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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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THAAD installation begins in S. Korea

BY KIM GAMEL
AND YOO KYONG CHANG
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — U.S. forces began installing an advanced missile defense system Wednesday, and South Korea said it will be operational by the end of the year as the allies step up pressure on the North over its nuclear weapons program.

It was the latest move as both sides try to project force amid fears that rising tensions on the divided peninsula could erupt into a full-fledged conflict. Analysts warned the situation has reached a dangerous stage.

The United States and South Korea agreed last year to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, or THAAD, to counter the growing threat from the North. But the decision met fierce opposition from China, which fears the system could be used against its military.

“China strongly urges the U.S. and South Korea to stop actions that would raise regional tensions as well as harm China’s strategic and security interests by canceling the THAAD deployment and withdrawing relevant equipment,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Wednesday, according to the BBC.

Many South Koreans also

strongly object to the anti-missile battery, and police in riot gear had to hold back local protesters as trucks carrying the equipment passed by on a road leading to the former golf course that will be its new home in the rural area of Seongju.

South Korean presidential hopefuls and other critics also accused the military of trying to rush THAAD into place ahead of snap elections to be held in less than two weeks.

The Ministry of National Defense confirmed that some parts of THAAD had been positioned to “secure early operational capability” but said no new facilities had been built.

The two countries will conduct the requisite environmental assessment and facility construction as scheduled and plan to have the THAAD unit fully operational by the end of the year, it added.

The ministry didn’t specify which parts were installed. South Korea’s Yonhap news agency reported that they were believed to include the system’s powerful radar and mobile launchers.

The Pentagon said it has been working with South Korea to complete THAAD’s deployment “as soon as feasible” and reiterated the system is solely aimed at defending South Korean and

alliance forces from North Korean missile threats.

Surviving April

The U.S. military has deployed a steady stream of strategic assets in recent weeks in what was widely seen as a warning to North Korea after satellite imagery showed heightened activity at the communist state’s main nuclear testing site.

North Korea watchers said that could mean preparations for a sixth nuclear test in connection with key April holidays.

But other than a failed missile test on April 16, the North stuck to putting on shows of military might — parading what appeared to be intercontinental ballistic missiles through Pyongyang on the April 15 birthday of late founder Kim Il Sung and conducting what it said was its largest live-fire artillery drill on its army foundation day on Tuesday.

Leader Kim Jong Un supervised the combined fire exercise, which included simulated submarine torpedo attacks and an aerial assault, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea has shown restraint but maintains the ability to conduct a nuclear or missile test, said John Delury, a professor of international relations at

Yonsei University in Seoul.

‘Dangerous bluff’

President Donald Trump has warned that all options, including military strikes, are on the table as he’s determined to stop Pyongyang from achieving its stated goal of developing a nuclear-tipped missile that could reach the U.S. mainland.

Underscoring U.S. military capabilities, the guided-missile submarine USS Michigan made a port call in South Korea on Tuesday while U.S. warships conducted joint exercises with South Korea and Japan in the waters to the east and west of the peninsula.

The USS Carl Vinson strike group, which includes an aircraft carrier and three warships, also is making its way to the region. Aircraft from Carrier Air Wing Two, which is assigned to the strike group, conducted combined aviation exercises with Japanese forces Wednesday in the Philippine Sea, the 7th Fleet said.

“There’s an element of gunboat diplomacy here ... to throw a lot of exercises and weaponry at the problem,” Delury said, adding that it could be “a very dangerous bluff.”

“North Korea is watching every move, and they could make a miscalculation,” he said.

PACOM chief pushes Congress to OK defense budget

BY DIANNA CAHN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — With tensions high on the Korean peninsula, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command on Wednesday called on Congress to repeal the spending caps known as sequestration and invest more in missile defense, radar systems and equipment

and submarines to counter the North Korean threat.

“We must be ready to confront all challenges from a position of strength and with credible power,” Navy Adm. Harry Harris told the House Armed Services Committee.

“I need weapons systems of increased lethality, precision, speed and range that are networked and cost-effective,” he

said. “Restricting ourselves with funding uncertainties reduces war-fighting readiness, so I urge Congress to repeal sequestration and approve the proposed Defense Department budget.”

Harris’ testimony was among several Capitol Hill appearances this week; it comes amid heightened focus on North Korea’s press to develop and test

its nuclear weapons capabilities and ballistic missiles.

President Kim Jong Un has said he wants to use the missiles with nuclear warheads to strike U.S. cities, including New York and Washington.

Harris was to brief committee members privately after the public session. He will testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday.

Mahan fires warning flare at Iranian ship

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer fired a warning flare toward an Iranian Revolutionary Guard vessel coming near it in the Persian Gulf, an American official said Wednesday, the latest tense naval encounter between the two countries.

The incident happened Monday as the vessel attempted to draw closer to the USS Mahan despite the destroyer trying to turn away from it, said Lt. Ian McConnaughey, a spokes-

man for the Bahrain-based 5th Fleet.

The “Mahan made several attempts to contact the Iranian vessel by bridge-to-bridge radio, issuing warning messages and twice sounding the internationally recognized danger signal of five short blasts with the ship’s whistle, as well as deploying a flare to determine the Iranian vessel’s intentions,” McConnaughey said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The Iranian vessel came within 1,100 yards of the Mahan during the incident, the

lieutenant said. The vessel later turned and sailed away.

