

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Rethinking rules of engagement in Syria

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's order to intensify air attacks in Syria has led to new internal debate over whether to loosen tight restrictions on strikes against Islamic State targets that risk civilian casualties, according to senior administration officials.

But so far, at least, the White House has resisted proposals to change the rules of engagement for the bombing. Each strike, whether against a pre-planned target or one chosen on a "dynamic" basis by patrolling aircraft, is weighed against likely collateral damage and must be individually approved by top officers at the coalition operations center in Baghdad.

"We are trying to develop intelligence to get targets, to le-

verage opportunities ... to create strikes that have a strategic effect," said a U.S. military official, who like other American officials interviewed for this article spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. "But we're going to keep doing those the same way we have done. We will not willy-nilly go after a target because it's right there, right now."

That caution has drawn sharp criticism from some Republican opponents of Obama's strategy, with calls to "carpet bomb" the Islamic State and place a lower priority on avoiding civilian deaths.

France and Britain, both newcomers to the Syrian air campaign after last month's Islamic State attacks in Paris, have chafed at the tight guidelines, officials acknowledged.

In Iraq, local commanders have publicly complained about U.S. reluctance to strike targets in populated areas.

According to new figures released by the military Tuesday, about 56 percent of all coalition aircraft return from "strike missions" without having used their weapons, either because of bad weather or a judgment that the risk of civilian casualties is too high.

That compares with estimates as high as 75 percent just a few months ago. But officials attribute the change to improved intelligence that has revealed more targets and allows more precise aim — not any change in the rules. But success in striking the militants has also worked in the opposite direction; they respond by positioning themselves behind and among civilians in urban areas

and are less exposed.

Complaints from allies and from inside the government, the military official said, are in part "a misperception that ... the number of targets is so abundant that we're saying no" to opportunities.

Obama has said he makes "no apologies for us wanting to do this appropriately and in a way that is consistent with American values."

What is at issue, however, is not the difference between no civilian casualties or tens or hundreds of thousands, but drawing a line somewhere in between. While much of the push for increased flexibility has come from the State Department rather than the military, a senior administration official said, "nobody's advocating for completely loose rules."

Bergdahl describes captivity in podcast

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl learned during his first year in captivity that filth and stink were his best weapons and that it was best to be forgotten, even if sick, hungry and lonely.

And in the months after his capture by the Taliban in the summer of 2009, Bergdahl said, he was sick and hungry practically all of the time, neglected

and treated worse than an animal. "Picture someone taking a bag, throwing it into the closet, shutting the door and just forgetting about it. That was basically how they treated me."

Bergdahl's vivid, often horrific descriptions of his first year in captivity make up much of the third episode of the Bergdahl "Serial" podcast, which aired Thursday.

Bergdahl, 29, was held by the Taliban for five years after he walked off his base in Afghanistan. Vilified by some politicians and servicemembers for putting at risk those who tried to find him, he was charged with serious military crimes on his return to the United States. The Army announced Dec. 14 that he would face a general court-martial on charges

of desertion and endangering troops.

The Taliban have denied that they tortured Bergdahl, saying he was treated and fed well and was even allowed to play soccer with his guards.

"Serial" podcast host Sarah Koenig summed up the soldier's first year in captivity "as the twin torments of isolation and sickness." Bergdahl developed a chronic case of diarrhea six months after his capture, a condition that persisted for about 3½ years. Food was unpredictable and scant.

During that first year, he attempted twice to escape.

His first escape lasted 10 to 15 minutes; the punishment was brutal. The second escape lasted almost nine days; by then he was so weak, his cap-

tors likely realized a brutal beating would have killed him and pulled out most of his hair as punishment.

Bergdahl's recollections — which he shared in phone conversations recorded earlier with movie producer Mark Boal — make up the bulk of the podcast's third episode on the former Army private.

He said his captors interrogated him using a line of questioning he said was mostly bizarre. They asked how officers on his base got prostitutes; where they got their alcohol and drugs; and whether President Barack Obama was gay.

Bergdahl was moved often. Near the end of his first year in captivity, he said, he was taken to a fortresslike Taliban prison in the mountains.

Note to readers

Stripes Lite will not be produced on Dec. 25. It will return on Dec. 26.

Deadly storm system sweeps across South

Associated Press

HOLLY SPRINGS, Miss. — A storm system forecasters called “particularly dangerous” killed at least six people as it swept across the country Wednesday, and officials were searching for missing residents into the night.

Tornadoes touched down in Indiana and Mississippi, where three were killed. The springlike storms packing strong winds killed two more in Tennessee.

A tree blew over onto a house in Arkansas, killing an 18-year-old woman and trapping a 1-year-old child inside, authorities said. Rescuers pulled the toddler safely from the home.

