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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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DOD: Afghanistan becoming less secure

BY HEATH DRUZIN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Security in Afghanistan is deteriorating, violence is increasing and the Islamic State group has become “operationally emergent” in the country’s east, though insurgents have not been able to exert lasting control over any major population centers, the Pentagon says in a new report.

The document, titled “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” comes at a crucial time, as it assesses the Afghan forces and the Taliban in the past summer fighting season, the first time coalition troops were largely absent from the battlefield.

“In their first fighting season against an Afghan-led counterinsurgency, the Taliban-led insurgent threat remains resilient,” says the report, which looked at the period from June 1 to Nov. 30. “Fighting has been

nearly continuous since February 2015.”

Afghan forces, which the U.S. funds at more than \$4 billion annually, took casualties at a record rate, which could have been partially mitigated through better equipment and medical evacuation capabilities, the report says. The Taliban also suffered losses.

“We said from the beginning that this was going to be a tough year,” said Col. Michael Lawhorn, spokesman for the U.S. military coalition.

While violence is up around the country, high-profile attacks in the capital, Kabul, saw a dramatic rise — by 27 percent over the same period in 2014, according to the report. Afghans’ attitudes about their own security are concurrently becoming more pessimistic. The report found that only 28 percent considered security in their area to be good, down from 45 percent in 2013.

“The [Afghan security

forces] are generally capable and effective at protecting the major population centers, or not allowing the Taliban to maintain their hold for a prolonged period of time,” the report says. “At the same time, the Taliban have proven capable of taking rural areas and contesting key terrain in areas such as Helmand while continuing to conduct high-profile attacks in Kabul.”

Echoing recent statements by military officials, the report found logistics, air power and operational planning to be major shortcomings of the Afghan forces. It criticized them for being too focused on checkpoints and unable to hold territory once they regain it.

“What we’d like to see them do is come off the checkpoints a bit and be more mobile,” Lawhorn said.

Gen. Dawlat Waziri, spokesman for the Afghan Defense Ministry, rejected the assertion that the Afghan military is

too reliant on checkpoints, saying that between Tuesday and Wednesday alone there were 13 operations in 12 provinces. He also said it was unrealistic to expect Afghan forces to hold every scrap of the largely rural, mountainous country.

“Afghanistan has 34 provinces and about 400 districts, so we can’t put checkpoints or military posts everywhere in the country to secure the area,” Waziri said.

While the report focuses on the ability of Afghan forces to fight the Taliban, it says peace talks would be the most effective way to end the war.

The report identifies the Islamic State group as an emerging threat in the country, citing two recent attacks, one on a U.N. vehicle and another on Afghan forces. A Stars and Stripes reporter recently witnessed fighting between Afghan troops and Islamic State fighters in the eastern province of Nangarhar.

Carter in Iraq seeking new ways to battle Islamic State

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Defense Secretary Ash Carter met with Iraqi leaders and his commanders Wednesday on an unannounced war zone visit aimed at broadening U.S. assistance to Iraq to defeat the Islamic State group.

The Obama administration has been talking for days about “accelerating” the fight against the Islamic State group, but that effort is complicated because there is some Iraqi reluctance to having a greater U.S. presence in the country.

Those concerns could affect whether Iraqi leaders agree to allow the U.S. to send Apache

attack helicopters and more troops into the fight.

At the start of a meeting with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Carter said the U.S. wants to help Iraq as it fights the militants in Ramadi and later in Mosul.

“Everything we do ... here is subject to the approval of the sovereign Iraqi government,” Carter said. “And I also wanted to emphasize to you, the respect for sovereignty and for Iraq’s territorial sovereignty is a principle that the United States strongly supports in every context.”

Abadi said he believes Iraqi forces are making progress.

“I think we are on the verge

of breaking the back of Daesh,” he said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group.

The Apache helicopters, said Army Col. Steve Warren, would not be used until al-Abadi requests them.

Speaking to reporters traveling with him, Carter said the U.S. wants to use the Apache helicopters when they can “make a distinctive difference and have a strategic effect.”

He said he plans to discuss the offer with Iraqi leaders, adding that al-Abadi has said he is willing to consider it and any decision is up to the Iraqi government.

