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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Carter: US mission into Syria a success

Associated Press

IRBIL, Iraq — Defense Secretary Ash Carter says the first mission by a new team of special operations forces into Syria was successful in identifying Syrian Arab fighters the coalition can work with to oust Islamic State militants from their self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa.

Speaking after meeting with several members of the team and commanders, Carter said the U.S. commandos went into Syria to “identify and link up with local forces, especially Syrian Arab forces that were willing to fight ISIL (an acronym for the Islamic State group) but needed our help.”

He said it was encouraging to find some, and the mission suggests there are more out there who would be willing to strike Raqqa.

“I think the point is that it bore the fruit that we hoped it would,” Carter told reporters Thursday as he wrapped up meetings with troops, commanders and Kurdish leaders in Irbil. It was the first time he has spoken openly about the mission in Syria.

A senior U.S. defense official said the team members were very positive about their meetings and said they believe the Syrians are interested in going after the Islamic State group.

The administration an-

nounced in late October that President Barack Obama had approved sending as many as 50 special operations troops to Syria on the first open-ended mission by U.S. ground forces in that country.

Initially, U.S. officials only acknowledged that a small advance party of special operations forces had gone into Syria and had returned.

But on Monday, Obama referred to the commandos during his comments at the Pentagon after meeting with his national security team there.

He said the special operations forces had started their work helping local groups cut off Islamic State supply lines

and put pressure on Raqqa. Carter had declined to discuss the mission.

Carter was in Irbil Thursday as part of a weeklong trip to the region, and his second day in Iraq. He met with the president of Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani, and with coalition commanders, and later met with some of the special operations team and had dinner with troops.

He said Barzani assured him that Kurdish forces will participate in the effort to encircle and retake Mosul, which is under the control of the Islamic State group, in a mission that is months away.

Militant offensive in northern Iraq shows group’s resilience

The Washington Post

IRBIL, Iraq — American-led airstrikes killed at least 180 Islamic State fighters as local Kurdish forces scrambled to repel a bold, multipronged assault by the militants, U.S. and Iraqi officials said Thursday.

The four coordinated attacks by at least 300 heavily armed militants kicked off the most intense fighting that northern Iraq has seen this year, illustrating the extremist group’s continued potency despite a yearlong air campaign by the United States and its allies. It is an indication of the challenges that Iraqi forces and their U.S. backers will face as they seek to reclaim Mosul and other areas under Islamic State control in Iraq and Syria.

Brig. Gen. Mark Odom, the top U.S. military official in northern Iraq, said U.S. and allied aircraft launched a 17-hour aerial attack in response to the

offensive against Iraqi Kurdish security forces, known as the peshmerga.

The assault began at about 4 p.m. Wednesday, targeting at least four positions along the front line north and east of Mosul that the peshmerga have held for months. One site, which was hit by a barrage of artillery fire, was a base used by Turkish troops training local forces.

U.S. officials said the militants advanced with an array of weaponry, including car bombs, vehicles mounted with machine guns, armored bulldozers and mortars. While most of the fighters surged toward the peshmerga positions from Mosul, which has been under Islamic State control since June 2014, a smaller number had previously infiltrated the Kurdish fighters’ front line, the officials said.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter, who met with Iraqi Kurdish leaders during a pre-

viously scheduled visit to Irbil on Thursday, said the outcome of the fighting reflected the effectiveness of Kurdish forces, especially when backed by U.S. and allied air power.

But the attack also demonstrates the resilience of the Islamic State group, which retains the ability to launch large-scale operations that threaten to overwhelm local forces on the ground.

The fighting in northern Iraq comes as President Barack Obama struggles to defend his policy — called feeble by some critics in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Calif. — and his handling of the war in Syria, where Russia’s new air campaign has added to the complexity of an already tangled conflict.

Hemin Hawrami, a Kurdish official, said at least seven Kurdish fighters were killed, including two senior commanders. A U.S. defense offi-

cial, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the military operations of a partner, said at least 18 peshmerga fighters were killed.