Iranian authorities did not immediately report the incident Wednesday.

The U.S. and Iran routinely have tense encounters in the Persian Gulf and the nearby Strait of Hormuz, through which a third of all oil traded by sea passes.

Iran views the American presence as a provocation, and its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard shadows U.S. Navy ships in the Gulf, occasionally firing missiles or rockets nearby.

Since the nuclear deal with world powers, the hard-line Revolutionary Guard has stepped up its encounters with the Americans.

The Navy recorded 35 instances of what it describes as “unsafe and/or unprofessional” interactions with Iranians forces in 2016, compared with 23 in 2015.

With Monday’s event, there have been seven so far in 2017, McConnaughey said.

Of the incidents last year, the worst involved Iranian forces capturing 10 U.S. sailors and holding them overnight.

Wild boars kill 3 Islamic State militants in Iraq

USA Today

Three Islamic State militants setting up an ambush in a bitterly contested area of northern Iraq were killed by a herd of stampeding boars, local leaders say.

Sheikh Anwar al-Assi, a chief of the local Ubaid tribe and su-

pervisor of anti-ISIS forces, told The Times of London the militants were hiding on the edge of a field about 50 miles southwest of Kirkuk when the boars overwhelmed them Sunday.

Five other militants were injured, al-Assi said. He said the group was poised to attack a band of local tribesmen who

had fled to nearby mountains since militants seized Hawijah three years ago.

“It is likely their movement disturbed a herd of wild pigs which inhabit the area as well as the nearby cornfields,” he said.

Al-Assi said the militants had summarily executed 25 people attempting to flee the militant’s

would-be caliphate in the three days before the boars attacked. Hawijah, about 100 miles south of Mosul, sees dozens of residents flee to Kurdish Kirkuk daily, and the Iraqi military has planned to launch an offensive in the region after a laborious effort to liberate Mosul is completed.

China launches its first domestically-made carrier

Associated Press

BEIJING — China has launched its first aircraft carrier built entirely on its own, in a demonstration of the growing technical sophistication of its defense industries and determination to safeguard its maritime territorial claims and crucial trade routes.

The 50,000-ton carrier was towed from its dockyard just after 9 a.m. Wednesday following a ceremony in the northern port city of Dalian, where its predecessor, the Soviet-built Liaoning, underwent extensive refurbishing before being commissioned in 2012, the Ministry of National Defense said.

Development of the new car-

rier began in 2013 and construction in late 2015. It’s expected to be formally commissioned sometime before 2020, after sea trials and the arrival of its full air complement.

The carrier program is a key part of China’s naval expansion at a time when it is looking to beef-up its regional military influence to match its economic might.

While China says it maintains a defensive military policy, its ambitions are rattling some neighbors who see Beijing as fueling already enflamed tensions in the region.

Chinese naval strategists see the carrier program not only as a means to protect their coun-

try’s maritime interests, but also to have “naval power commensurate with China’s international status, to impress both external and domestic audiences,” said Michael Chase, an expert on the Chinese military at U.S. think tank the Rand Corp.

The new carrier “is likely to be seen as further evidence of China’s desire to become the most powerful and influential country in the region,” he said. That will be especially worrying to Indian security analysts who are already concerned about Beijing’s ambitions in the Indian Ocean, he said.

India, along with Japan and Taiwan which also view Chinese carriers as threats, will

likely respond by building new submarines and anti-ship missiles, said Ian Easton, a research Fellow at The Project 2049 Institute in Arlington, Virginia.

China’s “expansionist behavior in the South China Sea and its aggressive efforts to undermine the security of Taiwan and Japan, in particular, have translated into a situation where few countries now trust that Beijing has benign motives,” Easton said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang reiterated China’s contention that it maintains a purely defense military posture and “sticks to the path of peaceful development.

TV summer 'Amazing' for major who's now in Afghanistan

By E.B. BOYD
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A U.S. Army major deployed to Afghanistan is among the 22 contestants competing for a \$1 million prize on the current season of the CBS reality show "The Amazing Race."

Maj. Tara Carr was among 4,000 people who vied to get on the show, which involves a series of challenges in a race around the world. She and her partner on the show, Boston police Sgt. Joey Covino, placed first in the last two episodes and are leading the pack heading into Thursday's show, the sixth of the 12-episode season.

Carr, who is serving with the Defense Intelligence Agency at Bagram Airfield, had hoped to take part in the competition with her husband, Tony, a West Point graduate who now works for the State Department.

But because of a twist this season, which was filmed last summer, only Tara was selected. In past seasons, contestants joined as partners: husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, best friends. This season the contestants were paired instead with other contestants they'd never met before.

"You have to get to know your partner in the first few hours and come up with a (game plan)," said Carr, 38, a former military intelligence soldier who became an officer through the Army's Green to Gold program.

Carr credits her military background and Covino's experience as a police officer and former Army cavalry scout for getting them this far.

Carr, like other contestants, is mum on the outcome.

