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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Airstrikes liberally used in Afghan fight

By JOSH SMITH

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan troops facing concerted attacks by resurgent Taliban forces are increasingly backed by American airpower, signaling more aggressive U.S. involvement than the defensive posture outlined when the NATO-led coalition formally ended its combat mission last year.

Coalition officials said they reserved the right to use force against terrorism targets and to protect their own troops, the vast majority of which are American, when they scaled back this year to a small train, advise and assist mission. Coalition forces were not meant to be involved in combat, as the Afghan National Security Forces took sole responsibility for the country's security.

But with the Afghan air force still in its infancy and Afghan troops finding themselves up against a still-powerful insurgency, the coalition policy on using offensive force has been broadly interpreted, said Stephen Biddle, an international affairs professor at The George Washington University in

Washington.

"The ANSF is having a harder time holding than American commanders had hoped, and given that, they've needed more support," he said. "For a variety of reasons, the administration has been keen to declare an end to the combat mission, but the definition of what they're doing is combat, under any understanding."

Since President Barack Obama declared a "responsible conclusion" to America's combat role in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, U.S. aircraft have flown at least 2,435 close-air-support sorties, deploying some kind of weapon during at least 198 missions, according to the latest data released at the end of July.

That doesn't include at least 18 airstrikes by manned aircraft that the coalition conducted in recent days to assist Afghan troops fighting desperately to retake the Musa Qala district center in Helmand province that had been captured by the Taliban.

Those strikes were carried out against "individuals threatening the force," Col. Brian Tribus, spokesman for the coalition's Resolute Support mission,

said in a statement.

"Resolute Support is training, advising and assisting elements of the ANDSF involved in counterinsurgency operations in Helmand. While Resolute Support is a noncombat mission, we do maintain the right to use lethal force to protect our personnel," he said.

In Washington, American officials went further, saying they reserve the right to help Afghan forces that may be in extremely difficult situations.

"The commander [in Afghanistan] does have the ability to provide air support to the Afghan defense forces when they're in extremis, and we have exercised that option," Col. Pat Ryder told reporters at the Pentagon. "There has been an increase in airstrikes in support of counterterrorism efforts and in support of Afghan forces in extremis."

At a news conference during a trip to a military base in California last week, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said such aid had always been a possibility.

"When there are special circumstances, wherein assistance by the coalition could make a material difference, we have said since we began the transi-

tion, that we would be prepared to intervene," he said.

While the U.S. continues to deploy airstrikes, the number this year is a fraction of what it was at the height of American involvement in 2010 and 2011.

American airstrikes in Afghanistan this year generally have been carried out quietly, especially compared with the near-daily updates from the high-profile campaign against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

Some airstrikes have made headlines in Afghanistan, however. In July, drone strikes reportedly killed top leaders and dozens of fighters of the nascent Islamic State affiliate here. Also in July, American helicopters mistakenly fired on an Afghan army position, killing at least seven soldiers.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has been more welcoming of American use of airstrikes than his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who was a staunch critic of the civilian casualties sometimes caused by coalition bombs.

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USS Ronald Reagan departs for Asia-Pacific region

By TYLER HLAVAC

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS Ronald Reagan is about to become the Navy's latest forward-deployed aircraft carrier in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Reagan's departure Monday from San Diego is part of the three-carrier swap involving the USS Theodore Roosevelt and the USS George Washington.

The more modern Reagan is replacing the George Washington, which departed Yokosuka Naval Base for San Diego in May. After a crew swap in August, nearly two-thirds of the servicemembers who departed Japan aboard the George Washington are returning to Yokosuka on the Reagan.

"We are sending our most modern West Coast-based aircraft carrier to support the security, stability and prosperity of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region

and our allies," said Vice Adm. Mike Shoemaker, commander of Naval Air Forces.

The carrier swap is part of the rebalancing strategy in the Pacific, an area the Obama administration and the Pentagon have deemed their highest long-term priority. The Reagan's arrival is one of many shake-ups occurring in 7th Fleet Pacific Forces. The modernized guided-missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville arrived in Yokosuka in May, bolstering

7th Fleet forces in the area.

