World Cup bid, souring diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico emboldened those countries' soccer leaders to find common ground through pursuing one of the biggest events in sports.

The U.S. could have gone it alone trying to host the 2026 World Cup, but it is seeking goodwill from FIFA and its neighbors by joining forces with Mexico and Canada.

"Especially with what's going on in the world today, we believe this is a hugely positive signal and symbol of what we can do together in unifying people," U.S. Soccer Federation President Sunil Gulati said at Monday's bid launch, "especially in our three countries."

Gulati didn't directly mention President Donald Trump in that particular remark, but the impact of the policies of the fledgling administration on a World Cup bid involving feuding neighbors was a constant theme during the event atop the Freedom Tower in lower Manhattan.

Trump has derided Mexico as a source of rapists and criminals, and vowed to build a wall on the border. Mexican President En-

rique Pena Nieto recently canceled a trip to Washington over Trump's insistence that Mexico pay for the wall.

Such tensions are at odds with the apparent glowing endorsement by Trump of Mexico's participation in a World Cup bid that currently faces no competitors.

"We have very specifically addressed this with the president," Gulati said of the Trump controversies. "He is fully supportive of the joint bid, encouraged the joint bid, and is especially pleased with the fact Mexico is participating."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment, and Gulati later clarified that he had not directly spoken to Trump.

"I'm not on the phone with the president or sitting down to dinner with him," Gulati said. "But he knows what we want to do."

Gulati maintained that he's "not at all concerned about some of the issues that other people may raise."

Another of those issues are Trump's plans — since stopped by courts — to bar new visas for people from Iran, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Libya. FIFA President Gianni Infantino said last month that all players, team officials and support

staff from the 48 finalists "need to have access to the country, otherwise there is no World Cup. That is obvious."

The 2026 World Cup will be the first tournament since FIFA expanded the field from 32 nations. A triple-hosted tournament poses logistical challenges trying to accommodate 48 teams, but the plethora of soccer facilities in North America offers some certainty to FIFA after likely challenging tournaments in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022.

The U.S., which hosted the World Cup in 1994, would dominate by staging 60 games, including all from the quarterfinals and on. Mexico and Canada would have to settle for 10 games each. As a consolation, Mexico wants the opener at its 87,000-capacity Azteca Stadium if it becomes the first three-time World Cup host.

The U.S., Mexico and Canada all expect to qualify automatically — as the last co-hosts South Korea and Japan did in 2002 — but the FIFA Council has the final decision on the 2026 slots.

The U.S. participated in the 2018 and 2022 bidding contest but lost in a hotly disputed vote that sparked corruption investigations.