A senior U.S. official said the

U.S. has been making preparations and will be ready at any moment to dispatch the Apaches when requested. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, so spoke on condition of anonymity.

Warren, a U.S. military spokesman, said the prime minister has to balance the military options with his political environment in the country.

“It’s kind of hard to inflict support upon somebody,” said Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, commander of the Joint Task Force fighting the Islamic State group. “The kind of support we provide has to be consistent with the way Iraqi security forces fight.”

Schools struggle with threats

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — When it comes to assessing threats, New York City and Los Angeles schools likely have more experience than most other districts in the country.

But their reactions were dramatically different Tuesday to the same threat of a large-scale jihadi attack with guns and bombs — LA canceled its classes while New York dismissed the warning as a hoax.

The divergent responses from the nation's two biggest K-12 public school systems reflected what many in school security know: that deciding whether a threat is credible is hardly a mathematical process and the stakes in staying open or closing are high. It is one that school district officials around the country have weighed heavily in the wake of school shootings and threats.

Across the nation, small and large districts regularly encounter the challenge of deciphering threats, complicated today by sophisticated technology that can make them harder to trace.

Even when a threat is determined to be a hoax, the consequences can be severe, with the safety of thousands of children, millions of dollars in school funding and the message each decision sends on the line.

It's extremely rare for a major U.S. city to close all its schools because of a threat and it reflected the lingering unease in Southern California following the attack that killed 14 people at a holiday luncheon two weeks ago in San Bernardino.

"If this was not ISIS, not a terror organization, they're nonetheless watching," Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., said Wednesday on MSNBC's "Meet

the Press Daily." "And if they come to the conclusion that they can literally mail it in, call it in and disrupt large cities, they're going to take advantage of that."

A 2014 analysis by National School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland-based consulting firm, found a 158 percent increase in the number of threats schools received over the previous year. Nearly 10 percent of the threats closed school for at least one day.

Los Angeles officials announced Tuesday evening that schools would reopen Wednesday, with all city police officers ordered to be in uniform and extra patrol at schools.

Officials in LA defended the move to shut down its entire district, with that city's police chief dismissing the criticism as "irresponsible."

Fed lifts key interest rate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve is raising interest rates after seven years of record lows. But it's signaling that further rate hikes will likely be made slowly as the economy strengthens further and muted inflation rises.

The Fed's move to lift its key rate by a quarter-point to a range of 0.25 percent to 0.5 percent ends an extraordinary seven-year period of near-zero rates that began at the depths of the 2008 financial crisis. Consumers and businesses could now face modestly higher rates on some loans.

The Fed's action reflects its belief that the economy has finally regained enough strength 6½ years after the Great Recession ended to withstand higher borrowing rates.

But the statement announcing the rate hike said the committee expects "only gradual increases" in rates going forward.

Rates on mortgages and car loans aren't expected to rise much soon. The Fed's benchmark rate doesn't directly affect them. Long-term mortgages, for example, tend to track 10-year U.S. Treasury yields, which will likely stay low as long as inflation does and investors keep buying Treasuries.

But rates on some other loans, like credit cards and home equity credit lines, will likely rise, though probably only slightly as long as the Fed's rate hikes remain modest.

Some analysts expect the Fed to raise rates at every other meeting in 2016, for a total of four quarter-point moves. Others think that after Wednesday's hike, the Fed could wait until June before raising rates again.

The central bank's target for the federal funds rate — the interest that banks charge each other — has been at a record low between zero and 0.25 percent since December 2008. At the time, Fed officials led by Ben Bernanke were struggling to contain a devastating financial crisis that triggered the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Cruz-Rubio feud at center stage

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Sens. Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio clashed sharply over national security and immigration in Tuesday's Republican presidential debate, thrusting their evolving feud to the forefront of the GOP race. Front-runner Donald Trump stood firmly behind his provocative call for banning Muslims from the United States, saying, "We are not talking about religion; we are talking about security."

For former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, the fifth GOP debate was an opportunity to find his footing after months of uneven performances. He appeared more comfortable than in previous debates in taking on Trump, though it's unclear whether his stronger showing will change the trajectory of his sluggish campaign.