The Reagan is the second-newest carrier behind the USS George H.W. Bush. It previously played a big role during Operation Tomodachi, the U.S. military's relief effort after Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami in 2011. The ship served as a floating refueling station for Japanese and U.S. helicopters flying relief missions to the battered coast.

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Federal workers on track to get pay hike

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Federal employees are on track for a 1.3 percent pay raise in January, following a decision by President Barack Obama to set that figure by default if Congress continues to follow its strategy of action by inaction on the raise.

A letter sent to Congress on Friday stating that intent is a routine step that is required when Congress has not set a raise for the upcoming year by the end of August. It prevents what would be a much higher raise from being paid under the complex laws governing federal pay raises should no raise number be enacted into law by the end of the year. Congress could yet set a different figure, but the appropriations bills for 2016 so far have been silent on a raise. That continues a pattern that resulted in 1 percent raises being paid by default in January 2014 and 2015.

Several federal employee organizations are pushing for a 3.8 percent increase.

The arrangement technically applies only to employees paid under the General Schedule system for most white-collar jobs. But under long-standing practice, the raise paid in a local area under that system also is paid to blue-collar employees.

Suspect in Houston deputy's shooting has lengthy record

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The man charged with capital murder in the fatal shooting of a uniformed suburban Houston sheriff's deputy had a lengthy criminal record going back a decade, but never spent more than short stints in jail.

Shannon J. Miles, whose criminal record includes convictions for resisting arrest and disorderly conduct with a firearm, was to be arraigned Monday in the shooting of Darren Goforth, a 10-year veteran of the Harris County Sheriff's Office. Miles' arrest Saturday came less than 24 hours after

authorities said he ambushed Goforth at a suburban Houston Chevron station.

Harris County Sheriff Ron Hickman said the attack was "clearly unprovoked," and there is no evidence that Goforth knew Miles.

"Our assumption is that [Goforth] was a target because he wore a uniform," the sheriff said.

Miles' criminal record begins in 2005, when he was convicted of criminal mischief, giving false information to police and resisting arrest, according to records. In 2006, he was convicted of disorderly conduct with a firearm and sentenced to a maximum of

15 days in jail. His most recent conviction came in 2009 for again resisting arrest.

Records show that Miles, 30, of Houston, was sentenced to several short stints in jail, anywhere from six to 10 days.

Goforth, 47, was pumping gas Friday night in Cypress when the gunman approached him from behind and fired multiple shots, continuing to fire after the deputy had fallen to the ground. The killing evoked strong emotions in the local law enforcement community, with Hickman linking it to heightened tension over the treatment of blacks by police. Goforth was white and Miles is black.

EU officials will meet on refugee crisis

The Washington Post

BRUSSELS — In an urgent bid to address Europe's mounting migrant crisis, top European Union officials discussed plans Monday to hold an emergency meeting in September aimed at streamlining a fragmented process that has led asylum-seekers to take desperate steps to scale Europe's high walls.

A decision to convene EU interior and justice ministers on Sept. 14 comes following a week

of tragedy in which a delivery truck was found packed with the corpses of 71 presumed migrants in Austria and more than 100 people drowned off the coast of Libya while trying to reach Europe's shores. The meeting was called by Luxembourg, which holds the EU's rotating presidency.

Record numbers of migrants are trying to flee conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, while others are seeking a newly prosperous future.

Leaders of countries that

have taken more asylum-seekers, Germany and Sweden first among them, have said that their generosity cannot be unlimited.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for measures to streamline the asylum process by separating countries presumed safe from ones embroiled in conflict. That would speed deportations of economic migrants while allocating more resources to people fleeing the bitter wars in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.

Japan seeking big boost in spending to bolster defense

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's Defense Ministry wants to buy an advanced Aegis radar-equipped destroyer and more F-35 fighters under its largest-ever budget to bolster the defense of southern islands amid a territorial dispute with China.

