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Pro-Trump conservatives urge restraint on US military involvement in Venezuela

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — For months, hawkish Florida Republicans have dominated the narrative on Venezuela, meeting with President Donald Trump days before the U.S. recognized Juan Guaido as the country's legitimate leader and arguing that the president sees the situation in Venezuela differently than his "America First" desire to pull U.S. troops out of Syria.

But as Nicolas Maduro maintains control of the military three days after Guaido declared Operation Liberty underway — and **ANALYSIS** Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., has called for U.S. troops to enter Venezuela and a senior administration official said, "It's now or never" — other conservative voices close to the president are arguing more forcefully that U.S. military intervention in Venezuela is not the right move.

"I'm not the only Republican urging restraint when it comes to uniformed U.S. military on the ground in Venezuela, and I believe the president to be aware that there are some conservatives who hold that view," Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz said in an interview with the Miami Herald.

Gaetz, a frequent defender of the president on cable news who speaks with him regularly, doesn't represent South Florida's large Venezuelan community like Scott, Sen. Marco Rubio and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart. Instead, he represents a district with one of the highest percentage of military veterans in the country and the home of the 7th Special Forces Group, a unit designed to train friendly Latin American governments.

Any decision to send in ground troops could put Gaetz's constituents in harm's way, and he wants to make sure all of the consequences of military intervention have been soundly evaluated by the White House and Pentagon.

"I wouldn't want anyone to characterize my remarks as against military intervention," Gaetz said. "I agree all options should be on the table. But leaping to military intervention in absence of a thorough understanding of the consequences would be a mistake in my view. It's my fear that at the first casualty at the hands of a U.S. servicemember, we could see mass protests in capitals beyond Venezuela."

Gaetz made the same argument on Maria Bartiromo's Fox Business show on Thursday morning, a show the president frequently calls into or watches.

3 main arguments

There are three main arguments against military intervention from conservatives. The first, espoused by Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, is that U.S. military intervention must have approval from Congress. Paul called Scott's position on sending in troops a "mistake" and said that the president doesn't have the authority to do it.

And Paul, much like Rubio and Scott, is also in constant communication with the president.

The second argument, noted by Gaetz, is that any U.S. military action in Venezuela, even if relatively popular in Caracas and Miami, could destabilize South and Central America at a time when more than 1 million Venezuelans have crossed the border into Colombia and migrants from Central America make their way to the U.S.-Mexico border.

And the third argument, noted by Fox News host Tucker Carlson in a recent interview with Diaz-Balart, echoes Trump's rationale for drawing down troop levels in Syria.

"How, exactly, is any of this good for the United States?" Carlson asked. "Our sanctions in Venezuela have already spiked our gas prices. Are we prepared to absorb millions of new Venezuelan migrants? All of them great people, no question. But many would have little education or skills or would not speak English."

Carlson repeatedly asked Diaz-Balart to justify the national security threat Venezuela poses to the United States.

"What, exactly, is the threat? Please be specific," Carlson asked Diaz-Balart.

"We now have Middle Easterners with real, legal Venezuelan passports that we have found," Diaz-Balart said. "You have Hezbollah, you have Cuba, you have Iran, you have Russia, you have China there. So imagine that if this regime, which is under a lot of international pressure, survives. Is it or is it not potentially a green light, an open door for the Russians, for the Chinese, for others to increase their activity against our national security interests right here in our hemisphere?"

AWOL Afghan pilots prompt DOD to end training effort

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon quietly ended a program to train Afghan Air Force pilots in the U.S. after nearly half of the course attendees disappeared, according to a Defense Department watchdog report released this week.

More than 40 percent of the Afghan pilots sent to train on the AC-208 Combat Caravan lightweight reconnaissance aircraft went absent without leave while in the U.S., according to a quarterly report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

The report, which was released Tuesday, did not detail precisely how many Afghan pilots deserted the training program, which has been conducted at Fort Worth Meacham Airport in Texas.

One class of Afghan aviators successfully completed the course in the U.S., according to the report. Two subsequent classes have been suspended. Their pilots — the ones who did not desert — have already been sent back to Afghanistan, where they will continue training on Cessna-built aircraft capable of carrying Hellfire missiles, which has been used in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. Air Force will also end another training program next year for Afghan pilots in the U.S., according to the report. Training for Afghan pilots to fly the A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft will move to Afghanistan in late 2020, SIGAR reported.

That training has been conducted at Moody Air Force Base, just outside Valdosta, Ga. While the program has also been plagued by desertions, SIGAR reported it will be disbanded because enough Afghan pilots will have been trained to fly that aircraft by that time.

Afghan elders talk foreign troop withdrawal

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A convention of regional Afghan leaders adopted a road map on Friday for peace talks with the Taliban that includes a call for the withdrawal of foreign troops and a cease-fire during the holy month of Ramadan.

The traditional gathering of elders — known as Loya Jirga — began Monday with more than 3,200 politicians, tribal heads and prominent members of society meeting to hammer out a shared strategy for future negotiations with the Taliban.

The five-day talks resulted in a 23-point list meant to express

what the Afghan people want out of any talks with the insurgents. The body's decisions are not legally binding but carry great political significance.