“This was the hardest punch ISIL had thrown since this summer, and the peshmerga defeated them,” said Col. Steve Warren, a U.S. military spokesman.

The Islamic State, strengthened by confiscated weapons and foreign fighters, remains dug in across much of Iraq and Syria, frustrating the United States and a raft of allies who seek to defeat it. In recent months, the Pentagon has rolled out new military measures that are aimed to bolster the U.S. strategy, which relies on local forces rather than American troops to do ground combat.

Odom described the assault as a “spoiling attack” by the Islamic State at a time when the group is under pressure from intensified airstrikes and partner ground operations.

Special ops team forced out of Libya by militia

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A U.S. special operations team dispatched to Libya to work with government forces was forced out of the country on Monday by members of a local militia, U.S. Africa Command said on Friday.

The deployment of a small number of U.S. forces to Libya was part of an ongoing effort to assist the Libyan government, AFRICOM said.

“What I can tell you is that with the concurrence of Libyan officials, U.S. military personnel traveled to Libya on Dec. 14 to foster relationships and enhance communication with their counterparts in the Libyan National Army,” said Lt. Cmdr. Anthony Falvo, an AFRICOM spokesman.

“While in Libya, members of a local militia demanded that the U.S. personnel depart. In an effort to avoid conflict, they did leave, without incident,” Falvo added.

On Monday, a group of U.S. troops was pictured at an airstrip not far from

the town of Sabratha, an Islamic State stronghold in western Libya. Pictures of the troops were posted to a Facebook page purported to belong to the Libyan air force. The men were dressed in civilian clothes and were armed with assault rifles.

On occasion, the U.S. military has conducted operations in Libya, where there are increasing concerns that the Islamic State group might establish a foothold in the war-torn country.

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VA to cover coverage for ailments tied to Lejeune

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs said Thursday it plans to cover eight diseases newly linked to toxic contaminants once found in drinking water at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Veterans who served at the Marine Corps facility between 1953 and 1987 could be eligible for medical care and disability coverage if they develop kidney or liver cancer, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, leukemia, multiple myeloma, scleroderma, Parkinson’s disease or aplastic anemia, the VA announced.

About 1 million Marines and dependents might have been exposed to industrial solvents present in the base’s drinking water for more than three decades and 15 health conditions already have been linked to the contamination.

The change also would make reserve and National Guard personnel who served at Camp Lejeune for any length of time during the decades that the water was polluted eligible for disability. Surviving dependents would be eligible for dependency and indemnity compensation and burial benefits.

Congress approves budget deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress on Friday sent President Barack Obama a bipartisan but deficit-draining year-end budget package that boosts U.S. government spending while removing any threat of a government shutdown or a default on debt obligations.

A 65-33 Senate vote on the bill was the last act that shipped the measure — which combines \$1.14 trillion in new spending

in 2016 and \$680 billion in tax cuts over the coming decade — to Obama. It had earlier swept through the House on a pair of decisive votes on Thursday and Friday, marking a peaceful end to a yearlong struggle over the budget, taxes and Republican efforts to derail Obama’s regulatory agenda.

Obama is expected to sign the measure, which includes many of the spending increases he fought for all year and is large-

ly cleansed of Republican attempts to block his moves on the environment, financial regulation and consumer protection. Republicans won increases for military spending and an end to a ban on exporting U.S. oil, as well as permanent tax cuts for business investment.

In exchange for ending the oil export ban, Democrats won extensions of tax breaks for alternative power sources such as solar and wind energy.

‘Star Wars’ sells out, wows in Bahrain

BY CHRISTOPHER CHURCH
Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — It was midnight on the Navy base in Bahrain, but curfew was the last thing on the minds of those who lined up to see the latest Star Wars movie, “The Force Awakens.”

Donald Wells, head of community activities for Morale, Welfare and Recreation at Naval Support Activity Bahrain, said he came up with the idea of the base’s first-ever midnight premiere because of the interest in the new film. He started getting phone queries about two months ago, he said.

Normally, servicemembers in Bahrain must be back in a residence by 1 a.m., whether or not they live on base. They also

must be out of establishments serving alcohol by midnight.