The prime-time debate was the first for Republicans since the attacks in Paris and San Ber-

nardino, Calif., which heightened fears of terrorism in the United States. The attacks have ignited a political debate about President Barack Obama's campaign to defeat the Islamic State in the Middle East and the nation's security posture in preventing attacks in the U.S.

Trump's call for temporarily banning Muslims from the U.S. — a proposal roundly criticized by his rivals — dominated much of the discussion heading into the debate. Bush dismissed the idea as unserious, saying, "Donald is great at the one-liners, but he's a chaos candidate and he'd be a chaos president."

In a moment that might help ease anxiety among Republican leaders, Trump pledged he would not run as an independent. If he should lose the nomination, some fear he would make such a move, possibly preventing the nominee from defeating the Democratic challenger. "I am totally committed to the Republican Party," Trump said.

He was largely spared from criticism by Cruz and Rubio, who said they understood why Trump had raised the idea of banning Muslims. Instead, they focused on each other, engaging in lengthy debates over their differences on national security and immigration, among the most contentious issues in the Republican primary.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who has been on the rise in New Hampshire, sought to assert himself in the national security discussions. He called for a no-fly zone over Syria and vowed to shoot down a Russian plane if it were to violate that space.

The debate's focus on national security was a detriment for retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, who has struggled on complex international matters. Also on the main stage Tuesday night were former business executive Carly Fiorina, Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul.

Badgers' Ryan announces retirement

Associated Press

The methodical brand of basketball that Bo Ryan ran at Wisconsin rarely surprised opponents as it piled up wins and two trips to the Final Four over the last two seasons.

Ryan saved the biggest shocker of his career for his final game.

The 67-year-old coach abruptly retired on Tuesday night, 12 games into the season after his Badgers beat Texas A&M-Corpus Christi two weeks before Big Ten play begins.

No farewell tour. No muss, no fuss.

Just the way he wanted it. Ryan had discussed retirement for months, but never offered any specific timetable.

"It is so emotional right now, and I'm trying to hold this together," Ryan said as he began to wrap up his remarks.

He had a prepared speech ready to go, printed on a white piece of paper, but decided at the last second to set it aside and speak from the heart in his last news conference as head coach.

"Can't put that into words," Ryan said. "I can't do that. I've got to tell you how I feel."

It was classic Bo — rarely shy to hold back, whether it was about a call, his team or the future.

And it's in part what started the "Will he or won't he?" retire drama in the first place.

Ryan, who turns 68 on Sunday, said in June this would be his last season. He had told athletic director Barry Alvarez of his plans after the Final Four in April, but Alvarez advised him to give it some time, and not to make a decision right after the end of the season.

At a charity golf event in August, Ryan left the door open to return.

In making his announcement on Tuesday, Ryan revealed another factor in the timing. He said he would have retired in June, but associate head coach Greg Gard's father had just been diagnosed with brain cancer.

Ryan said the demands on Gard's time to fly around the country meeting with doctors and helping his dad put his retirement on the back burner. The elder Gard died on Oct. 30.

Ryan later talked to Alvarez. He said that he came to a decision in recent weeks that the semester break would be a good time to step down.

Gard was named the interim head coach by Alvarez.

"Every coach would like their top assistant to be the coach," Ryan said after the 64-49 victory in his final game.

Gard is considered one of the top assistants in the game. He has worked with Ryan for 20 seasons, including 14-plus years in Madison.

He still has a tough act to follow.

With 364 victories, Ryan is Wisconsin's winningest coach.

Ryan finished with a career mark of 747-233, good for 27th on the NCAA career wins list when counting successful tenures at Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Division III Wisconsin-Platteville. He won four national titles at Platteville.

But it's in the Big Ten where Ryan especially made his mark with 14 straight NCAA appearances and seven conference championships. In 2014-15, his final full season, Wisconsin finished a school record 36-4 and advanced to the NCAA title game, losing to Duke.

Those squads relied on upperclassmen and defense in an era of one-of-done headliners. Ryan molded offensive stars, for sure, like Sam Dekker and 2014-15 national player of the year Frank Kaminsky, but players knew they had to play defense and play with smarts to earn time.