The convention's demands include calls for the Afghan government to create a timeline for the "responsible withdrawal" of foreign forces from the country.

The U.S. currently has about 14,000 troops deployed to Afghanistan, along with hundreds of civilian employees and 12,000 civilian contractors, in addition to about 8,500 allied forces. Reports in December that the White House had signaled for half of the U.S. forces to be withdrawn in a matter of

months had raised concerns among some Afghans and allies of a too-rapid drawdown.

The Afghan delegates also called on the Taliban to end violence and agree to a cease-fire during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. In turn, the movement's legitimate demands should be recognized by the Afghan government, the resolution said.

The Taliban have so far shut the Afghan government out of its peace negotiations with U.S. diplomats, which began a new round Wednesday in Doha, Qatar. Washington has long sought to establish "intra-Afghan" dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul, saying it

is key condition of any peace settlement. A recent attempt at such an exchange in mid-April however fell apart due to a dispute about how many delegates from Kabul should attend a planned meeting in Qatar.

President Ashraf Ghani convened the Loya Jirga and sought to project a unified stance on peace talks. Several prominent politicians boycotted the gathering, however, including Ghani's partner in the government, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Ghani, in a speech concluding the council, promised to free 175 Taliban prisoners ahead of Ramadan as a goodwill gesture.

Estimates of cost to fix flood damage at Offutt rising

Associated Press

OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, Neb. — The Air Force is raising its cost estimate to \$420 million to repair and rebuild at Nebraska's Offutt Air Force Base following severe flooding that forced officials to scramble to save munitions and move aircraft to higher ground.

More than 130 structures were damaged by the Missouri River flooding at the base that houses the U.S. military's Strategic Command. Roughly 60 of those structures were damaged beyond repair and will need to

be demolished, said John Henderson, assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, environment and energy.

"It wasn't just the water, it was what was in the water," Henderson told the Omaha World-Herald. The floodwaters ran as deep as 9 feet in some places and left behind a toxic sludge at the base.

The latest estimate is \$70 million more than the initial estimate issued last month as part of the Air Force's \$4.9 billion federal funding request for disaster relief. The call for emergency funding would also

cover damage from Hurricane Michael nearly leveling Tyn dall Air Force Base in Florida last fall.

Henderson said \$300 million would be designated to design and build new structures at Offutt, while \$120 million will go toward cleanup and the repair of structures that can be saved.

Most of the new facilities will be built on higher ground, if possible, Henderson said.

The two levees protecting Offutt that were overwhelmed by floodwaters this spring are slated to be raised through a \$30 million project by the

Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District.

Henderson said it's important for the two-year project to move forward. Construction was expected to begin this spring, but it's been pushed back because of flood damage to the levees.

John Winkler, the district's general manager, said they're working with the Army Corps of Engineers to assess the damage. Winkler said crews will need dry weather and lowered river water levels to get started.

US soldier survives 70-foot fall into Hawaiian volcano

Staff and wire reports

A soldier survived a 70-foot fall onto a ledge inside Hawaii's Kilauea volcano this week after hopping a railing to get a better look at the crater.

The 32-year-old Schofield Barracks soldier was on the Big Island as part of a training mission, Army officials told Hawaii News Now.

He climbed over a permanent metal railing at the Steaming Bluff overlook to get closer to the edge of a 300-foot cliff and fell, according to a statement from Hawaii National Park.

A visitor reported the fall at about 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, park officials said. The man was found more than two hours later, seriously injured

on a narrow ledge about 70 feet from the edge.

Emergency personnel completed a "high-angle extrication using ropes and stokes litter," officials said.

A military helicopter airlifted the man in critical condition to Hilo Medical Center.

"Visitors should never cross safety barriers, especially around dangerous and destabi-

lized cliff edges," Chief Ranger John Broward said in a statement. "Crossing safety barriers and entering closed areas can result in serious injuries and death."

The last fall fatality in the park occurred on Oct. 29, 2017, the park reported.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Democrats step up their criticism of Barr

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Attorney General William Barr portrayed himself as an apolitical elder statesman at his confirmation hearing. He declared he'd rather resign than be asked to fire special counsel Robert Mueller without cause and insisted the prosecutor he'd known for decades would never involve himself in a witch hunt as the president claimed.

But now, Barr has emerged as arguably the most divisive figure in Donald Trump's administration. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi accused him on Thursday of lying — a charge

the Justice Department called reckless and false — and House Democrats are poised to hold him in contempt.

His appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee this week accelerated calls for his resignation after he said Trump had been falsely accused and he spun politically damning episodes in Mueller's report in the president's favor.

Barr might have seemed an unlikely lightning rod given his long government career, his distance from Trump's inner circle and his age, 68, that he said made him unconcerned with political advancement. But he had telegraphed

his sympathetic view of strong presidential powers — surely a useful viewpoint for Trump — in a memo to the Justice Department last year that criticized Mueller's Trump-Russia obstruction of justice investigation. His latest testimony, including that Trump's actions weren't criminal, reaffirmed that philosophy and, to critics, established Barr as the president's protector.