The ministry endorsed a 5.1

trillion yen (\$42 billion) budget request Monday for the year beginning next April, up 2.2 percent from this year. It would be the fourth annual increase under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who took office in December 2012 and ended 10 years of defense budget cuts.

Abe's government says Japan needs to bolster its military

role amid China's growing territorial assertiveness and the rising risk of terrorist attacks. Parliament is expected to approve a set of contentious bills to expand Japan's military role by late September.

The budget increase results largely from proposed purchases of new equipment, including 17 surveillance heli-

copters, six F-35 fighters and three advanced "Global Hawk" drones. The construction of a Soryu-class submarine is also planned to bolster island defense and surveillance.

The requests are based on new defense guidelines allowing Japan's military a larger role amid tensions over China's growing military might.

Cubs' Arrieta tosses no-no against Dodgers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Jake Arrieta had been building toward this moment. He'd come achingly close to holding opponents hitless three times last year in a breakout season with the Chicago Cubs.

Finally, it happened. And near Hollywood, no less.

Arrieta threw the second no-hitter against the Los Angeles Dodgers in 10 days, leading the Cubs to a 2-0 victory Sunday night.

He struck out a season-high 12 and walked one, becoming just the third opposing pitcher to achieve a no-hitter at Dodger Stadium.

"He's starting to create more buzz around him," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "To do it under these circumstances, in this ballpark, against this team, with a pretty good audience, that should pretty much put him on everybody's radar."

With 46,679 in attendance — including his wife and two kids — and a national television audience looking in, Arrieta became the first 17-game winner in the majors this season by throwing the 14th no-hitter in Cubs history.

"It's something that everybody wants,"

he said. "It's something I've wanted for a long time. I've been close on a couple of occasions, and tonight I was just fortunate that everything aligned right."

Last year, Arrieta (17-6) became the first Cubs pitcher since 1950 to take a no-hitter into the seventh inning three times in one season. He tossed a one-hit shutout against Cincinnati last Sept. 16 at Wrigley Field, allowing his first hit to Brandon Phillips with one out in the eighth.

Arrieta had a then career-high 10 wins last season after going 4-2 in nine starts for the Cubs in 2013, when he was acquired from Baltimore that July.

At 29, he's blossoming a little later than some big league pitchers.

"Right now, he's pitching at a different level, and he deserves it," Maddon said. "I don't think I've ever seen anybody work any harder. He has come a long way from Baltimore, where he really had command issues with the fastball but always had good stuff."

Arrieta sensed his time was ending with the Orioles, who had drafted him in 2007 out of Texas Christian and called him up to the majors in 2010. He quickly found a home with the Cubs, who embraced the low-key Texan.

"The comfort level was there from the get-go, so it was a seamless transition," he said. "I came over here and started doing some things I knew I was capable of doing to help me be more consistent. The momentum just continued to roll."

Kris Bryant's two-run homer in the first gave Arrieta a quick boost, and all the offense he would need.

The right-hander was sharp early against the Dodgers, retiring the first seven batters he faced before he got some help toward his no-hitter from the official scorer.

Jerry White charged Starlin Castro with an error when Kike Hernandez reached on a one-hopper hit right at the second baseman in the third, although several players on both sides believed it should have been ruled a hit.

Arrieta thought so, too. "He hit it pretty well. I think (the call) could have gone either way," he said. "I wasn't aware that it was an error until I think an inning or two later. It was kind of out of sight, out of mind. But even if it was a hit, I would have kept the same mindset."

White gave the error after Castro tried to make the play on an in-between hop. The ball bounced off him and rolled away, allowing Hernandez to reach first.

"The ball was hit right at him and he didn't have to move to make the play," White said. "I had no thought even at the time to change it."

Arrieta was undeterred, despite a two-out walk in the sixth to Jimmy Rollins. Arrieta finished strongly, striking out the side in the ninth, when Maddon thought it was a little too quiet in the dugout.