The premiere was open only to junior servicemembers living on base.

“We wanted to do something special just for those who live on base,” Wells said. “If we opened it up to the entire base population, it would have been harder for those guys to get tickets.”

Seaman William Cruz, a mineman aboard mine countermeasures ship USS Gladiador, was one of 102 sailors who attended the show at the MWR Theaters.

He said he had been eagerly awaiting the movie all day while he was at work. He had to start his next day’s shift about an hour after the end of the midnight premiere.

“I took a nap before the show

and will take another one before work,” Cruz said. “I will still get more sleep than underway.”

The premiere was sold out, as is every Friday showing, Wells said. He added that commands had booked private, 8 a.m. showings all the way through Christmas as a gift to their personnel.

Several audience members said the movie was everything they’d hoped it was going to be and more. Petty Officer 3rd Class Christopher Henzerling rated it the best “Star Wars” movie since “The Empire Strikes Back.”

“The movie broke barriers with new characters,” Henzerling said. “Nothing made you feel bland about it. I cannot wait until the next one.”

Panthers gain respectability

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Thomas Davis heard the rumblings late last season about how the NFL needed to consider changing its playoff rules to prevent teams with a losing record from playing in the postseason.

He was talking about Davis' Carolina Panthers, last year's poster child for what ailed the league.

"We ain't got to worry about that this year, now do we?" the Panthers veteran linebacker said with a wry smile.

Nope, they certainly do not.

The Panthers (13-0) have gone from being the joke of the NFC South last December with a 3-8-1 record to darlings of the league in a little more than a year. They've won 17 straight regular-season games since — tied for the fourth-longest streak in NFL history — and have become Super Bowl favorites with a chance to join the 1972 Miami Dolphins as the only undefeated champions.

The team's rise to respectability has been impressive, but not overly complicated.

"We went through the growing pains," Davis said. "But we came together as a team and never lost focus. There were a lot of things that went against us last year, but we stayed together, stayed the course and we put the work in. That is what it boils down to."

The Panthers didn't bring in any big-name free agents. They didn't fire any coaches. And they didn't make a change at quarterback.

Instead, they remained true to their blueprint and stayed the course. They allowed young players to develop into core players. They added moderately priced, mid-level free agents in the offseason who were familiar with the team's system. And Ron Rivera and his staff kept on coaching.

The Panthers have been built around quarterback Cam Newton and middle linebacker Luke Kuechly, and they add

continue to pieces to complement them. Often times that means utilizing rookies and young players.

"We keep that in our mind — our young guys have to play," Rivera said. "You have to develop that core."

There is no magical formula for Carolina's turnaround; it didn't happen overnight.

It is easy to forget this team went 12-4 in 2013 to win the first of three straight NFC South championships.

But the Panthers fell on hard times last season for a variety of reasons. Newton was coming off foot surgery and broke his ribs in the preseason. He was working behind a revamped offensive line and wide receiving corps. The defense struggled with injuries.

Often playing seven rookies in significant roles, the Panthers struggled to find cohesiveness and lost a series of close games.

Rivera was on the hot seat. Newton was being talked about as a bust. The Panthers seemed in shambles, even though they were still in the thick of the playoff hunt at 3-8-1.

Then, they got healthy, their no-huddle offense started clicking and they haven't looked back since.

The Panthers reeled off four straight wins to capture the NFC South, not that many noticed.

They beat Arizona in the playoffs, though that victory was dismissed because of the Cardinals' quarterback injuries. And when Carolina lost 31-17 to Seattle when Kam Chancellor sealed the game with a late interception return for a touchdown, it was expected — the clock had struck midnight for Cinderella.

Still, the Panthers stayed the course.

They acquired some unheralded veterans this past offseason, including safety Kurt Coleman, wide receiver Ted Ginn Jr., cornerback Charles Tillman and offensive tackle Michael Oher who have played major roles. But mostly they spent money re-signing their core players, including Newton and Kuechly.

When the team lost No. 1 wide receiver Kelvin Benjamin to a season-ending knee injury in training camp, general manager Dave Gettleman didn't panic.