"We have a chief law enforcement officer who is definitely the defense lawyer for the president," Democratic Sen. Mazie Hirono, of Hawaii, said Thursday.

The Senate testimony was

the latest episode in a turnabout in public perception for Barr, whose selection was greeted by some with high hopes that he would return the Justice Department to stability following two years of leadership upheaval. He replaced Jeff Sessions, who was ridiculed by the president and ultimately pushed out, and an acting attorney general, Matt Whitaker, who was dismissed by Democrats as unqualified and a Trump loyalist.

Testimony from Mueller is especially in demand now that his apparent rift with Barr has been exposed.

Biden election bid shows Dems' foreign policy split

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Joe Biden is staking his presidential bid in no small part on the premise that he doesn't need on-the-job training to lead the U.S. on a world stage that President Donald Trump has gleefully upended.

But his more liberal rivals aren't ceding that ground.

The former vice president's entrance into the campaign is reigniting Democratic debates over foreign policy that have largely faded to the background during the chaotic Trump era. Biden, long part of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, is being pitted against progressives more skeptical of the use of military intervention. Biden's long record — in the Obama administration and in the Senate before that — isn't necessarily a selling point for many progressives in the party's base.

"It's not going to be enough to simply have foreign policy experience and put things back to the way they were before Trump," said Elizabeth Beavers, a longtime veteran of international nongovernmental agencies and a former top adviser at Indivisible, a grass-

roots group on the left. "We've got to move the United States off the path of needless war, talking about cutting the Pentagon budget and address the corporate greed that fuels it."

Biden has talked in broad strokes about international affairs in the week since he launched his campaign.

Biden demurred in Iowa when asked about trade, saying there'd be "plenty of time" for such discussions. He avoided a question about unrest in Venezuela, only later tweeting his support for "legitimate, internationally monitored elections."

When Biden did talk foreign affairs while campaigning, he invited backlash. In Iowa, Biden dismissed China as a geopolitical threat.

Sanders and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Biden's two most liberal top rivals, have laid out arguably the most detailed foreign policy visions of any Democratic hopefuls and ones that progressive leaders hope push Biden. They both give voice to the left's argument that authoritarianism and unrest is on the rise because of corporate domination of the world economy, with the system propped up by the militarization of Western democracies.

Trump defends health workers' right to refuse giving abortions

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Advancing his anti-abortion agenda, President Donald Trump moved Thursday to protect health care workers who object to procedures like abortion on moral or religious grounds.

Trump chose the National Day of Prayer to announce the new regulation.

"Just today we finalized new protections of conscience rights for physicians, pharmacists, nurses, teachers, students and faith-based charities," Trump told an interfaith audience in the White House Rose Garden. "They've been wanting to do that for a long time."

The conscience rule was a priority for religious conservatives who are a key part of Trump's political base, but some critics fear it will become a pretext for denying medical attention to LGBT people or women seeking abortions, a legal medical procedure.

In a strongly worded statement, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said, "these bigoted rules are immoral, deeply discriminatory and downright deadly, greenlighting open discrimination in health care against LGBTQ Americans and direct-

ly threatening the well-being of millions.

"Make no mistake," she added, "this is an open license to discriminate against Americans who already face serious, systemic discrimination."

The complex rule runs more than 400 pages and requires hospitals, universities, clinics and other institutions that receive funding from federal programs such as Medicare and Medicaid to certify that they comply with some 25 federal laws protecting conscience and religious rights.

Most of these laws and provisions address medical procedures such as abortion, sterilization and assisted suicide. The ultimate penalty can be loss of federal funding for violations of conscience or religious rights, but most cases are settled by making changes in practices and procedures.

The rule makes no new law and doesn't go beyond statutes passed under administrations of both political parties, said Roger Severino, head of the office that will enforce it at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Unemployment falls to 49-year low: 3.6%

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added a robust 263,000 jobs in April, suggesting that businesses have shrugged off earlier concerns that the economy might slow this year and anticipate strong customer demand.

The unemployment rate fell to a five-decade low of 3.6% from 3.8%, though that drop partly reflected an increase in the number of Americans who stopped looking for work. Average hourly pay rose 3.2% from 12 months earlier, a healthy increase though unchanged from

the previous month.

Friday's jobs report from the Labor Department showed that solid economic growth is still encouraging strong hiring nearly a decade into the economy's recovery from the Great Recession. The economic expansion is set to become the longest in history in July.

Many businesses say they're struggling to find workers. Some have taken a range of steps to fill jobs, including training more entry-level workers, loosening educational requirements and raising pay.

The brightening picture represents a sharp improvement

from the start of the year. At the time, the government was enduring a partial shutdown, the stock market had plunged, trade tensions between the United States and China were flaring and the Federal Reserve had just raised short-term interest rates in December for a fourth time in 2018. Analysts worried that the economy might barely expand in the first three months of this year.

Yet the outlook soon brightened. Chair Jerome Powell signaled that the Fed would put rate hikes on hold. Trade negotiations between the U.S. and China made some progress. The

economic outlook in some other major economies improved. Share prices rebounded.

American households have become more confident since the winter and are ramping up spending. Consumer spending surged in March by the most in nearly a decade. A likely factor is that steady job growth and solid wage increases have enlarged Americans' paychecks.