"There was a respectful buzz. Nobody was too loud," the manager said. "Our guys are really a closely knit group."

In the Dodgers' dugout, starter Alex Wood, a 24-year-old with two years in the majors, studied Arrieta.

"He's ahead of almost every hitter," Wood said. "When you get a guy like that who's pumping strikes and has all three of his pitches working well, it's a tough situation."

Making history proved a fitting ending to August for Arrieta, who was 6-0 with a 0.43 ERA in the month, allowing just two earned runs in 42 1-3 innings. He's 11-1 on the road with a 1.76 ERA in 15 starts away from Wrigley Field.

"For those of us who are around Jake all the time, it's not surprising at all," Maddon said. "It's a combination of Jake's skill, his drive and who he is."

Blue Jays complete sweep of struggling Tigers

Associated Press

TORONTO — Edwin Encarnacion homered for the fourth time in two days and Josh Donaldson also connected as Toronto beat struggling Detroit 9-2 to complete a three-game sweep.

Russell Martin and Kevin Pillar each hit a two-run shot for Toronto, which leads the majors with 184 home runs. The AL East leaders had their second straight four-homer game and sixth of the season.

Encarnacion hit three home runs and matched a Blue Jays record with nine RBIs in Saturday's 15-1 rout. His latest drive extended his hitting streak to 25 games, the longest in the majors since a 28-game run by Colorado's Nolan Arenado in 2014.

The home run was Encarnacion's 30th of the season, 11 in August. He has a major league-leading 35 RBIs this month, breaking the club record he shared with Carlos Delgado, who had 34 in June 2003.

Encarnacion has at least one extra-base hit and one RBI in eight consecutive games.

Mark Buehrle (14-6) allowed two runs in six-plus innings as the Blue Jays improved to 21-5 in August, matching the team record for wins in a month. Toronto went 21-9 in May 2014.

Alfredo Simon (11-9) allowed all four Blue Jays homers in five innings as the last-place Tigers lost for the ninth time in 10 games.

Yankees 20, Braves 6: Jacoby Ellsbury hit a three-run homer, and Chase Headley and Stephen Drew each added a two-run shot as New York routed host Atlanta to finish a three-game sweep.

All three homers, which helped build an 8-2 lead, came with two outs. Headley and Drew, who had four hits, both drove in four runs.

After the Braves cut the lead to 8-5, pinch-hitter Alex Rodriguez drove in two runs with a bases-loaded single in the Yankees' nine-run seventh inning.

The U.S. flag at Turner Field flew at half-staff and a moment of silence was observed before the game in memory of Gregory K. Murrey.

Murrey, a Braves season-ticket holder, died after falling from the upper deck to the lower-level seats on Saturday night. He was 60. The Braves displayed a photo of Murrey on the video board during the moment of silence.

Despite the sweep, the Yankees gained no ground on first-place Toronto, which leads New York by 1½ games.

The Braves have lost five straight and 12 of 13. They've dropped nine consecutive interleague games since a win over Boston on June 17.

Cardinals 7, Giants 5: Matt Carpenter, Brandon Moss and Mark Reynolds homered and Yadier Molina drove in two runs as visiting St. Louis beat San Francisco.

Jason Heyward added three hits and drove in a run for the Cardinals, who won for the seventh time in eight games. Greg Garcia also drove in a run.

Mets 5, Red Sox 4: Michael Cuddyer hit a tiebreaking single in the seventh inning as the NL East-leading Mets stopped their five-game home losing streak, averting a sweep by Boston.

Cuddyer kept up his three-week surge since coming off the disabled list, going

3 for 3 with a walk. His go-ahead hit came after Daniel Murphy stole second base with two outs.

Boston slugger David Ortiz lined his 494th home run, moving past Lou Gehrig and Fred McGriff for 27th place on the career list.

Nationals 7, Marlins 4: Jayson Werth homered and drove in three runs, and Clint Robinson added a pinch-hit homer as host Washington had 13 hits and rallied past Miami.