"Thank you Coach Ryan for molding me into a young man," Dekker, who is now a rookie with the Houston Rockets, posted on Twitter. Dekker left after his junior season.

"Wish I could argue with you one more time," Dekker wrote. "All love to Pops!!"

Ryan drew national criticism in 2012 when he tried to restrict forward Jarrod Uthoff from transferring from Wisconsin to another Big Ten school. Uthoff ended up transferring anyway to his home state Iowa Hawkeyes after redshirting for a season.

Ryan could certainly be brusque. He tended to have a relatively quiet sideline demeanor during games, but wasn't shy to express his displeasure with calls.

Ryan seemed to be in his element especially at practice, where he loved to teach. Off the court, he could be a charmer and command a room with his stories.

A native of the Philadelphia suburb of Chester, Ryan still had a hint of a Philly accent and street-smart persona even after all these years in Midwest.

He considered it a joy to be able to lead the Badgers six months longer than he had anticipated.

"But I knew, I knew the energy level ... the speaking, the traveling, the trying to do other things, to help other people — I enjoy doing it, but the thing was, I felt it was time," said Ryan, his eyes appearing to well up with tears. "But I couldn't make the decision at the time."

That time finally came on Tuesday.

Freshman leads Duke past Georgia Southern

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — No. 7 Duke won't have its best big man for a while. The Blue Devils do have freshman Brandon Ingram, and that was more than enough to beat Georgia Southern on Tuesday night.

Ingram had season highs of 26 points and 14 rebounds, leading Duke to a 99-65 victory over Georgia Southern.

Grayson Allen added 18 points, Matt Jones had 16 and Derryck Thornton finished with 15 for the Blue Devils (9-1) in their first game without high-energy forward Amile Jefferson.

"Everybody was asked to pick it up some," Ingram said. "There was an opportunity out there to get more rebounds. ... We had to go after it."

Coach Mike Krzyzewski said after the game that Jefferson, who averages a double-double, broke his right foot during practice and is out indefinitely, but does not need surgery.

Tookie Brown scored 20 points and Mike Hughes added 14 for Georgia Southern (3-5), which has lost two straight and five of seven.

No. 22 UCLA 89, Louisiana-Lafayette 80: Bryce Alford scored a season-high 27 points, and short-handed UCLA posted its fifth consecutive victory.

UCLA (8-3) was without starting center Thomas Welsh, out with a stomach virus, and reserve Prince Ali, who bruised his

left knee against Gonzaga on Saturday night.

Shawn Long had 26 points and 16 rebounds for Louisiana-Lafayette (3-5), which fell to 0-5 on the road this season.

No. 23 Cincinnati 75, Norfolk State 59: Farad Cobb matched his season high with 20 points for host Cincinnati, and Gary Clark added 19.

The Bearcats (9-2) had dropped two of three, including a home-court loss to Butler and a 65-55 defeat at No. 10 Xavier on Saturday. They were sloppy in the first half before pulling away.

Norfolk State's Jeff Short came into the game averaging 18.7 points in the last six games, but had a tough time finding shots against one of the country's toughest defenses.

Monmouth 83, Georgetown 68: Je'lon Hornbeak scored 18 points, going 15 of 16 from the line, and visiting Monmouth upset Georgetown for the program's first win over a Big East opponent.

Monmouth (7-3) got contributions all over the floor — Micah Seaborne, Deon Jones and Collin Stewart all scored 13 points and Justin Robinson added 12 points. The Hawks shot 50 percent (10 of 20) beyond the arc and outrebounded Georgetown 38-32.

James, Cavs top Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — LeBron James scored 24 points and Kevin Love returned to Boston to score 20 with eight rebounds on Tuesday night, helping the Cavaliers beat the Celtics 89-77 in an uneventful rematch of last season's bruising — but one-sided — first-round playoff series.

It was Cleveland's first trip back to the new Boston Garden since Love's shoulder was yanked out of the socket by Boston's Kelly Olynyk in the finale of the Cavaliers' four-game sweep. Jae Crowder, who took a punch in the jaw from J.R. Smith in the series, scored 14 for the Celtics.