Businesses are also spending more freely. Orders to U.S. factories for long-lasting capital goods jumped in March by the most in eight months.

Baltimore mayor resigns amid book scandal, probe

The Washington Post

BALTIMORE — Mayor Catherine Pugh, who is under state and federal investigation over lucrative sales of her self-published children's books, resigned Thursday, plunging this already rattled city into another political crisis.

Pugh, a former Democratic state legislator, has faced public scrutiny since March, following news reports about the book deals with companies that do business with the city and state.

Her attorney, Steven Silverman, announced her resignation Thursday afternoon at his downtown law office, calling it a "sad day for Baltimore" and reading a brief statement from Pugh, who was be-

lieved to be at her home in the northwest part of the city.

"I am sorry for the harm I have caused to the image of the city of Baltimore and the credibility of the office of the mayor," she said, according to the statement. "Baltimore deserves a mayor that can move our great city forward."

The resignation ends weeks of speculation over whether Pugh would seek to stay in office. Her departure is a bruising setback for a city long besieged by poverty and violence and still recovering from a series of police corruption scandals and rioting in 2015 related to the death of Freddie Gray.

Pugh, 69, is the second Baltimore mayor in the past decade to leave office while fac-

ing corruption allegations.

"This was the right decision, as it was clear the mayor could no longer lead effectively," Gov. Larry Hogan, R-Md., who called for her resignation a week ago, said in a statement. "The federal and state investigations must and will continue to uncover the facts. Baltimore City can now begin to move forward."

City Solicitor Andre Davis said portraits of Pugh were being removed from the walls of City Hall on Thursday and stationery was being reprinted with the name of Bernard C. "Jack" Young, 64, the longtime City Council president who was elevated to acting mayor when Pugh went on leave April 1. He now becomes mayor.

Trump, Putin talk nuclear weapons, Mueller report

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin for more than an hour Friday about nuclear weapons agreements, the conflict in Venezuela, North Korea and also briefly about special counsel Robert Mueller's just completed report on Moscow's interference in the 2016 election.

"They had a very good discussion. Spoke for a little over an hour," White House press secretary Sarah Sanders told

reporters at the White House. "They discussed nuclear agreements, both new and extended, with the possibility of having conversations with China on that front as well."

"There was a discussion about having — extending the current nuclear agreement — as well as discussions about potentially starting a new one that could include China as well," she said.

She did not specify which treaty. The current strategic nuclear arms treaty, New

START, expires in 2021.

Sanders also said they discussed trade and how it has increased between the two countries since Trump has come into office. They also talked about Ukraine and North Korea.

"They spoke about North Korea for a good bit of time on the call, and reiterated both the commitment and the need for denuclearization, and the president said several times on this front, as well, the need and importance of Russia stepping

up and continuing to help and put pressure on North Korea to denuclearize," she said.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un traveled to Russia last week to meet with Putin.

She said Putin and Trump talked "very, very briefly" about the Mueller report.

She dodged a question about whether they had discussed Russian election interference, instead blaming the Obama administration for not doing enough to stop it before the 2016 election.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Driver convicted in crossbow incident

VA PULASKI — A Virginia man has been found guilty of shooting a crossbow at another vehicle during a road rage incident but was acquitted of trying to murder the other driver.

The Roanoke Times reported that the jury in Pulaski rendered its verdict Wednesday. It recommended that Glen McNeal Grubb spend six years behind bars.

Authorities said Grubb chased a Ford F-150 in his fiancée's Pontiac Grand Am last year. Her two daughters, then ages 4 and 6, were in the back.

Authorities said the cars raced each other down twisting, narrow roads in western Virginia. Grubb fired the crossbow out his window while driving. It struck the metal just to the left of the Ford pickup's rear cab window.

Man tries to retrieve drone, gets stuck

NH MANCHESTER — Rescuers in New Hampshire came to the aid of a man who got stuck dangling 60 feet high in a tree while trying to retrieve a drone.

Daniel Lacourse told WMUR-TV the drone got caught in the tree at Lafayette Park in Manchester two weeks ago. Earlier efforts to free it didn't work, so he borrowed a friend's climbing gear, looked up "how to climb" on YouTube and went up the tree Wednesday.

Once he got up there, Lacourse was just hanging onto a rope and said he "just didn't expect it to be so difficult and take so much endurance." His friend called the fire department. Firefighters used a ladder truck to secure Lacourse's equipment and bring him down.

Beehives destroyed in act of vandalism

TX ALVIN — Investigators south of Houston are trying to determine who killed more than 500,000 bees by setting hives on fire, toppling some over and tossing others into a pond.

The vandalism was discovered early Saturday when a Brazoria County sheriff's deputy patrolling a rural road near Alvin saw flames shooting up from a field.

Steven Brackman, head of the Brazoria County Beekeepers Association, said the destruction occurred at a critical time, in part because queen bees are laying thousands of eggs a day at this time of year. The 20 hives were home to European honeybees, which experts say are declining globally.