Michael Taylor added two singles and scored twice for Washington, which got hits from all eight position players.

Doug Fister (5-7) pitched two scoreless innings in relief of Stephen Strasburg for the win.

Strasburg was lifted after throwing 60 pitches in four innings with upper back tightness. He gave up four runs on seven hits.

Rangers 6, Orioles 0: Derek Holland struck out every Baltimore batter while throwing a three-hitter for his eighth career shutout, leading host Texas to a three-game sweep.

Holland (2-1), in his third start since coming off the disabled list, matched a career high with 11 strikeouts. He walked none and hit a batter with a pitch. The left-hander struck out each of the Orioles' nine starters at least once, getting Adam Jones and Chris Davis twice.

At 68-61, the Rangers are seven games over .500 for the first time since the end of the 2013 season. Their 68 wins are already one more than all of last year.

The Orioles have lost 10 of 11, falling 5½ games behind the Rangers in the AL wild-

card chase.

Rockies 5, Pirates 0: Jorge De La Rosa pitched into the seventh inning before being ejected, and Ben Paulsen hit a two-run triple as visiting Colorado beat the Pittsburghers.

Rays 3, Royals 2: Brandon Guyer and Kevin Kiermaier homered, as the Tampa Bay bullpen held visiting Kansas City to one hit over five innings.

Twins 7, Astros 5: Ervin Santana struck out 10 to earn his first home win, Eduardo Nunez and Miguel Sano homered as the Twins withstood a ninth-inning rally to beat the visiting Astros.

Indians 9, Angels 2: Abraham Almonte hit his first career grand slam and Josh Tomlin worked into the eighth inning, leading host Cleveland over slumping Los Angeles.

White Sox 6, Mariners 5 (11): White Sox rookie Tyler Saladino drove in the winning run with a single in the 11th inning as host Chicago rallied to beat Seattle.

Brewers 4, Reds 1: Ryan Braun homered and Wily Peralta pitched seven strong innings to help Milwaukee beat visiting Cincinnati.

Athletics 7, Diamondbacks 4 (11): Marcus Semien's two-run single with the bases loaded and two outs in the 11th inning lifted Oakland over host Arizona.

Padres 9, Phillies 4: James Shields pitched seven innings for his first road win since May as visiting San Diego hit three homers in a victory over Philadelphia.



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Skins to start Cousins at QB

Associated Press

ASHBURN, Va. — The Washington Redskins have made a quarterback change: Kirk Cousins will be the starter this season, not Robert Griffin III.

"We feel like at this time, Kirk Cousins gives us the best chance to win," coach Jay Gruden said, unseating Griffin, the 2012 Offensive Rookie of the Year. "It's Kirk's team."

Griffin, who has struggled since tearing his right ACL and MCL in a January 2013 playoff loss to Seattle, was slated to start last Saturday's preseason game at Baltimore before being scratched the previous day in the wake of a concussion suffered on Aug. 20 against Detroit.

Cousins, taken in the fourth round in the same draft that Griffin was chosen second overall, took over and led Washington's starting offense to its first two touchdowns of the preseason.

"It's not so much what somebody didn't do; it's just what Kirk has done. It has really opened our eyes," Gruden said.

Gruden added that Cousins "has taken a giant leap" since being benched in Week 7 of 2014 after committing 11 turnovers in five games.

"There's something powerful about knowing you're believed in, something powerful about knowing where you stand," Cousins said.

With Griffin still in the NFL's concussion protocol program, Gruden opted for Cousins, who was drafted along with Griffin in 2012 and has started nine games when Griffin has been hurt, going 2-7.

Gruden said the team still believes in Griffin, who has been

plagued by injuries since leading the Redskins to the NFC East title.

Cousins will sit out the preseason finale Thursday against Jacksonville, with Colt McCoy playing the entire game.

Bills cut veteran RB Jackson

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Fred Jackson's tenure with the Buffalo Bills is over after the veteran running back, respected team leader and fan favorite was released on Monday.