Deployed to Afghanistan for the run of the show, Carr is missing out on sharing the experience with her fellow contestants. Instead, she wakes up early on Friday mornings to watch the show, which airs Thursday evenings in the States, with her husband over FaceTime.

Expert: New social media rules for troops won't stop scandals

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

New rules for servicemembers posting on social media make sense but they won't stop scandals, according to a technology expert.

The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps are cracking down on things servicemembers might be tempted to post online after a scandal involving shared nude photographs of female comrades on the Marines United Facebook group.

New rules introduced by the services after the scandal last month make sense, said technology expert and Arizona State University engineering professor Braden Allenby.

"Someone who is going to post revenge porn may be unlikely to care much about the rules, but explicitly establishing them still

serves a purpose and provides a basis for taking appropriate personnel action when they are violated," he said.

Two Marines were recently disciplined for posting disrespectful comments on social media, marking the first time the Marine Corps has officially punished members for online misconduct.

Allenby predicted there would be more scandals.

"Social media is rapidly evolving, and attitudes and practices are also shifting," he said. "What may be tricky is differentiating between practices that are obviously wrong and those that are simply new and raise unexpected security and operational issues."

Service branches have laid out their expectations for online behavior in recent orders and messages.

However, new rules have been questioned.

Mark Bender, a former airman who runs YokotaTalk, a public Facebook group associated with Yokota Air Base, headquarters of U.S. Forces Japan and 5th Air Force in Tokyo, said the military doesn't want servicemembers tarnishing its reputation. At the same time, people don't appreciate losing their freedom.

Bender's philosophy as administrator is summed up in the group's description, which states that YokotaTalk is not moderated and "there are no rules."

"In a lot of these forums that are run by servicemembers and family members, people try to place controls or restrict what people can post," Bender said. The idea on YokotaTalk is for people to figure out the rules on their own.

Photographers delight in deployment of USAF F-35A Lightning IIs at Lakenheath

By WILLIAM HOWARD
Stars and Stripes

RAF LAKENHEATH, England — Aviation enthusiasts from all over Britain have converged on this base for a rare chance to photograph the U.S. Air Force's newest fighter, the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II.

The jets from the 388th Fighter Wing at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, are the Air Force's first operational F-35A. They arrived at RAF Lakenheath on Saturday for their first major overseas training deployment.

Nearly 100 vehicles were parked along both sides of the road leading to the dedicated viewing area outside the base.

"We absolutely love that there are so many photographers gathered to get such awesome shots of our F-35 visitors," said Tech. Sgt. Matthew Plew, a base spokesman. He cautioned visitors not to obstruct traffic on a

major highway nearby.

The arrival of the eight F-35s in Britain reinforces the close relationship between the two nations. The U.S. Air Force plans to station two squadrons of 54 F-35s at Lakenheath by 2021, and Britain plans to purchase a total of 138 of the fifth-generation warplanes.

This is the busiest it's been along the fence line since the F-22A Raptor deployed to Lakenheath in April last year.

"In the location we live in we're always in the flight path of the two American bases," said photographer Simon Lewin. "People share each other's photos on the forums, and it's generally quite good. You get to see what different shots people are doing, see what you can do and where you can improve on your own shots."

Aviation photographer Matt Pullen said he's used the local haunt for the past six years and

wouldn't miss a chance to capture the F-35A II Lightning.

"I love it. Fantastic aircraft, great looking and sounds brilliant," Pullen said. "They should come over more often."

Enthusiasts used a combination of high-tech setups on vehicles, portable radio receivers and mobile phone applications to track outgoing and incoming flights of F-15s and F-35s, their destinations and pilot call signs.

That might seem like a security risk, but aviation enthusiasts have photographed around the USAF bases since the 1950s. They often report on suspicious activities to the authorities.

"(Britain) has no law for taking photographs of aircraft or structures from outside establishments, as long as they're not trespassing on the facility," Paul Glover, a Defense Ministry security official, said in a local newspaper.

Trump proposal billed as 'biggest tax cut' in history

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is proposing “the biggest tax cut” ever even as the government struggles with mounting debt, in an effort to fulfill promises of bringing jobs and prosperity to the middle class.

White House officials on Wednesday were to release broad outlines of a tax overhaul that would provide massive tax cuts to businesses big and small. The top tax rate for individuals would drop by a few percentage points, from 39.6 percent to the “mid-30s,” according to an official with knowledge of the plan.

Small business owners would see their top tax rate go from 39.6 percent to 15 percent, said the official, who was not authorized to publicly discuss the proposal before the White House announcement and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, in a Wednesday morning speech, said the proposed overhaul would amount to “the biggest tax cut” and the “largest tax reform” in U.S.

history.

White House officials already have said the top corporate tax rate would be reduced from 35 percent to 15 percent. The plan will also include child-care benefits, a cause promoted by Trump’s daughter, Ivanka.

Trump sent his team to Capitol Hill on Tuesday evening to discuss his plan with Republican leaders.

“They went into some suggestions that are mere suggestions and we’ll go from there,” said GOP Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

A White House argument that tax cuts pay for themselves has been debunked by economists from across the political spectrum.