The Panthers turned to the receivers on the roster, a nondescript group that included Ginn, Philly Brown, Jerricho Cotchery and second-round draft pick Devin Funchess.

This season everything has come together, though the respect didn't come with it.

When they were one of the teams to start 5-0, they were dismissed yet again: Many believed they were weakest of the unbeaten, would be the first to lose a game, didn't have enough weapons to win a Super Bowl.

At 10-0, the Panthers were underdogs against the Dallas Cowboys on Thanksgiving Day.

"People are going to find something," fullback Mike Tolbert said.

But Carolina isn't listening; its formula is working.

They're first in points per game on offense and have run for at least 100 yards in 24 straight games.

They rank third on defense and lead the league with 33 takeaways, resulting in an NFL-high 117 points.

Newton has been a huge part of the team's success.

Offensive coordinator Mike Shula turned to a no-huddle offense late last season, and Newton has been thriving ever since.

Newton has thrown for a career-high 28 touchdown passes this season and run for seven more and established himself as a leading MVP candidate. His QB rating in the fourth quarter is among the league's best.

"You can't really put a finger on it, but he just has it," Cotchery said of the fifth-year quarterback. "He lives for those moments. A lot of people shy away from those moments, but he just embraces those opportunities."

And so are the Panthers.

Rams beat Bucs, take home finale

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — If this was the Rams' last game in St. Louis, they did what they could to leave the fans smiling.

"I can't really determine what's going to happen, what's not going to happen," defensive end William Hayes said after the Rams started fast and beat the Tampa Bay Buccaneers 31-23 in their home finale on Thursday night.

"The one thing I can say is it was pretty awesome for the support they gave us."

The Rams rolled in what might have been their final home game before a possible move to Los Angeles.

Quarterback Case Keenum certainly played inspired. He was 14-for-17 for 234 yards and two touchdowns with a near-perfect passer rating of 158.

"Obviously, the fans were incredible — chanting and yelling and being loud when the defense needed them to be loud," Keenum said. "I think it was a great atmosphere and I think it was a great atmosphere for the nation to watch and see."

The Edward Jones Dome has been about half-filled most of the season, and the finale wasn't much better. The team announced 51,295 tickets had been distributed for the 66,000-capacity dome.

But those who showed up were into it.

Fans chanted "Keep Our Rams! Keep Our Rams!" and carried signs, one of them reading "We Don't Need Kroenke, We Just Want our Rams."

Owner Stan Kroenke, who wants to move the Rams (6-8) to Los Angeles, attended the finale but kept a low profile.

As for the actual game, here are some reasons why the Rams beat the Buccaneers:

Offensive surge: St. Louis has won two straight with a notable spike in production under new coordinator Rob Boras.

Tavon Austin scored twice, Todd Gurley topped 1,000 yards rushing for the season and Keenum threw both touchdown passes in the first quarter. The 31st-ranked offense rolled to a 21-3 halftime lead.

"We come pumped up every game, not just in case it might be our last game here," Austin said. "We're going to come in and play our game and handle our business."

Big playmakers: Todd Gurley needed 25 yards to become the first Rams rookie to rush for 1,000 yards since Jerome Bettis. He didn't get it by much, gaining 48 yards on 21 carries.

Meanwhile, Austin became the first player since Gale Sayers in 1965 to score at least four rushing touchdowns, five receiving touchdowns and one touchdown on a punt return in a season. He leads the Rams with 10 total TDs.

Big returns: Benny Cunningham had a 102-yard kickoff return to the 3 in the fourth quarter, setting up a field goal. The backup running back wasn't happy about getting caught.

"I'm starting to realize I'm maybe a little too big for this kickoff thing," Cunningham joked.

Iwakuma gets one-year deal with Seattle

Associated Press

SEATTLE — The Mariners didn't wait long to bring back Hisashi Iwakuma after his agreement with the Los Angeles Dodgers failed to get finalized.