A 7-year-old boy died in Holly Springs, Miss., when the storm picked up and tossed the car he was riding in, officials said. Police there said several homes were blown off their foundations.

Slabs of metal were tangled in drooping power lines, dangling precariously alongside the road, and the smell of freshly over-

turned dirt and trees lingered in the air as emergency crews tended to downed power lines.

Close by, in Benton County, Miss., two people died and at least two were missing. Crews were searching house-by-house to make sure residents were accounted for.

In the northwest part of the state, a tornado damaged or destroyed at least 20 homes. Planes at a small airport overturned and an unknown number of people were injured.

“I’m looking at some horrific damage right now,” Clarksdale Mayor Bill Luckett said. “Sheet metal is wrapped around trees; there are overturned airplanes; a building is just destroyed.”

Television images showed the tornado appeared to be on the ground for more than 10 minutes. Interstate 55 was closed in both directions as the tornado approached, the Mississippi Highway Patrol said.

The biggest threat for tornadoes was in a region of 3.7 million people in Mississippi,

Tennessee and Arkansas and parts of Missouri, Illinois and Kentucky, according to the national Storm Prediction Center in Oklahoma.

Elsewhere, skiers on the slopes out West got a fresh taste of powder and most people in the Northeast enjoyed springlike temperatures as they finished up last-minute Christmas shopping.

“It’s too warm for me. I don’t like it. I prefer the cold in the winter, in December. Gives you more of that Christmas feel,” said Daniel Flores, a concierge from the Bronx, his light jacket zipped open as he shopped in Manhattan with his three children.

In the small coastal town of Loxley, Ala., Mandy Wilson watched the angry gray sky and told drivers to be careful as she worked a cash register at Love’s Travel Stop.

“It’s very ugly; it’s very scary,” Wilson said. “There’s an 18-wheeler turned over on I-10. There’s water standing really bad. It’s a really interesting way to spend Christmas Eve eve.”

US, Afghan forces target Taliban in Sangin district

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan forces backed by U.S. airstrikes pushed back a Taliban onslaught Thursday in a strategically important district in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, officials said.

Sangin district had been besieged by the insurgents for weeks before an uptick in the ferocity of the fight this week sparked concerns it could fall to Taliban control.

But civilian and military officials said Sangin remained in government hands after the United States conducted two airstrikes overnight, and Afghan military helicopters dropped food and ammunition to soldiers and police who had been surrounded and trapped inside the district army base for days.

The presence of a small contingent of British troops, who arrived in the Shorab base — formerly Britain’s Camp Bastion during their Afghan combat mission — Wednesday had helped boost morale

of both civilians and security forces, officials said.

Overnight, the Taliban captured parts of the center of Sangin district around the district governor’s compound, but the Afghan forces, bolstered by reinforcements, soon succeeded in driving them further out, said Akhtar Muhammad, a police commander in Sangin.

“An hour later we recaptured that building and now we have it,” he told The Associated Press.

In recent days, the Taliban assault has threatened to overrun Sangin, a major poppy-growing area in Helmand, raising alarm that Afghan forces were too overstretched to fend off the insurgency. The Taliban this week pronounced they had seized control of the district, but the claim was widely refuted by Afghan officials.

Just before midnight, U.S. warplanes conducted two strikes in the vicinity of Sangin, the spokesman for the NATO mission in Afghanistan, U.S. Army Col. Mike Lawhorn, said.

Activist: Mall protest ‘decoy’ for airport block

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Mall of America was used as “a decoy” to start a protest that quickly moved to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and blocked a terminal on a busy holiday travel day, one organizer said.

Access to one of two terminals was closed after more than 100 protesters blocked roads leading to the airport Wednesday, airport spokesman Patrick Hogan said.

Protesters hoping to draw attention to the police shooting last month of a black man in Minneapolis had described in advance their plans to target the mall, but not the airport. They started at the shopping mecca in suburban Bloomington, then took a light-rail train to the airport.

“The mall was a decoy,” said Black Lives Matter organizer Miski Noor. “I think it was really effective.”

A revised tally showed a total of 12 arrests at both sites, mostly for trespassing or obstruction of

justice. No injuries or property damage were reported.

Officials said traffic at the airport was back to normal by Wednesday evening, and about 80 stores at the mall were closed for about an hour as officers escorted protesters off the property.

“We accomplished exactly what we came here to accomplish — we wanted to shut down the highway, shut down the airport and show solidarity with other Black Lives Matter groups,” Michelle Barnes of Minneapolis, one of the protest organizers, told the Star Tribune.

Gov. Mark Dayton questioned the need for such a demonstration, noting federal and state investigations were ongoing into the death of Jamar Clark, 24, who was fatally shot by Minneapolis police responding to an assault complaint.

About 500 protesters briefly gathered at the mall before abruptly walking out while chanting, “What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!”