On Tuesday, the official scorekeeper for Congress dealt the argument — and Trump’s plan — another blow. The non-partisan Joint Committee on Taxation said a big cut in corporate taxes, even if temporary, would add to long-term budget deficits. That is a problem for Republicans because it means they would need Democratic

support in the Senate to pass a tax overhaul that significantly cuts corporate taxes.

Republicans have been working under a budget maneuver that would allow them to pass a tax bill without Democratic support in the Senate, but only if it didn’t add to long-term deficits.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the Senate was sticking to that strategy.

“Regretfully, we don’t expect to have any Democratic involvement in” a tax overhaul, McConnell said. “So we’ll have to reach an agreement among ourselves.”

Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., said, “On a lot of fronts, both the administration and Republicans have been contradictory, to say the least.

“There’s no question we should try to reduce (the corporate tax rate), but I don’t see how you pay for getting it down that low,” he said. “Fifteen percent, that’s a huge hole if you can’t make the math work.”

Talks halted on troops paying into the GI Bill

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A House committee backed off of a proposal to require servicemembers to pay into the GI Bill after a written draft of the idea provoked a rift between various veterans organizations.

A subcommittee of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs was slated to hold a hearing Wednesday about a list of possible improvements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Packaged into the discussion was an idea to offset the cost of those improvements by deducting \$100 from new enlistees’ basic pay each month for two years — for a total \$2,400 — in order for them to receive education benefits.

Veterans organizations lined up on either side of the issue last Wednesday, with Veterans of Foreign Wars kicking off opposition to the buy-in by dubbing it a “tax on troops” and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America starting an online petition against the proposal.

The House VA committee announced Friday that the hearing was postponed. Staff have given no further details on why it was delayed or when it would be rescheduled.

“I think getting some early opposition and hearing from the VFW and their constituents caused them to decide it’s probably better to have more conversation about this before taking this to the official record in a hearing,” said Kayda Keleher, a VFW legislative associate.

Student Veterans of America, a group that claims to represent approximately 500,000 student veterans nationwide, is a major proponent of the buy-in proposal.

“The hearing was intended to be that first discussion of these topics,” said Will Hubbard, SVA’s vice president of government affairs. “It’s disappointing some organizations were shortsighted and didn’t even want to have that discussion.”

Federal judge blocks immigration order

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — For the third time in two months, a federal judge has knocked down an immigration order by President Donald Trump and used Trump’s own language against him.

In a ruling on Tuesday, U.S. District Judge William Orrick quoted Trump to support his decision to block the president’s order to withhold funding from “sanctuary cities” that do not cooperate with U.S. immigration officials.

Trump called the sanctuary

cities order a “weapon” against communities that disagree with his preferred immigration policy, Orrick said.

The judge also cited a February interview in which he said the president threatened to cut off funding to California, saying the state “in many ways is out of control.”

The first comment was evidence that the administration intended the executive order to apply broadly to all sorts of federal funding, and not a relatively small pot of grant money as the Department of Justice had argued, the judge said.

The second statement showed the two California governments that sued to block the order — San Francisco and Santa Clara County — had good reason to believe they would be targeted, Orrick said.

Orrick’s ruling was another immigration policy setback for the administration. The sanctuary city order was among a flurry of immigration measures Trump signed in January, including a ban on travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries and a directive calling for a wall on the Mexican border.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Wrong suspect named in slaying of child

AR LITTLE ROCK — A Little Rock car salesman said he received threats after being wrongly identified as a suspect authorities arrested in connection with the fatal shooting of a 3-year-old child.

Greg Holmes told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette he received threatening calls until March despite attempts to clear his name on social media.

Investigators in Little Rock arrested Gary Eugene Holmes, 33, in the toddler's death. But in December, the U.S. Marshals Service incorrectly identified the suspect as "Greg Holmes" and didn't provide a photo, age, race or address of the man.

In the absence of identifying information, Greg Holmes' personal information was circulated on social media linked with news reports of the child's death.

Deputy U.S. Marshal Kevin Sanders said the correct name appears on records.

Man denied new lungs due to pot use dies

UT PARK CITY — A man who was denied a lung transplant at the University of Utah because marijuana was found in his system has died after suffering complications from recent surgery.

Reports say Riley Hancey, 20, of Park City, died Saturday from complications with his double lung transplant at the University of Pennsylvania hospital.

Hancey was admitted to the University of Utah hospital in December, diagnosed with pneumonia and put on life support two weeks later. He was denied a transplant in early April after marijuana was found in his system.

University of Utah Medical Center says it doesn't transplant

organs for people with active alcohol, tobacco or illicit drug use.

The University of Pennsylvania added Hancey to its transplant list in March and moved him to Philadelphia. He received the double lung transplant March 29.

Unearthed cannonballs slated to be removed

PA PITTSBURGH — Dozens of Civil War-era cannonballs unearthed at a Pittsburgh construction site will be removed by a Maryland firm.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that Ordnance Holdings Inc., of Reisterstown, has been hired to remove the cannonballs, which were found near the former site of the Allegheny Arsenal. The arsenal supplied the Union Army, and an explosion there in September 1862 killed 78 people, many of them female employees.

Franjo Construction Corp., of Homestead, a Pittsburgh suburb, unearthed the cannonballs — about 40 of them — during excavation for a planned apartment complex.