"Time heals all wounds," said Love, who had no exchange with Olynyk during the game. "I'll remember my first playoff run and that fourth game being particularly tough. But as time goes on it'll be another game against a really good team."

Timofey Mozgov had nine points and a season-high 10 rebounds, scoring seven with five boards in the third quarter when Cleveland turned a five-point deficit into a 10-point lead. The Cavaliers have won three in a row since losing three straight to start the month.

Avery Bradley scored 17 points for Boston, which was back home for the first time since nearly ending the Warriors' unbeaten start.

Nuggets 112, Timberwolves 100: At Minneapolis, Randy Foye scored 19 points, and Denver picked up its sixth win in seven games.

Kenneth Faried added 19 points and 10 rebounds, Will Barton had 14 points,

seven boards and five assists, and the Nuggets shot 56 percent against the porous Timberwolves defense. Foye broke out of a season-long slump to hit 5 of 6 3-pointers, and the Nuggets hit 10 of 18 from deep as a team.

Zach LaVine had 20 points and five assists and Andrew Wiggins scored 23 points for the Timberwolves.

Kings 107, Rockets 97: Sacramento star DeMarcus Cousins' manager was ejected for slapping at Houston guard Jason Terry during the Kings' home win.

Trailing the play on a dunk by Sacramento's Ben McLemore, Terry put his hand out to slow down as he neared fans sitting along the baseline. Andrew Rogers, Cousins' manager, slapped at Terry's arm. Terry stopped, turned around and started to step toward Rogers, who was then ejected from his seat.

James Harden had 33 points for Houston.

Lakers 113, Bucks 95: Kobe Bryant had 22 points and six assists as host Los Angeles beat the Bucks in Milwaukee's first game since ending Golden State's 24-0 start to the season.

D'Angelo Russell had 19 points and seven assists as the Lakers took a 22-point lead in the third quarter and cruised to their second victory in 15 games, improving to 4-21 in Bryant's final season.

Michael Carter-Williams scored 19 points for the Bucks, who played without leading scorer Greg Monroe in their first game since snapping the Warriors' 28-game winning streak dating to last season.



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Manning set to practice

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Peyton Manning was set to return to practice Wednesday for the first time in a month, but he'll be a sideline spectator again Sunday when Brock Osweiler makes his fifth consecutive start Sunday at Pittsburgh.

The Denver Broncos said coach Gary Kubiak met with his QBs on Tuesday and laid out his plan for the week.

Manning had a trio of throwing sessions indoors and away from his teammates last week after he had his hard cast and then a walking boot removed from his left foot the previous week.

Manning stood on the sideline Sunday after skipping Denver's trips to Chicago and San Diego and watching the Broncos win over New England from inside the locker room area. He has been dealing with a torn plantar fascia along with sore ribs and an aching throwing shoulder.

The Broncos are 3-1 in Osweiler's starts and 7-2 when Manning starts, although Denver has struggled to find the end zone

no matter who's taking the snaps.

The Broncos have gone seven quarters without an offensive touchdown. They settled for four field goals Sunday when they wasted an historical effort by the league's top defense — holding the Raiders to minus-12 yards in the first half — in losing 15-12.

Denver's eight-game winning streak over the Raiders ended despite allowing just 126 yards of offense, including 27 yards on 24 rushes.

Osweiler completed a career-best 35 of 51 passes for 308 yards, his first 300-yard game, but he was sacked five times by Khalil Mack and several receivers dropped on-target passes.

In roughly 17 quarters, Osweiler has been sacked 17 times, including once for a safety Sunday.

Manning threw a league-high 17 interceptions in his nine starts, including four against Kansas City on Nov. 15, when he had a career-worst 0.0 passer rating on the same day he broke Brett Favre's NFL record for career passing yards.

Kubiak pulled him in the third quarter that day and then made the switch to Osweiler the following week. Manning went to see noted orthopedist Dr. Robert Anderson in Charlotte, N.C.

Anderson put Manning in a cast for a week and then a walking boot for several more days while putting his rehab on hold.

Two weeks ago Manning said Anderson had no answers for him when he asked how long he'd be sidelined or when he might be able to return. But Manning has made enough progress to get back on the field.