The decision came only as a mild surprise after the Bills acquired LeSean McCoy in a trade this offseason. But Jackson's release was significant nonetheless because of the blue-collar style and perseverance he displayed during his nine seasons in Buffalo.

General manager Doug Whaley called it a "difficult decision" in a statement released by the team.

"He had an incredible career for this organization for the past 10 years," Whaley said. "We thank Fred for his hard work, dedication and leadership during his tenure with the Buffalo Bills. Fred has inspired the city of Buffalo in a number of ways."

Aside from McCoy, the Bills' depth chart at running back includes Boobie Dixon, Bryce Brown and hard-hitting rookie fifth-round draft pick, Karlos Williams.

The cuts were made two days after Jackson made an impact in what was his final game in Buffalo's 43-19 preseason win over Pittsburgh.

Dixon takes 4th IndyCar title while still grieving

The Associated Press

SONOMA, Calif. — Stefan Wilson stood in a circle of crew members in front of his brother's car, the entire group swathed in T-Shirts commemorating Justin Wilson.

The group spoke softly before Sunday's season finale, then broke by yelling "Justin!" in unison.

Then they stood together at the car as Wilson was honored in a series of pre-race tributes at Sonoma Raceway. There was a video of him, a moment of silence and "God Save the Queen," England's national anthem, played as a tribute.

Finally, the number 25 was written high above the raceway during a flyover.

Then one of Wilson's closest friends went out and won the IndyCar championship and celebrated in the first joyous moment since the British driver was killed a week earlier. Wilson died last Monday night of a head injury suffered at Pocono Raceway a day earlier when a piece of debris from another car struck his helmet.

"We all raced with heavy hearts this weekend," said champion Scott Dixon. "It's been a very tough week. It's such a small community. But Justin would have wanted us to go out and race, and today I gave it my all from when the green flag dropped. Much love to the Wilson family."

Dixon won his fourth title Sunday by winning the season finale to snatch the championship from Juan Pablo Montoya.

He was a fitting winner at the end of a somber week. Dixon remained in Pennsylvania to comfort Wilson's family after the accident. In 2011, he quietly relocated his family for a few months to Florida to support Dan Wheldon's family after he died in the season finale.

As soon as he climbed from the car Sunday, Dixon made mention of Wilson.

"He and Justin were pretty close. I know their families were close," team owner Chip Ganassi said of Dixon.

Dixon was a longshot to win the title after falling 47 points behind Montoya to third in the standings. Montoya led the standings from the season-opener until the final lap of the year. But in a race worth double points, Dixon dominated.

The title went to the New Zealand native based on number of wins: Sunday was Dixon's third of the season, while Montoya has just two.

Dixon and Ganassi celebrated by leaping from the championship stage to crowd surf.

The victory was the 100th for Chip Ganassi Racing, while a Team Penske driver failed to win a championship in the finale for the ninth time since 2002. It also marked Chevrolet's fourth consecutive manufacturer championship since the company returned to IndyCar in 2012.

"I'm shocked," Ganassi said. "We knew we had a car to be at the front, and then a lot of other things had to happen. And they happened."

Indeed, Dixon was third in the standings as he began the race and everyone assumed it was Montoya's title to lose.

Team Penske was in trouble from the midway point of the race when Montoya hit teammate Will Power. It sent the Colombian to pit lane for repairs and he was mired in the middle of the pack for the bulk of the race.

"It doesn't matter what happened," Montoya said. "We had a few ways to win the championship and we just threw it away. We didn't close it."

ACC eager to showcase league depth

Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — The Atlantic Coast Conference recently has produced a Heisman Trophy winner, a No. 1 overall draft pick, a BCS champion and a playoff team.

OK, that wasn't the whole league, but just one school — Florida State.

This is shaping up as a pivotal year for a conference that wants to prove it's more than just the Seminoles and then everybody else.

Florida State doesn't look quite as much like the group that won the final BCS championship and reached the first College Football Playoff behind 2013 Heisman winner — and current Tampa Bay quarterback — Jameis Winston.