Man swept down river on air mattress saved

KY WILLIAMSBURG, — Emergency workers rescued a man from rushing water in the Cumberland River near Williamsburg.

Local media reported that Williamsburg fire Chief Larry Todd said Jerry Shadoan, 45, was camping Sunday near the banks of the Cumberland River when the water levels rose and washed him into the river.

Shadoan floated 30 yards downstream while asleep on an air mattress inside his tent.

Shadoan's tent eventually got caught on a tree, waking him up. He called 911 with his cell-

phone and was rescued shortly thereafter.

Whitley County Emergency Management Director Danny Moses said Shadoan was unharmed.

Woman inhales nitrous oxide in front of police

CA SANTA ROSA — A California woman was arrested for inhaling shots of nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, while speaking with police.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that officers responded to a call Saturday about a woman who had a pistol in her car in the parking lot of a Santa Rosa hospital. An officer began speaking with the woman, who then proceeded to inhale the nitrous oxide from a canister.

The woman was removed from the vehicle, and police said they found a semi-automatic pistol inside the car. The suspect was arrested for inhaling nitrous oxide with the intent to get high and carrying a concealed firearm in a vehicle.

2 charged after date ends in theft, stabbing

NC FAYETTEVILLE — A woman is accused of conspiring with another man to rob her date, who was stabbed during the incident.

The Fayetteville Observer reported that Lechonte-Andrea Ilima Day and Nikita Fuquell Creech, both 25, face several charges in the robbery of Sylvanus Ralls.

Arrest documents say Day set up a date with Ralls and asked him to drive her to a home after the date. Upon arrival, Creech came out with a knife, and the pair stole Ralls' phone, car keys, credit cards and \$300. Ralls was stabbed twice in the back during an ensuing struggle, with one blow puncturing

his liver. Creech called 911, and Ralls was taken to a hospital with serious injuries.

Day and Creech are being held on \$10,000 bail each.

Police: Boy set fire at Family Dollar store

OH MIDDLETOWN — Police said a 10-year-old boy was charged as a juvenile with aggravated arson after a fire at an Ohio discount store caused damage estimated at more than \$200,000.

Middletown police Lt. Jim Cunningham said about 10 people were inside the Family Dollar store when the fire began. No one was hurt.

Investigators suspect the fire was set intentionally.

Police said the boy's mother helped officers track him down after they determined he was a suspect. There was no immediate information about why or how the fire was set.

The boy was released to his mother and is scheduled to appear in Butler County Juvenile Court on May 16.

Triplet calves born on 2 farms in state

KS PRESTON — Two southern Kansas farmers are rearing unusual sets of triplet calves.

The Hutchinson News reported that Delbert Ross described the recent discovery of the triplets in a pasture on the line dividing Pratt and Kiowa counties as "pretty special."

On the other end of Pratt County, near Preston, another set of triplets was born in mid-March at the home of Mike and Sarah Jackson.

Pratt Community College agriculture instructor Lori Montgomery said it's rare to have "live, healthy triplets."

From wire reports

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Top RBs expected to go early in draft

Associated Press

Ezekiel Elliott's immediate impact last season, along with one of the strongest classes in years, have made running backs popular again heading into this week's NFL Draft.

After running backs failed to go in the first round in 2013 and '14, LSU's Leonard Fournette, Stanford's Christian McCaffrey and Florida State's Dalvin Cook could be selected on Thursday. That would mark the first time since 2012 that three backs are selected on the first day.

"It was a good thing for us coming in right now," Cook said. "Zeke did a great job of catching the ball out of the backfield, protecting Dak (Prescott) at quarterback, and running very well behind a good offensive line."

Elliott ran for 1,631 yards and 15 touchdowns last season for Dallas, becoming the first rookie since Edgerrin James in 1999 to lead the league in rushing.

Elliott's success came the year after the Rams' Todd Gurley became the first rookie in league history to rush for 125 yards or more in four straight games. Both were also voted NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year.

Add in Melvin Gordon's solid play last season with the Char-

gers and the past three first-round picks have shown that they were worth the pick. That has reversed a trend in which first-round picks had struggled or bombed, the most notable being Trent Richardson, the third overall pick by Cleveland in 2012.

Richardson's struggles were one reason 2013 marked the first time in 50 years a back was not picked in the first round.

A consensus of general managers and scouts believes that a back can be taken in the late rounds and still prosper. Jordan Howard, second in rookie rushing yards last season, was a fifth-round pick by the Bears.

Only three of the top 10 rushers in the league last season — Elliott, Le'Veon Bell (Steelers) and LeSean McCoy (Bills) — were drafted in the first two rounds.

Senior Bowl executive director Phil Savage, who was Browns general manager from 2005-08, says teams can find a back in every round this year. Cowboys coach Jason Garrett, though, believes that the round shouldn't matter as long as the selection can make an immediate impact.

"I understand the arguments about shelf life and maybe you can find running backs later in

the draft. But if you have an opportunity to get a great football player who's a running back, he can have a big impact on your football team," Garrett said during the scouting combine.