Seattle announced a one-year contract with Iwakuma late Thursday night, a deal that includes options for the 2017 and 2018 seasons that could become guaranteed based on performance. The team posted a video on Twitter of general manager Jerry Dipoto announcing the signing at the club's holiday party.

Finding a way to re-sign the right-hander, who turns 35 in April, was a priority for Seattle entering the offseason. There were several reports Dec. 7 of a \$45 million, three-year agreement between Iwakuma and the Dodgers, pending a physical, and the Mariners then acquired

left-handed starter Wade Miley from Boston.

Japan's Jiji Press reported Thursday the Dodgers were not satisfied with the physical, and Iwakuma was suddenly available again.

"We said from the start that Kuma was a priority for us," Dipoto said in a statement. "Obviously, the developments from the last few days allowed us to get back in the game. It's a credit to our ownership; to Howard Lincoln, to Kevin Mather, to our entire ownership group that we were able to get aggressive and find a way to bring Kuma back to the Mariners. We're all thrilled. This is a big move for us."

Iwakuma was 9-5 with a 3.54 ERA in 20 starts last season for the Mariners, including the first no-hitter of his career in August against Baltimore, and was 4-2 with a 2.17 ERA over his final seven starts.

He has pitched his entire career in the majors with Seattle, going 47-25 with a 3.17 ERA in 111 games.

Iwakuma was an All-Star in 2013 and became the second Japanese-born pitcher to throw a no-hitter, joining Hideo Nomo. Since being moved into Seattle's rotation on July 2, 2012, Iwakuma has the fourth-best ERA in the American League at 3.09. When healthy, he's been a stabilizing part of Seattle's rotation, often slotting behind ace Felix Hernandez.

Iwakuma's return all but sets Seattle's rotation going into spring training. Iwakuma and Hernandez will be the anchors along with the additions of Miley and Nathan Karns and the return of young standout Taijuan Walker.

"We feel like this really puts a finishing touch on what we think has been a very productive offseason," Dipoto said.



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Kings, Quick shut out Montreal

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Jonathan Quick stopped everything the Montreal Canadiens threw at him on Thursday night.

Quick made a season-high 45 saves, Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty scored and the Los Angeles Kings beat the Montreal Canadiens 3-0.

The shutout was Quick's second of the season and 39th of his career. It was also his 17th victory of the year.

"They had a good amount of zone time," Quick said of Montreal. "The shot guys here are pretty generous. I don't think we got outplayed the way the shot differential was. We were right there most of the game."

"They had their moments with extended zone times, but we weathered it."

Marian Gaborik added an empty-net goal to help the Kings improve to 20-9-2.

Mike Condon made 17 saves for Montreal and has lost four straight starts.

The Canadiens have lost six of their last seven games and scored just 11 goals over that stretch. They fell to 20-10-3.

"We dominated a lot of these losses," coach Michel Therrien said. "This bad stretch will make us a better team. We're playing good hockey, so we're not panicking."

Quick was sensational throughout the game. Montreal hit him with 18 shots in the first period en route to a season-high for shots on goal.

Flames 3, Stars 1: Karri Ramo stopped 35 shots to help visiting Calgary beat Dallas for its seventh straight win.

Sean Monahan, Dougie Hamilton and Mason Raymond scored for Calgary. Ramo had 17 saves in the third period and outplayed Stars goalie Kari Lehtonen to

win his fifth in a row. Ramo has allowed 11 goals in those five games.

Blue Jackets 7, Coyotes 5: Brandon Saad, Alexander Wennberg and Cam Atkinson each had a goal and two assists as visiting Columbus ended a five-game losing streak.

Arizona goalies Anders Lindback and Louis Domingue faced just 20 shots on goal. Lindback allowed four goals on 10 shots and Domingue let in another two goals after entering in the second period.

Sharks 5, Maple Leafs 4 (OT): Visiting San Jose's Brent Burns banked the winning goal off Toronto center Peter Holland's leg 2:13 into overtime.

Joe Pavelski, Patrick Marleau, Marc-Edouard Vlasic and Matt Nieto scored in regulation for San Jose, and Martin Jones had 28 saves.