Defensive back Jalen Ramsey says he's often asked how the Seminoles will remain at a high level with significant roster turnover.

He said his standard response is, "We're Florida State. We're going to hold ourselves to a high standard every single year."

Maybe, but this season could help determine whether the Seminoles' recent rising tide lifted the rest of the league — or if the ACC as a whole rises and falls with how Florida State performs.

"There's several teams in this conference that I think have a chance to win the league," Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said. "I think we're one of them."

So do the voters. They made his Tigers the league's preseason favorite and picked sophomore quarterback DeShaun Watson as preseason player of the year.

And maybe Georgia Tech will continue its stealthy climb with returning starter Justin Thomas orchestrating Paul Johnson's triple-option offense to another Coastal Division title.

Perhaps North Carolina — with 10 offensive starters returning and a national championship-winning coordinator leading a defensive overhaul — will finally break through to its first league title game.

Or maybe a legitimate contender will vault from the pack, much like Duke in 2013 and Boston College in the late 2000s.

Some things to watch this season:

New faces: Some big names have arrived in the ACC this season. Gene Chizik, who was fired by Auburn a year after he led the Tigers to the 2010 national title, has resurfaced as the defensive coordinator at North Carolina. Everett Golson, who led Notre Dame to the BCS championship game in the 2012 season, is a graduate transfer at Florida State and is fighting for the starting job.

Familiar faces: The ACC returns its leading rusher, its top passer and its top two scorers from 2014. Reigning player of the year James Conner rushed for 1,765 yards and 26 touchdowns for Pittsburgh last season while Miami's Brad Kaaya had an efficiency rating of 145.9 as a freshman. Conner averaged two touchdowns per game while Florida State kicker Roberto Aguayo was responsible for 136 points. And there's a case to be made that another player — Ramsey — is the league's best. Said Ramsey: "I feel no one has the résumé I have."

Coastal crapshoot: Picking a champion in the Coastal Division has been a fool's errand — the voters haven't nailed it since they correctly chose Virginia Tech in 2011. In the previous two years, a total of 232 ballots were cast at the league's preseason media days and only one picked a winner — the one who chose Georgia Tech last year. That could be a bad omen for the Yellow Jackets, this year's favorite. Quipped Johnson: "For once, I hope they got it right."

Hot seat: This could be a make-or-break year for a couple of Coastal Division coaches. Mike London is 23-38 in five years at Virginia, and though the Cavaliers improved to 5-7 in 2014, they've only had one winning season under him.

Powerhouse Pac-12 confident it can contend

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — When Gary Andersen left Big Ten powerhouse Wisconsin for Oregon State and the Pac-12 last December, the veteran coach made a move that would have been unthinkable — or at least a bit illogical — just a few seasons ago.

Andersen knew exactly where he was going and what he was doing.

It's not because the Big Ten is declining, he said. The Pac-12 is on the rise, and it just might be the peak of college football this fall.

"I absolutely have felt a huge swing in the last two years, and that's me being in the Midwest for two years, that the Pac-12 has gained a ton of respect nationally," said Andersen, the league's only new coach this year. "The Pac-12 has gotten better and better and better."

Indeed, the West Coast's premier conference is stacked with

elite talent in wealthy programs committed to contending for national championships as it celebrates the 100-year anniversary of its official formation this fall.

Andersen couldn't resist the chance to move back out West, even though he'll have to compete with the archrival Oregon Ducks, who reached the national title game last season behind Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Marcus Mariota.

But almost nobody gets an easy ride these days in the Pac-12, which has amazing players and no clear-cut title favorite.

"A lot of the talent that's been out West that maybe had left the western part of the country, going somewhere else, is now staying out here," Arizona coach Rich Rodriguez said. "We're one of them, but the other schools in our division and in our league are doing it. So I think the Pac-12 South is probably going to be better this year than it's ever been. The Pac-12 will be better than it's ever been, and I think it's going to stay that way into the future."