Many believe Fournette will be the first taken. He rushed for 2,045 yards and 22 touchdowns in 2015, but played in only seven games last year due to an ankle injury. Despite the limited playing time he gained 873 yards and scored eight touchdowns.

Fournette is more of a traditional back with a punishing running style. He had only 40 receptions in three seasons at LSU and was not counted on much to block.

"He is more of an I-formation back. Put him behind the quarterback and hand it to him in order to get his momentum going as a downhill runner," Savage said. "I thought LSU took away from his talent when they had him as a back in the shotgun. You're not playing to his strength when you offset him."

Savage believes McCaffrey has the best hands of anyone in the draft, including receivers and tight ends. McCaffrey led FBS in all-purpose yards the past two seasons, includ-

ing averaging 211.5 yards per game last year, and led the Pac-12 in rushing yards (1,603) last season

There are some though, including Savage, who wonder if McCaffrey can be an every-down back or if he is better suited for a backfield by committee.

During the combine, McCaffrey said he felt he was being a little disrespected in this year's class because of his versatility.

"I don't think there's anyone else that can do all the things I can as far as running between the tackles, outside pass protect, play X, Z, slot, and do a lot of things in the return game as well," he said.

Cook is considered one of the more elusive backs and averages 4.2 yards after contact, according to Pro Football Focus. He rushed for 1,765 yards last season but also excelled catching the ball out of the backfield, averaging 14.8 yards on 33 receptions.

"If a running back gets put in the right system, you put him in the right place, he can do a great amount of things for a team. I feel like if I can get put in the right system I can do the same things that Zeke did," Cook said.

Time running out for Cardinals' QB search

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — Time is slipping away for the Arizona Cardinals in their quest for an heir-apparent to quarterback Carson Palmer.

Palmer is 37 years old. This coming season could well be his last.

General manager Steve Keim knows how important identifying and grooming Palmer's successor is to the viability of the franchise.

"I would like to keep my job for a while," he said. "I do have four small kids. ... If you don't have a quarterback, you are not going anywhere."

Coach Bruce Arians has said he doesn't want to find the Cardinals in the same position they were in after Kurt Warner retired following the 2009 season.

The team wallowed in mediocrity under a succession of ineffective quarterbacks

until Palmer arrived.

The ideal scenario would be for Arizona to acquire a young quarterback and have him learn behind Palmer for a year (or two).

But how to get one under the current circumstances is the Cardinals' quandary.

Arians said there are "maybe five or six" quarterbacks in this year's draft class that have the ability to be starting quarterbacks in the NFL.

"Probably the best group of arms in the last four or five years," he said.

But none of them is close to a sure thing.

And at least five teams picking ahead of Arizona's No. 13 selection are seen as needing a quarterback — the Browns, 49ers, Jets, Bears and Bills.

The consensus top two candidates — North Carolina's Mitchell Trubisky and Clemson's Deshaun Watson — are likely to be gone by the time the Cardinals make

their first pick. There's a good chance Patrick Mahomes of Texas Tech, who has the kind of cannon arm Arians loves, won't be there either.

That would leave Notre Dame's DeShone Kizer, who would be a big reach for the Cardinals at No. 13. Most mock drafts have him going late in the first round.

But he probably won't be around when Arizona picks in the second round. Judging whether a QB can succeed in the NFL is an inexact science. Seven quarterbacks were picked before Dak Prescott was drafted by Dallas in the fourth round last year.

"People start taking quarterbacks just because they have to have one," he said. "They will take a guy that they must have had on their board in the first round that you had in the third or fourth round but he was the next best quarterback so they took the position over the player."

Rockets close out Westbrook, Thunder

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The Houston Rockets are headed to the Western Conference semifinals after using strong defense and a balanced scoring attack to overcome another big game by Russell Westbrook and eliminate the Oklahoma City Thunder with a 105-99 victory in Game 5 on Tuesday night.

James Harden had 34 points while Westbrook piled up 47 and came up just one assist shy of his fourth straight triple-double. But the Rockets didn't allow anyone else to score more than 11 points while getting 22 from Lou Williams, 15 from Patrick Beverley and 14 from Nene.

The Thunder head home a year after advancing to the Western Conference finals

after Houston took this series 4-1 despite struggling from three-point range.

"Everything isn't always going to be perfect," Harden said. "You've got guys that step up and help you make big plays, always have your back ... we're not worried about our shooting, our shooting is going to come."

The Rockets used a 5-1 run, with all their points coming on free throws, to pull away from the Thunder and make it 98-91. Victor Oladipo threw a pass about 5 feet above Westbrook's head and out of bounds on the next possession and Harden made a layup on the other end with about 3 minutes left.

The Rockets began eating up the clock after that and Oklahoma City missed shot after shot that could have closed the gap.

Houston couldn't add to its

lead though and the Thunder cut it to 4 points twice in the final seconds, with the second one coming on a basket by Alex Abrines. But Harden made two free throws both times they got close to secure the win.

After scoring 20 points in the third quarter, Westbrook made just two of 11 fourth-quarter shots in a disappointing end to a stellar season where he became the first player since Oscar Robertson in 1961-62 to average a triple-double by scoring an NBA-best 31.6 points a game, with 10.7 rebounds and 10.4 assists. He also set an NBA record for most triple-doubles with 42 to help the Thunder withstand the loss of All-Star Kevin Durant in free agency.