Blackhawks 4, Oilers 0: Corey Crawford made 33 saves in his NHL-best fifth shutout and Teuvo Teravainen had two goals and an assist as host Chicago beat Edmonton.

Jonathan Toews added a goal and two assists in a strong performance by Chicago's top line. Marian Hossa had three assists as the Blackhawks won for the third time in four games.

Avalanche 2, Islanders 1: Defenseman Francois Beauchemin scored twice, including the tiebreaking goal late in the third period and Semyon Varlamov stopped 33 shots as host Colorado beat New York for its fourth straight win.

Beauchemin was in the corner when he sent a puck in front of the net that bounced off the skate of Islanders center Mikhail Grabovski and caromed past goaltender Thomas Greiss with 3:48 remaining. Beauchemin also scored in the opening period.

Blues 2, Predators 1: Vladimir Tarasenko scored a power-play goal with 5:20 left and Jake Allen made 27 saves as host St. Louis rallied to beat Nashville.

The Blues came back from a goal down in the third period for the second straight game and have won three of four. It's their first winning streak since getting three straight victories in early November.

Wild 5, Rangers 2: Devan Dubnyk made 21 saves in his return to action and Mikko Koivu had two goals and an assist for host Minnesota in a win over New York.

Dubnyk missed four games with a groin strain. In his first game back, he helped the Wild to their ninth straight game with a point (6-0-3).

Sabres 3, Ducks 0: Chad Johnson made 44 saves for his first shutout in nearly 21 months, leading host Buffalo over Anaheim.

Evander Kane, Jack McCabe and Jamie McGinn scored for the Sabres, who rebounded from Tuesday's shutout loss to New Jersey.

Flyers 2, Canucks 0: Steve Mason made 36 saves, and Michael Raffl and Sean Couturier each scored, leading host Philadelphia over slumping Vancouver.

Mason, Philadelphia's No. 1 goalie who was making his first appearance since Dec. 8, returned to form and earned his first victory in his last eight home starts. Philadelphia has won seven of 10 overall.

Panthers 5, Devils 1: Brandon Pirri had a goal and two assists, and Jussi Jokinen and Logan Shaw each had a goal and an assist as visiting Florida beat New Jersey.

Vincent Trocheck had two assists, Dmitry Kulikov and Reilly Smith also scored and AI Montoya made 15 saves for the Panthers.

No. 18 SMU romps to best start in 17 seasons

Associated Press

DALLAS — Another monster game from Jordan Tolbert and a second-half shooting surge allowed SMU associate head coach Tim Jankovich to hand an undefeated team back over to head coach Larry Brown.

Tolbert posted a big double-double, getting 20 points and 19 rebounds as No. 18 SMU romped over Hampton 105-72 Thursday night.

A night after having 18 points and 23 boards in a rout of Nicholls State, Tolbert helped the Mustangs (9-0) to their highest-scoring game since November 2010. SMU is off to its best start since going 10-0 to open the 1997-98 season.

Brown served a nine-game suspension after the NCAA ruled in September that a former men's basketball administrative assistant completed online course work for a student to help him be admitted to school. The Mustangs also are banned from postseason play this season, including the American Athletic Conference tournament.

Brown's "sentence" — as Jankovich called it — ended with the game's final horn. Brown addressed the team in the locker room after being banned from any contact with the program for 33 days.

Jankovich said he didn't feel pressure to deliver a perfect record for a team that can't play in the postseason but said, "I'm going to get a lot more sleep next week."

Hampton (4-4) was led by Quinton Chievous and Brian Darden with 18 points each.

The Pirates trailed 58-53 with 15:20 left before SMU pulled away. The Mustangs shot 67.6 percent in the second half, hitting seven of 10 three-pointers. They outrebounded Hampton 22-9 in the second half and 49-23 overall.

"Our rebounding is like nothing I've ever experienced," Jankovich said.

Tolbert, who is playing his senior season for SMU after previously playing for Texas Tech, had already recorded his fourth double-double of the season by halftime.

Sterling Brown scored a career-high 23 points and Nic Moore added 18, hitting four of his first five three-point shots of the second half.