17-year cicada swarm is about to emerge

PA PITTSBURGH — With their bulging red eyes and deafening mating song, the 17-year cicadas are about to emerge. The insects have been waiting underground for nearly two decades, and millions are about to make their debut around western Pennsylvania, parts of eastern Ohio and a small swath of West Virginia.

Penn State Extension horticulture educator Sandy Feather told the Tribune Review it takes several days of temperatures above 60 degrees Fahrenheit for them to emerge. Temperatures around Pittsburgh are forecast to be in the high 60s and low 70s next week.

Feather said they'll be loud, but they don't pose a threat to anything except very young trees. Adult cicadas don't eat or bite and exist only to mate. They'll all be dead by the end of June.

Thieves in stolen cars ram gun stores, steal

GA ATHENS — Police in Georgia are investigating two cases of stolen vehicles being rammed into gun stores, with thieves then making off with weapons.

Athens-Clarke County police are trying to determine whether the most recent robbery last weekend is related to one two weeks ago in Loganville.

The Athens Banner-Herald reported that the latest smash-and-grab happened early last Sunday morning. A Jeep Grand Cherokee crashed through the front door of the Athens Gun Club. Surveillance video shows the Jeep's driver being joined by four accomplices who loot the shop of an undisclosed number of guns. The suspects left in a separate getaway vehicle.

A stolen car was also used in the earlier robbery to smash into 3X Firearms in Loganville. A separate getaway vehicle was used in that crime as well.

Bill to ban declawing of cats purring along

NY ALBANY — An effort to ban the declawing of cats is moving through the New York Legislature.

The Democrat-led assembly's agriculture committee advanced the measure Tuesday. Supporters hailed the move, but the bill must pass a second committee before going to a vote in the assembly.

Supporters include animal welfare advocates and many veterinarians who say declawing a cat is inhumane since it involves the amputation of a cat's toes back to the first knuckle. The state's largest veterinary association has opposed the bill, arguing that the procedure should remain a last resort for felines who won't stop scratching furniture or humans.

1 stabbed in fight at school over tobacco

KY SOMERSET — Authorities said a Kentucky high school student has been stabbed and another charged with assault.

News outlets reported that the Pulaski County Sheriff's Office responded Wednesday to a fight at Pulaski County High School. A statement from the agency says the altercation occurred in a boys' bathroom during a class change, and no other students were involved.

Student Damien Erp told WKYT-TV that he was in the restroom when it happened. He said two boys were fighting over smokeless tobacco when one stabbed the other.

Katessa Brock told The Commonwealth Journal that her son, Daniel Wilson, 18, was "blessed" to be alive. She said the knife missed his heart "by an inch" and he ended up with five stitches.

The newspaper reported that a school resource officer took a male juvenile into custody.

Deer hunting licenses take jump this year

ND BISMARCK — Deer hunting licenses in North Dakota are taking a big jump this year.

The Game and Fish Department is issuing 65,500 licenses for white-tailed deer and mule deer, up 19 percent from 2018. It's the fourth consecutive year of an increase.

The department this year also is fully lifting restrictions on mule deer doe hunting in the west that were implemented eight years ago following a string of harsh winters.

State Tourism Division data show that deer hunting contributes tens of millions of dollars to the state's economy.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Baffert goes for 6th Kentucky Derby win

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Bob Baffert is feeling the pressure now. The five-time Kentucky Derby winner finds himself with new favorite Game Winner since Omaha Beach was scratched with a breathing problem.

“Oh, boy, here we go,” the white-haired trainer said Thursday to a throng outside his Churchill Downs barn. “I think everybody is trying to jinx me. It’s still a very wide-open race.”

The Derby lost another horse Friday when Haikal was scratched because of an infection in his left front foot. That leaves the field at 19.

Trained by Kiaran McLaughlin, Haikal was being treated for an abscess and didn’t train Thursday or Friday. That left McLaughlin no choice but to scratch the Gotham Stakes winner before the deadline Friday morning.

Haikal, a 30-1 shot, had his infected foot soaked in Epsom salts to reduce the accumulation of pus. The problem should

clear shortly, but the colt ran out of time to prepare for the 1½-mile Derby.

As a result, the rail will remain empty and Derby horses will break from posts 2 through 20.

No matter how much he tries to deflect the attention, Baffert holds a strong hand heading into Saturday’s race. Game Winner is the 9-2 early favorite, and his two other horses, Improbable and Roadster, are the co-second choices at 5-1.

A sixth victory would tie him for the most wins by a trainer in the Derby’s 145-year history.

“I don’t think there’s a heavy-duty favorite now,” he insisted.

Instead, he tried to sic the media on Jason Servis, who trains Maximum Security. The Florida Derby winner is a 10-1 shot.

“He should be the favorite,” Baffert said. “He’s a horse that nobody is talking about and that’s a horse that I’m worried about. He’s run faster than we have. Put the pressure on Jason, will you?”

Baffert said he gave no

thought to replacing Florent Geroux aboard Roadster with Hall of Fame rider Mike Smith. Smith initially chose to ride Omaha Beach over Roadster in the Derby.

“I would never do that to the riders,” he said, having started in racing as a jockey.