"Coming out of the halftime and in that third quarter he was obviously spectacular,"

Thunder coach Billy Donovan said. "He was the reason why we got back into it and took a seven-point lead. He has been a phenomenal closer for us all year long ... you can't expect a guy to be perfect every single time."

Westbrook had 11 rebounds and nine assists but he made just five of a career-high 18 three-point attempts.

Houston coach Mike D'Antoni felt fortunate that his team was able to overcome Westbrook's performance.

"The guy is so good," he said. "If he were to continue what he was doing, you'd just have to take your hat off to him. I don't know of anybody with all the athleticism and talent and determination — I haven't seen it. He was incredible."

Hayward, Jazz down Clippers to take 3-2 series lead

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Still weak and lacking his usual energy after a bout of food poisoning, Gordon Hayward leaned on his teammates. They came up big.

Hayward scored 27 points, Utah controlled the paint and the Jazz beat the Los Angeles Clippers 96-92 on Tuesday night to take a 3-2 lead in their first-round NBA playoff series.

"It was good I got some open looks early," said Hayward, who missed most of Utah's win in Game 4. "I was definitely tired out there. There was points in time where I didn't have legs. I'm pretty tired and thankful we have a couple days off."

The Jazz made five three-pointers in the fourth quarter, including three by Rodney Hood, who finished with 16 points.

Joe Johnson hit two huge shots in the fourth, continuing his timely shooting against the Clippers.

"We are kind of growing up in the moment," said Johnson, one of three veterans brought in to balance Utah's inexperience.

"These guys have never been in this situation. We have to go home with a business mindset and not be overconfident but confident enough. This has to be our Game 7 in Game 6."

Chris Paul's three-pointer drew the Clippers within two with five seconds left. After George Hill hit two free throws, Paul struggled getting the ball under control near the sideline and couldn't do anything as time expired. He slammed the ball in frustration.

"They made the winning plays down the stretch, and therefore we lose," Paul said.

Paul led the Clippers with 28 points and J.J. Redick added 26 with injured star Blake Griffin watching from the bench, his right foot encased in a black walking boot.

"Chris got tired early," Clippers coach Doc Rivers said. "Without Blake in the first seven minutes, Chris is the only ballhandler on the floor, and that's too hard. That hurt our offense, so we have to make an adjustment there."

The Jazz can clinch the series with a victory in Game 6 on

Friday night in Salt Lake City.

"We still haven't done anything yet," Utah coach Quin Snyder said. "We're competing though, and I like that."

The Clippers rallied from an 11-point deficit early in the fourth to tie the game. They made 12 of 15 free throws in the final period, but never managed to take the lead.

Paul and Hayward were called for double technical fouls with 40 seconds to go. Paul had already pushed Hayward in the back after they got tied up scrambling for a rebound that Hayward secured in front of Utah's bench. Hayward made both shots for a 90-85 lead.

"That was huge," Johnson said.

Neither team shot well, but the Jazz were better at most everything else. They owned a 34-28 edge in the paint, and the team that has done so has won each of the first five games in the best-of-seven series.

Utah outscored the Clippers on second-chance and fast-break baskets.

The Clippers clawed back with an 11-0 run in the fourth

featuring five straight free throws by Redick and two consecutive 3-pointers from Paul that tied the game at 69-all.

The Jazz regrouped to take a 77-69 lead. They ran off eight straight, capped by Hayward's 3-pointer after the Clippers' defense shut down Hill inside and forced him to pass out to the perimeter with the shot clock winding down.

Spurs 116, Grizzlies 103: Kawhi Leonard had 28 points and the Spurs rebounded from two discouraging road losses to beat Memphis and take a 3-2 lead in their first-round NBA playoff series.

San Antonio shot 14-for-28 on three-point attempts, two off its postseason record, including 5-for-7 shooting by Patty Mills.

Mills finished with 20 points and Tony Parker added 16.

Mike Conley had 26 points and Marc Gasol added 17 for the Grizzlies, who have lost nine straight postseason games in San Antonio.

With each team winning on its homecourt, Game 6 is Thursday night in Memphis.

Turner hits for cycle in Nationals' win

Associated Press

DENVER — Trea Turner wore everything he could to stay warm, including a red ski mask that covered his face.

For someone who doesn't enjoy hitting in the cold, he sure was hot at the plate.

Turner hit for the third cycle in Nationals history and drove in a career-high seven runs, helping Washington to a 15-12 win over the Colorado Rockies on a frigid Tuesday night.

The shortstop had a single in the first, a two-run double in the second, a two-run homer in the sixth and a bases-loaded triple in the seventh. It was the first cycle by the Nationals since Cristian Guzman on Aug. 28, 2008.

"I'm a baby when it comes to the cold," Turner said. "I was just trying to survive the cold."

In between pitches in the field, Turner stuck his throwing hand into his back pocket. At the plate, he really sizzled. Turner wasn't thinking triple to complete the cycle, only about lifting the ball into the outfield.

He did that and more, lining a shot into the right-field corner. He slid into third and began to clap.

"It's funny — when you don't think about it, it happens," said Turner, who had the ninth cycle in Expos/Nationals history.