There's still a possibility he could return to the starting lineup either against Cincinnati on Dec. 28 or San Diego on Jan. 3. Both of those are home games.

The Broncos ran for an average of 161 yards in Osweiler's first three starts, nearly twice the production they got on the ground when Manning was in the lineup. At 25, Osweiler is much more athletic and mobile than Manning, who's nearing his 40th birthday.

Avs blank Chicago, end Kane's streak at 26

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Semyon Varlamov stopped 29 shots for his first shutout of the season, leading the Colorado Avalanche to a 3-0 victory over Chicago on Tuesday night and snapping Blackhawks star Patrick Kane's points streak at 26 games.

Matt Duchene had a goal and an assist for the Avalanche, who won their third straight to cap a perfect four-day road trip to Nashville, St. Louis and Chicago. Zach Redmond scored in the second period and Gabriel Landeskog added an empty-netter with 1:57 left.

Varlamov was sharp when needed in earning his 19th career shutout and third against Chicago. But for most of the game, Colorado limited Chicago's chances — and Kane.

Kane's franchise-record streak was the longest since Mats Sundin's 30-game stretch in 1992-93. The Chicago right wing had 16 goals and 24 assists during the run, and has points in all but three of the Blackhawks' 32 games.

Stars 5, Blue Jackets 1: Tyler Seguin broke open a tight game with two second-period goals 30 seconds apart in host Dallas' victory over Columbus.

Kari Lehtonen improved to 11-1-0 by making 34 saves. He also notched his third assist of the season on Seguin's first goal.

Blues 4, Jets 3: Paul Stastny scored the tiebreaking goal with 3:38 left in regulation, and St. Louis fought back from a two-goal deficit to defeat host Winnipeg.

Sharks 3, Canadiens 1: Joe Pavelski scored once and added an assist as San Jose beat host Montreal to snap a six-game skid.

Rangers 4, Oilers 2: Rick Nash and Mats Zuccarello each had a goal and an assist as host New York ended Edmonton's six-game winning streak.

Dylan McIlrath scored his first NHL goal and Jesper Fast added an empty-netter in the final seconds to help the Rangers snap a three-game slide.

Flyers 4, Hurricanes 3 (OT): Shayne Gostisbehere scored 1:42 into overtime, lifting Philadelphia past Jeff Skinner and visiting Carolina.

Flames 2, Predators 1 (OT): Kris Russell scored 1:23 into overtime and Calgary beat Nashville for its sixth straight victory.

TJ Brodie also scored for Calgary, which improved to an NHL-best 8-1 in overtime and won for just the fourth time away from home this season.

Wild 6, Canucks 2: Thomas Vanek scored one of Minnesota's three power-play goals and added three assists, leading the Wild to a romp over road-weary Vancouver.

Devils 2, Sabres 0: Cory Schneider made 25 saves to earn his second shutout of the season and lead New Jersey past host Buffalo.

Panthers 5, Islanders 1: Reilly Smith, Aleksander Barkov and Aaron Ekblad all scored in the second period to lead visiting Florida.

Lightning 5, Maple Leafs 4 (OT): Vladislav Namestnikov scored 2:01 into overtime to give visiting Tampa Bay the win.

Nikita Kucherov, Anton Stralman, Mike Blunden and Jonathan Marchessault had Tampa Bay's goals in regulation. Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 33 shots.

Cards eye NFC West title, bye

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — After a long weekend off, the Arizona Cardinals went back to work on Tuesday, preparing for their last regular-season road game, a trip to Philadelphia with a chance to clinch the NFC West title and perhaps a first-round bye in the playoffs.

The game has been flexed to Sunday night, the Cardinals' fifth prime-time appearance in the last eight games.

"We know what's at stake, no matter what time we're playing," Arizona safety Tony Jefferson said.

The Cardinals (11-2), winners of seven in a row, can clinch the NFC West crown if they beat the Eagles or Seattle loses to Cleveland. If Arizona wins and Green Bay loses at Oakland, the Cardinals clinch the NFC's No. 2 seed and the first-round bye that goes with it.