Race officials said Friday that Smith, 53, has picked up the mount on 30-1 shot Cutting Humor, trained by Todd Pletcher.

Smith won last year’s Derby with Justify, trained by Baffert. They went on to sweep the Preakness and Belmont to capture the Triple Crown. Smith won his first Derby with 50-1 shot Giacomo in 2005.

Cutting Humor was the last Derby horse to have a rider named Monday when Corey Lanerie got the mount. He would have been aboard the colt for the first time. But once Smith became available, owner Starlight Racing decided to go with the jockey nicknamed Big Money Mike for his ability to win some of the sport’s richest races.

Meanwhile, Omaha Beach was set to have surgery Thursday to fix an entrapped epiglottis that affects his breathing. The minor procedure, at nearby clinic Lexington, will require two to three weeks of recovery, enough time to knock the colt off the Triple Crown trail. He’s expected to race this summer.

“As bad as it felt yesterday, it would be a horrible feeling to have him not finish well and know that I was at fault for running him,” trainer Richard Mandella said. “So we had to do the right thing by the horse, and that is give it up and go to the next step.”

Prominent owner and breeder Arthur Hancock was among many who contacted Mandella to express sympathy. Hancock pointed out that the late training great Charlie Whittingham was 73 when he won his first and only Derby.

“So who I am to think I should be doing this now?” said Mandella, who is 68.

Court, 58, ready to be oldest jockey ever in big race

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Jon Court will set a record as the oldest jockey in the Kentucky Derby when he rides Long Range Toddy this weekend.

Court is 58, which is a lot of candles on the birthday cake for someone still participating in an incredibly dangerous sport.

Churchill Downs officials say the current record holder is Bobby Baird, who was 57 when he rode Raymond Earl to a 10th-place finish in the 1978 Derby.

Mike Smith, 53, was scheduled to ride Omaha Beach in the Derby but the early favorite was scratched. Smith instead will ride Cutting Humor on Saturday.

Bill Shoemaker is the oldest jockey to win the Derby, at 54 aboard Ferdinand in 1986.

It takes a combination of skill

and a healthy dollop of luck to persevere when most of the competition since riding your first winner in 1980 has long since retired.

“I’ve been blessed,” Court said. “I’ve been fortunate to have the gift to do, and the talent to be able to participate on a regular basis. I am taking care of myself. And I’ve been very blessed that I can compete at this level and at the top category with this type caliber horses.”

Long Range Toddy is a long shot at 30-1. The colt trained by Hall of Famer Steve Asmussen is 4-for-8 in his career, with Court aboard for the last two races, both at Oaklawn: a victory in the Rebel Stakes and a sixth-place finish in the Arkansas Derby.

“I had been told that he was kind and intelligent,” Court

said of Long Range Toddy. “That impressed me. After working him, I realized he had the talent it would take to be running at the caliber level he’s racing at.”

This will be Court’s fourth Derby mount. His best finish was eighth aboard Will Take Charge in 2013. Derby opportunities were a long time coming. Court’s first Derby ride came in 2011. He never abandoned hope he would make the sport’s biggest race.

“I would say I was quietly confident,” he said.

Court, who was born in Gainesville, Fla., has lived the typical gypsy life of a jockey. He has been a regular on circuits in Colorado, Louisiana, Kentucky, Indiana, Arkansas, Alabama and California. He has more than 4,000 victories and his two biggest were con-

secutive wins in the Arkansas Derby with Line of David (2010) and Archarcharch (2011).

But it was a different kind of horsepower that could have ended Court’s career. He suffered a fractured collarbone last year in a motorcycle accident.

“As long as it feels good and I’m doing well, I’ll keep going,” Court said. “I’d like to be able to enjoy this industry as much as I have loved it and be able to step down gracefully at my timing.”

He’d love to leave with a trophy as a memento.

“That would be a beautiful thing,” Asmussen said. “Jon gave him such a dream trip in the Rebel. Hopefully, we can recapture some of that magic Saturday.”

Embiid leads Sixers to rout of Raptors

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Joel Embiid had knocked the air out of Toronto by the time he punctuated a Game 3 victory with a windmill dunk. Embiid sprinted down the court with his arms stretched out like airplane wings, and the Philadelphia 76ers are flying high in the postseason.

Embiid refused to get tripped up back in Philly, scoring 33 points and playing to the “MVP” chants to lead the Sixers to a 116-95 victory over the Toronto Raptors on Thursday night.

Philadelphia took a 2-1 lead in the Eastern Conference semifinal series.

“When I have fun, my game just changes,” Embiid said. “I’m always told if I don’t smile during the game it means I’m having a bad game or I’m not into it. I know to get my game

going, I’ve got to have fun on the court.”

Embiid also had 10 rebounds, shaking off a pair of passive games and became the driving force on offense the Sixers needed as they chase their first NBA championship since 1983.

He made the game his own in the third quarter and helped the Sixers put away a Raptors team badly overmatched outside of Kawhi Leonard.