Turner's seven RBIs are tied for second-most in a single game in Nationals history. Count Washington manager Dusty Baker was impressed.

"There aren't many guys that can say they drove in seven runs in a game," Baker said.

Not to be overlooked: Daniel Murphy also had a big night, tying a career best by driving

in five runs.

Enny Romero (2-1) earned the win by pitching 1¹/₃ scoreless innings a night after taking the loss.

German Marquez (0-1) was roughed up in his first start of the season, surrendering eight runs in four innings. He was recalled from Triple-A Albuquerque to fill in for Jon Gray, who's sidelined by a stress fracture in his left foot.

Carlos Gonzalez and Mark Reynolds hit solo homers for Colorado. Charlie Blackmon added a two-run shot in the eighth and Gerardo Parra homered to lead off the ninth to make it 15-12. But Shawn Kelley settled down to finish off the game.

The game was delayed 66 minutes by rain and the temperature at first pitch was 43 degrees. Turner and Nolan

Arenado were among several players who wore ski masks to keep warm.

Marquez learned an important lesson: Don't walk the pitcher. With two outs in the second, he struggled to find the strike zone as Joe Ross drew a walk. The Nationals went on to score five times in the inning to take a 7-0 lead.

"He'll gather this one and realize that if he gets through that second inning, the whole world changes," manager Bud Black said. "Who knows what happens? It didn't. That's the reality of it."

Ross went 4²/₃ innings and allowed five runs, breaking a string of 12 straight quality starts by Washington.

Bryce Harper finished 2-for-4 with a double and an RBI. He's hitting .400.

Hendricks turns in solid start, helps Cubs blank Bucs

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Kyle Hendricks rediscovered his 2016 form, limiting the Pittsburgh Pirates to four hits over six innings to outduel Gerrit Cole and lead the Chicago Cubs to a 1-0 win on Tuesday night.

Hendricks (2-1) struck out two and walked three in easily his best start this year. The struggling Pirates managed just four singles off Hendricks and didn't reach third base until he was out of the game. Wade Davis worked a perfect ninth for his fifth save as the Cubs won for the sixth time in seven games.

Addison Russell doubled in the second off Cole (1-3) and scored when second baseman Alen Hanson airmailed first base on a Jason Heyward grounder, the Pirates' major league-high 20th error this season. They've also allowed 15 unearned runs, the most in the big leagues.

The miscue spoiled a terrific outing by Cole. He struck out eight without issuing a walk

and retired 14 of his final 15 batters. It wasn't enough for Pittsburgh, which has lost six of eight.

Hendricks became the first Cubs pitcher in nearly 80 years to lead the majors in ERA last year (2.13) but entered at 6.19 after three lackluster starts. It dropped to 4.50 after he spent six innings keeping the Pirates off balance with a steady diet of breaking balls and changeups.

It was the second straight strong start for the defending World Series champions, who have spent the last week riding their offense to shake out of an early pitching funk. The Cubs' pitching did the heavy lifting while Cole dominated the highest-scoring team in the majors.

Russell's double and a two-out infield hit by Kris Bryant in the sixth was all the Cubs managed against the Pittsburgh ace, who is hoping to put an injury plagued 2016 behind him. After giving up five runs in a loss to Boston on opening day, Cole has surrendered just seven runs over his last 25 innings, a 2.52 ERA.

Astros 4, Indians 2: Dallas Keuchel (4-0) pitched a six-hitter, allowing home runs to Austin Jackson in the third and Michael Brantley in the ninth, during visiting Houston's victory over Cleveland.

Rays 2, Orioles 0: Austin Pruitt combined with four relievers on a two-hitter in his first big league start, helping visiting Tampa Bay shut out Baltimore.

Tigers 19, Mariners 9: James McCann, Justin Upton and Alex Avila homered — and that was before host Detroit added nine runs in the fifth inning en route to a rout of Seattle.

Dodgers 2, Giants 1: Clayton Kershaw (4-1) struck out seven over seven innings in another impressive performance as visiting Los Angeles ended a four-game losing streak against rival San Francisco.

Angels 2, Athletics 1 (11): Kole Calhoun ripped a two-out single in the 11th inning to score Danny Espinosa and send host Los Angeles to a victory over Oakland.

Blue Jays 6, Cardinals 5 (11): Chris Coghlan made an acrobatic, run-scoring leap over All-Star catcher Yadier Molina, and Marcus Stroman came across with the go-ahead run in visiting Toronto's win over St. Louis.

Brewers 9, Reds 1: Eric Thames hit his major league-leading 11th home run as host Milwaukee cruised to victory over Cincinnati.

Diamondbacks 9, Padres 3: Paul Goldschmidt drove in three runs and Patrick Corbin (2-3) struck out nine in seven innings as host Arizona rolled over San Diego.

Twins 8, Rangers 1: Ervin Santana (4-0) delivered his fourth straight outstanding start, Miguel Sano sparked a seven-run fifth inning with a leadoff homer and visiting Minnesota pounded Texas.

White Sox 10, Royals 5: Todd Frazier drove in three runs, Leury Garcia had three hits and host Chicago got its second straight one-sided win over Kansas City.