Boise State routs Northern Illinois

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Northern Illinois won the coin toss and deferred, giving Boise State the ball first.

The Poinsettia Bowl was just beginning, yet it was essentially over.

Jeremy McNichols scored three touchdowns, the first one 58 seconds into the game, and finished with 189 total yards as Boise State embarrassed Northern Illinois 55-7 Wednesday.

The Broncos (9-4) took the opening kickoff and moved 75 yards in three plays for the fastest TD in the school's bowl history. After completions of 7 and 39 yards by Brett Rypien, McNichols ran 29 yards for a touchdown just 58 seconds in.

"It was huge. We always start fast," McNichols said. "Even in practice, we come out fast and run a paced offense. That first touchdown, we practiced it all week and we hit it exactly like we were supposed to."

McNichols and the Broncos kept piling on as the running back from Long Beach scored on each of the next two possessions, on a 4-yard pass from Brett Rypien and on a 1-yard run.

McNichols ran 19 times for 93 yards and caught five passes for 96 yards. The sophomore came in tied with Heisman Trophy winner Derrick Henry of Alabama for the national lead with 23 TDs.

Rypien, a freshman, was 29 of 40 for 377 yards and three touchdowns, with one interception.

"He did an amazing job," McNichols said. "He took control of the offense for us. He prepared in the film room and gave us everything he had. He did great."

The Broncos outgained the Huskies (8-6) 654 yards to 33.

The Huskies added to their misery by losing three fumbles in the first half. Tyler Gray recovered two of them.

"Sometimes the ball just rolls your way, and that helped me today to be in the right place a couple of times," Gray said. "I think tonight you saw how well we really can play. We played great all season, but tonight showed how good we can be."

The Huskies were left disappointed in falling to 0-3 in the Poinsettia Bowl.

"Give credit to Boise State," coach Rod Carey said. "That's a good football team and today they made all the plays. They were certainly the more physical team. When you can control the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball it makes for a good day for them. It wasn't a good performance for us."

Said center Andrew Ness: "They were a great team and defensively they were rock-solid. But we played our worst game when we wanted to play our best."

The Huskies avoided a shutout when Aregeros Turner returned a kickoff 96 yards for a touchdown to make it 24-7 midway through the second quarter.

GoDaddy Bowl

Georgia Southern 58, Bowling Green 27

At Mobile, Ala., Georgia Southern quarterback Favian Upshaw blew past Bowling Green's defensive line and linebackers and split two safeties, showing off impressive speed on his way to the end zone.

But as his 80-yard touchdown run neared completion he slowed down a little and was nearly caught.

"I started out pretty fast," Upshaw said, grinning. "But I got a little tired there at the end."

It's hard to blame him. After all, he wasn't used to running that much.

Usually the backup quarterback with a limited role, Upshaw ran for 199 yards and four touchdowns to lead Georgia Southern over Bowling Green.

Georgia Southern (9-4) won the first bowl game in school history in the first year it was eligible to go to the postseason. The program transitioned to the Football Bowl Subdivision in 2014.

The Eagles prevailed thanks to their trademark running game. They had 452 yards rushing to top their nation-best season average of 355.6 yards.

The 6-foot-1, 170-pound Upshaw, who was named the game's Most Valuable Player, usually splits time with starter Kevin Ellison.

In the team's previous 12 games Upshaw had run for a total of 384 yards and two touchdowns.

Bowling Green (10-4) led 27-23 at halftime, but Georgia Southern scored the final 35 points.

Bowling Green was undone by a brutal stretch in the third quarter that included two fumbles by quarterback Matt Johnson deep in the Falcons' own territory.

It helped Georgia Southern score three touchdowns — including two by Upshaw — in three minutes and turned a 30-27 game into a blowout.

The game was tight for much of the evening, but Georgia Southern started to pull away late in the third quarter when Upshaw's 80-yard touchdown run gave the Eagles a 37-27 lead.

Then Bowling Green — specifically Johnson — fumbled away any chance at a comeback on a rain-soaked evening at Ladd-Peebles Stadium.

"It was the third quarter from hell," Johnson said.

Johnson fumbled on Bowling Green's 14 when he lost the ball as he winding up to make a pass. Georgia Southern scored two plays later when Matt Breida ran for a 1-yard touchdown to push the advantage to 44-27.

On the ensuing drive, Johnson fumbled again when trying to make a handoff at the Bowling Green 10. Two players later, Upshaw ran for the 8-yard touchdown and the rout was essentially complete.

Hield helps keep No. 3 Oklahoma unbeaten

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Oklahoma's latest test was its toughest.

Buddy Hield had 27 points and nine rebounds and the third-ranked Sooners remained one of five unbeaten teams in Division I by escaping with an 84-81 victory over Hawaii in a Diamond Head Classic semifinal Wednesday night.