Embiid struck a chord when he buried a three-pointer in the third that stretched Philadelphia’s lead to 12. That was start of a string of plays that got Toronto’s attention. Embiid chased a loose ball and was tripped when Pascal Siakam intentionally stuck out his right leg and sent Philly’s All-Star tumbling to the court. The crowd went wild and Siakam was hit with a flagrant foul. Embiid made both free throws

as fans — including some of Philadelphia’s biggest sports stars — serenaded him with chants of “MVP! MVP!”

Jimmy Butler, the Game 2 standout, dunked off his own steal and the Sixers had quickly put the game out of reach. Butler had 22 points.

Embiid scored another layup and waved his arms and pointed with a smile as wide as the hoop. Embiid went 9-for-18 from the floor and made 12 of 13 free throws.

It was moments like this why the 76ers endured the painful Process — the years of tanking seasons for high draft picks, like in 2014 when they drafted Embiid with the No. 3 overall pick.

Hall of Famer Allen Iverson and rapper Meek Mill engaged in a lengthy embrace from the courtside seats as the Sixers moved two wins away from

their first Eastern Conference finals appearance since 2001.

The Sixers just had to survive Leonard.

Leonard toyed with Ben Simmons in the third to lead Toronto’s charge back into the game. The Raptors ran Simmons through screens to give Leonard the space he needed to create and bury open jumpers. And when there was no space, Leonard simply bullied his way to the basket. He shoved a right elbow into James Ennis III and spun around him for a two-handed jam. Leonard made all six baskets and scored 14 points in the quarter to cut the deficit to eight points. Kyle Lowry and Danny Green offered little help (20 combined points) and Leonard couldn’t carry the Raptors on his own.

“They did a great job scoring. We didn’t,” Leonard said.

Leonard scored 33 points, and Siakam added 20.

Syndergaard strikes out 10, hits home run for Mets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Noah Syndergaard became the first pitcher in 36 years to homer and throw a shutout in a 1-0 victory, lifting the New York Mets over the Cincinnati Reds on Thursday.

Syndergaard (2-3) struck out 10 and allowed four hits in his third career complete game, shaking off a sloppy start to the season with a do-it-all effort. He became the first Mets starter to get an out in the eighth this season, and the franchise’s first starter ever to go yard in a 1-0 complete-game win.

Thor did his hammering in the third inning, driving a ball 407 feet to the opposite field in left-center off Tyler Mahle (0-4).

The previous pitcher to homer in a 1-0 complete-game win was the Los Angeles Dodgers’ Bob Welch against the Reds on June 17, 1983, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Nationals 2, Cardinals 1: Stephen Strasburg reached 1,500 strikeouts in fewer in-

nings than any pitcher in major league history, and host Washington beat St. Louis after a long rain delay to salvage the finale of a four-game series in which they lost the first three.

Strasburg (3-1) lasted 6²/₃ innings, giving up a run and six hits with two walks and nine strikeouts. He got opposing starter Dakota Hudson looking in the fifth for his eighth strikeout of the game and the 1,500th of his career — in 1,272¹/₃ innings.

White Sox 6, Red Sox 4: Nicky Delmonico hit a three-run homer with one out in the bottom of the ninth inning to lift host Chicago over Boston.

It was Chicago’s second straight walk-off win. Yonder Alonso had a two-run single in the nightcap of Wednesday’s doubleheader against Baltimore for a 7-6 victory.

Twins 8, Astros 2: Jose Berrios won his fourth straight start, Jason Castro homered off former battery mate Brad Peacock and drove in four runs,

and AL-leading Minnesota beat visiting Houston.

Backed by a six-run fourth from the Twins against Peacock (2-2), Berrios (5-1) finished seven smooth innings with seven hits and two runs allowed to push the Twins to their first season series victory over the Astros since 2013.

Rockies 11, Brewers 6: Nolan Arenado, David Dahl and Raimel Tapia homered to help visiting Colorado earn a four-game split with Milwaukee.

Arenado had three hits, including his ninth home run this season. Dahl finished a triple short of the cycle for the Rockies, who outscored the Brewers 22-10 in the final two games of the series.

Rays 3, Royals 1: Brandon Lowe hit a two-run homer off Wily Peralta with two outs in the ninth inning, and visiting Tampa Bay split a four-game series with Kansas City.

Peralta (2-2) walked Daniel Robertson on four pitches leading off the ninth, and Lowe

connected with two outs for his seventh home run this season.

Padres 11, Braves 2: Ian Kinsler and Wil Myers homered, Matt Strahm (1-2) worked six innings and visiting San Diego routed Atlanta to earn a split of a four-game series.

The Padres broke the game open with a five-run fifth, helped by an errant throw from Atlanta pitcher Mike Foltynewicz (0-1) that allowed four unearned runs to score. San Diego added five runs in the sixth — the first time since 2000 it has scored five runs in consecutive innings.

Angels 6, Blue Jays 2: Mike Trout and Kole Calhoun homered, Tyler Skaggs (3-2) pitched four-hit ball into the seventh inning and host Los Angeles completed a three-game sweep of Toronto.

Albert Pujols had two doubles for the Angels, who have won six of seven after losing nine of 10. They swept Toronto at Angel Stadium for the first time since April 2002.

Female players hope NHL will start league

Associated Press

Meghan Duggan need only look around sports to get excited about what an NHL-run women's hockey league might look like.