With three games to play, the Cardinals are three games ahead of Seattle and two up on the Packers. They trail undefeated

Carolina by two games for the NFC's No. 1 seed.

With the Eagles game now scheduled for an 8:30 p.m. ET kickoff, the Cardinals will leave Arizona on Saturday, rather than Friday, as was originally planned.

"The biggest difference will be the next week," coach Bruce Arians said, "because instead of getting back in bed by 10 (Sunday night), we won't get back until 5 in the morning (on Monday). So the coaching staff will go straight to the office. It just puts more burden on that."

After the trip to Philadelphia, Arizona concludes its regular season with home games against Green Bay and Seattle.

Fourteen-year NFL veteran outside linebacker Dwight Freeney said he's been talking to younger players about how critical this time of year is to a team with big aspirations.

"This is December ball," Freeney said. "Championships are kind of built from here on. It's all momentum. You've got to start building momentum at some point

and December is when you really start doing that. You want to be playing your best ball in December and January."

Inside linebacker Deone Bucannon said the players aren't thinking too much about what might be clinched on Sunday night.

"It's big-time but if you get wrapped up in that then you'll kind of lose focus," he said. "I feel like as a team we are on the same page. We want to win as many games as possible no matter what it is, because every game is a big game. It's the NFL. I feel like that's how we see it in this locker room. That's how our leaders are seeing it, and I'm going to follow suit."

Arians gave the players four days off after the Cardinals escaped with a 23-20 win over Minnesota on Thursday night.

The coach said he watched a few football games on Sunday.

"Slept a lot, recovering from Saturday," Arians said, smiling. "Father-son golf tournament, it was rough."

Rams' finale may mark end of 21-year run

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — The Rams play their season home finale on Thursday night against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. If the past is any indication, what could be the franchise's swan song in St. Louis will be lightly attended.

If this is the end of the 21-year run, fans can always remember the "Greatest Show on Turf," a Super Bowl championship, the handful of years that Mike Martz referred to as a "special place in time." When Dick Vermeil came to town a few months ago, he got the rock star treatment on the Lambert International Airport concourse, which prompted a tinge of regret for his long-ago decision to abruptly retire not long after Mike Jones' title-saving tackle against the Titans in the title game.

"I didn't spend any time here after the game, which was my mistake," Vermeil said. "From the minute I get off the airplane, it's amazing how loyal these people are."

It's often said that St. Louis is a baseball town thanks to the steady success of

the Cardinals, though the Edward Jones Dome rocked on game day when the Rams were a factor. That hasn't been the case for some time.

Those who still show up booed Jeff Fisher during player introductions before Sunday's victory over the Lions, showing frustration with a coach who has yet to deliver a playoff contender. They also enthusiastically chanted "Gurley! Gurley!" as the Rams ended a five-game skid that gave them another irrelevant December.

The Rams have had just four winning seasons in the city, going 56-24 during a glorious stretch from 1999-2003. They're just 67-121-1 since then, so it's tough to blame a once-fervent fan base that has lost heart and gone sour on owner Stan Kroenke, who wants to leave town and has been conspicuously absent from the public eye since a potential move back to Southern California started looking more and more like a real possibility.

Highlights and (mostly) lowlights of 21 years in St. Louis:

The honeymoon: The Rams arrived to much fanfare from the West Coast

in 1995. A city without an NFL team for seven years was so desperate to get back in the game that construction began on a domed stadium before the move was approved.

Vermeil's team: The Rams were 4-12 the year before the franchise won its lone Super Bowl. The turnaround began when Vermeil was ordered to cut back on ultra-long practices and players responded.

Good deals/bad deals: Future seven-time Pro Bowl offensive tackle Orlando Pace was well worth the package of picks the Rams sent New England to get the first overall selection in 2007. Marshall Faulk also was a bargain in 1999, with second- and fifth-round picks going to Indianapolis. Largesse received from the Robert Griffin III trade with Washington included cornerback Janoris Jenkins, defensive tackle Michael Brockers and other stalwarts. Running back Lawrence Phillips was the No. 6 overall pick in the 1996 draft and he is currently accused of fatally stabbing his cellmate in a California prison.