Moore played for head coach Jankovich as a freshman at Illinois State before both of them came to SMU in 2012 when Larry Brown was hired.

"It's been great to have him as a head coach," Moore said of Jankovich. "Now having Coach Brown back, we're used to that. When he came in the locker room, all the joy and excitement ... to see his face was great. We know we're about to take another step."

No. 20 West Virginia 86, Marshall 68: Jevon Carter scored 15 points and the host Mountaineers used their depth to wear down the Thundering Herd.

West Virginia (9-1) took control with a 16-1 run early in the second half to beat its intrastate rival for the fifth straight year and for the ninth time in 10 tries.

Daxter Miles Jr. added 14 points, Elijah Macon had 12, and Tarik Phillip 11.

Ryan Taylor led Marshall (3-7) with 15 points. Jon Elmore added 14, and James Kelly had 11.

Short-handed Cavs hold off OKC

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James scored 33 points, passed for 11 assists and grabbed nine rebounds and the short-handed Cleveland Cavaliers twice rallied from double-digit deficits to beat Oklahoma City 104-100 Thursday, ending the Thunder's six-game winning streak.

Tristan Thompson had 12 points and 15 rebounds for the Cavs, including 11 offensive rebounds. Four of those offensive rebounds were in the fourth quarter.

Thunder guard Russell Westbrook had 27 points and 10 assists, and forward Kevin Durant scored 25 points, but both stars missed potential game-tying three-pointers in the final 10 seconds.

The game was delayed with 3:07 to play after James collided with a court-side fan as he was diving after a loose ball. She was taken out on a stretcher and accompanied by PGA golfer Jason Day, who was in attendance.

Rockets 107, Lakers 87: James Harden scored 25 points, and Dwight Howard added 16 points and 15 rebounds in visiting Houston's second victory over Los Angeles in six days.

Terrence Jones had 16 points to help the Rockets avoid a winless three-game trip. They never trailed in their fifth straight win over the Lakers at Staples Center, Houston's longest road winning streak in the rivalry's history.

Kobe Bryant scored 22 points and dunked for the first time in his farewell season, but the Lakers followed up their fourth victory of the season with their 14th loss in 16 games.

James' courtside crash raises concerns for NBA fan safety

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — For years, NBA fans have been willing to pay thousands to sit courtside and watch some of the world's most powerful athletes run and jump.

Up close, there is nothing quite like the experience.

On Thursday night, that thrill came with a heavy price.

Chasing after a loose ball, Cavaliers star LeBron James crashed into the wife of PGA golf champion Jason Day, sending her tumbling violently backward from her seat in an incident that could push the league to consider changes to protect its fans.

It's not uncommon for players to dive into the stands in NBA games. On a few occasions there have been minor injuries, but to this point nothing serious.

But fans are paying big money for premium seats that are closer than ever,

creating the potential for problems.

The league has recently taken steps to improve safety, including cutting the number of photographers allowed to sit along the baselines to reduce the risk of contact with players.

With a full slate of Christmas Day games just a week away, it may be time for the NBA to consider implementing changes to make the game experience safe for fans so close to the action.

James said the incident hasn't changed how he feels about fans being near the floor.

"It's a great experience for our fans," James said. "I mean, that doesn't happen much. It's unfortunate it happened tonight, but that doesn't happen much. Our fans are why our game is so great. Sitting courtside, it's all part of the game. It's pretty cool. If I was a fan, which I am a fan of the game, but, I would love to sit courtside and watch games."

Hornets 109, Raptors 99 (OT): Jeremy Lin scored a season-high 35 points and Kemba Walker had 27 as host Charlotte beat Toronto in overtime.

P.J. Hairston added 14 points, including a three-pointer with 1:30 remaining in overtime that put the Hornets ahead

to stay.

DeMar DeRozan scored 31 points, Kyle Lowry added 20 and Terrence Ross had 17 for Toronto. Bismack Biyombo, who spent four seasons with Charlotte, had a career-best 18 rebounds while also blocking seven shots and scoring eight points.