The NBA did it with the WNBA. Soccer leagues in Europe and the U.S. have done it. And that was enough for the 2018 U.S. Olympic gold medal-winning captain and more than 200 fellow players to take a leap of faith by pledging not to play in North America this year to try to get to the point where there's a single, economically viable professional league.

"History has told all of us that startup women's professional leagues thrive and are very successful when working with an existing professional league," Duggan told The Associated Press on Thursday. "That's definitely something I think that we would be excited about. But this is just the first step in getting there."

The effective boycott of North America's only remaining women's hockey league, the National Women's Hockey League, sent shockwaves through the sport with a major equipment company advocating for NHL ownership and men's players and agents voicing their support.

Now comes the big question: Will it work?

"I think they have a better chance of succeeding than some of the men's unions have," said Matt DeDuca, a labor and employment attorney with Pepper Hamilton. "Strikes have not been very effective in professional sports for players because it's hard to maintain them long term. Women's professional sports are a little different because of the economics. I think there is a tremendous opportunity for them."

It's an opportunity equipment giant Bauer Hockey wants to be a part of. Vice president of

marketing Mary-Kay Messier released a statement saying the National Hockey League "must be in an ownership position" for any women's league.

"I really do believe and we at Bauer believe that that is the only sustainable, viable option for ownership," Messier said in a phone interview. "It will really take a long-term view and the possibility of looking at this from a perspective of not the bottom line immediately but as a necessary step to ensure the future of the game through continued growth and participation inspiring those (future) generations."

The NHL has given \$50,000 annually each to the NWHL and the now-defunct Canadian Women's Hockey League that recently ceased operations. It has invited a handful of top players to participate in its All-Star skills competition. When Brianna Decker demonstrated the passing drill and finished

with a better time than the winner, CCM Hockey said it would pay her the \$25,000 she would've gotten as the prize.

University of Buffalo sports law professor Nellie Drew said her children follow the NHL and NWHL and love the game. She wonders what happens next.

"The question is going to be whether the economic demand will be there to drive this," Drew said. "Right now in 2019, do the women's hockey players have the economic leverage to make an effective stand on this position? Maybe not. But do they have the capacity to drive public sentiment strongly enough that it will make the (NHL) consider it? Yeah, I think they do."

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly told The AP, "We will further explore the situation privately before taking any affirmative position on next steps."

NHL playoffs roundup

Avalanche blank Sharks, even best-of-seven series at 2-2

Associated Press

DENVER — Nathan MacKinnon described his batted-in goal as merely cleaning up garbage.

This was far from trash talk: The Colorado Avalanche are right back in the series.

MacKinnon kept up his scoring spree with a second-period goal, Philipp Grubauer stopped 32 shots for his first career playoff shutout and the Avalanche beat the San Jose Sharks 3-0 on Thursday night to tie the Western Conference semifinal series at two games apiece.

"Huge," Grubauer said. "The longer we can keep the zero up there the better it is, and the better chance we have to win."

MacKinnon now has at least a point in eight straight games. It's the longest streak by an Avalanche player in the postseason since Peter Forsberg had a

point in eight straight in 2002.

Colin Wilson gave Colorado a two-goal cushion with a power-play goal early in the third period. Wilson's score was set up by a between-the-legs pass from Mikko Rantanen, who registered two assists. Erik Johnson added an empty-netter with 1:09 remaining.

Game 5 is Saturday in San Jose.

The chants of "Gruuuu" by the crowd only grew louder with every save Grubauer made. He turned back nine shots in the final period.

"We needed to win this game and he was unreal," Rantanen said.

In an attempt to bottle up the speedy MacKinnon, the Sharks kept rolling out their top defensive pair of Brent Burns and Marc-Edouard Vlasic. MacKinnon rarely had a moment when he wasn't shadowed.

Still, he found ways to shake free, including in the second period when the puck bounced off goaltender Martin Jones and into the air. MacKinnon was on the spot, taking one whack at it and then another to send it past Jones ("just cleaned up garbage, nothing really," he said). It was his sixth goal in this postseason.

"I love it as a coach because I don't think you're going to be dancing around and making a bunch of high-skilled plays in traffic and score the highlight-reel goal that's going tic-tac-toe," Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said. "I don't see that happening."

Bruins 4, Blue Jackets 1: Tuukka Rask stopped 39 shots and visiting Boston got some much-needed production from its top-liners in a win over Columbus that evened their Eastern Conference semifinal

series at two games apiece.

Patrice Bergeron had two goals, David Pastrnak had a goal and an assist and Sean Kuraly also tallied for the Bruins, who had lost the last two games in the best of-seven series but knotted the set again as it moves back to Boston for Game 5 on Saturday.

Artemi Panarin scored for Columbus on a controversial play, and Sergei Bobrovsky, who has been spectacular in the postseason so far, had 41 saves but was beaten on long shots by Pastrnak and Bergeron in the first period.

Brad Marchand picked up an assist on Bergeron's goal but also committed three penalties, one leading to an unsuccessful Blue Jackets penalty shot in the first period. Marchand and Bergeron had been kept off the score sheet in the first three games.