It was the closest win for Oklahoma (10-0), which entered the game with a plus-23.4 scoring margin, fourth-best in the country.

"I thought Hawaii did a terrific job," Sooners coach Lon Kruger said. "(Hawaii first-year coach) Eran (Ganot) has always done a good job. He's a smart guy and he had his team ready. The crowd was fantastic. It was a good college basketball game."

The Rainbow Warriors (8-2) dropped their first game at home this season and saw a four-game winning streak snapped.

"It was actually a really tough game," said Sooners forward Khadeem Lattin, who scored a career-high 17 points and grabbed eight rebounds.

"Their guys were good, you've got to give it up to them. We just had to come out and really just play as hard as we could. They made shots and so we just had to always bounce back and it took

us a while to become the aggressor and once we became the aggressor the game kind of started changing in our favor."

Hield was 7 of 16 from the field, including 5 of 9 from three-point range, and he made all six of his free throw attempts. He had 18 points at halftime.

Roderick Bobbitt scored a career-high 32 points and had six assists for the Rainbow Warriors.

Oklahoma, which led by as many as 16 points in the first half, was up 41-40 at halftime.

Isaiah Cousins added 14 points and six assists for the Sooners.

Stefan Jankovic scored 15 of his 17 points before halftime for Hawaii.

There were six ties and 12 lead changes in the game.

The game was tied at 75 on a slicing layup by Hawaii's Isaac Fleming with 4:22 remaining, but the Sooners took the lead for good on two free throws by Hield with 1:42 to play.

Bobbitt drew a foul attempting a three-pointer and made his first two attempts to get Hawaii within 83-81 with 4 seconds to play. He missed the third free throw intentionally and Lattin grabbed the rebound for Oklahoma.

Lattin made the first of two free throws before Hawaii got the ball back with 1.2 seconds to play.

Hawaii scored 18 points off 12 Oklahoma

turnovers and held the edge in bench points, 23-10.

Both teams were 24 of 33 from the free throw line.

The Sooners entered the game ranked second in three-point field goal percentage (47.2). They hit 6 of 11 from behind the arc in the first half, but attempted just six the rest of the way, making two.

OU's record for three-point field goal percentage in a season is 41.4, set in 1986-87.

No. 16 Louisville 98, Utah Valley 68

Trey Lewis scored 21 points and the Cardinals used a hot shooting start to coast to the victory at home.

Louisville (11-1) made 18 of its first 24 shots and shot 69 percent from the field in the first half (20-for-29) to blow past Utah Valley, one night after an out-of-sync showing in beating UMKC.

Konner Frey led Utah Valley (5-8) with 17 points and Marcel Davis scored 15. Seven Cardinals scored at least eight points.

The Cardinals, who led 59-31 at halftime, finished 31 of 56 (55 percent) from the field and hit nine threes. Utah Valley shot 40 percent.

No. 18 SMU 70, Colorado 66: At Las Vegas, Nic Moore scored 16 points to lead SMU in the Las Vegas Classic championship game. The Mustangs remain one of five unbeaten Division I teams.

SMU (11-0) used a late 14-1 run to over-

come a seven-point deficit with just under 7 minutes left and end Colorado's 11-game winning streak.

Moore, the tournament's MVP, was 7-for-18 from the field.

Shake Milton added 14 points, while Markus Kennedy had 12 for the Mustangs, who had coach Larry Brown return from his nine-game suspension to win on consecutive nights at the Orleans Arena.

The Mustangs hit six of seven free throws over the final 1:06.

Josh Fortune led Colorado (11-2) with 15 points, including a desperation 3-pointer with 20 seconds left that made it 68-66.

No. 23 Baylor 85, New Mexico St. 70

At Waco, Texas, Taurean Prince scored a career-high 34 points and Lester Medford had 10 points and 12 assists for Baylor.

Prince was 13-for-19 from the field, including 3-for-4 from three-point range, and led the Bears (9-2) with six rebounds in their 32nd consecutive non-conference home win.

Ishmail Wainwright scored a career-high 14 points and Al Freeman added 10 for Baylor.

Pascal Siakam had 26 points and 10 rebounds to lead the Aggies (7-6), who were facing their first nationally ranked opponent of the season.



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Nowitzki passes Shaq in Mavs' OT win

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Dirk Nowitzki moved past Shaquille O'Neal into sixth place on the NBA's career scoring list, then made the go-ahead basket with 19.2 seconds left in overtime to give the Dallas Mavericks a 119-118 victory over the Brooklyn Nets on Wednesday.

Nowitzki will have plenty of time to think about what it means to pass O'Neal, a longtime rival who beat him in the 2006 NBA Finals. But on Wednesday, the most important thing for the German was getting a win.

"That's what I play for, is to compete at the highest level for this franchise, for this team," Nowitzki said. "No. 6 in the bigger picture is a lot bigger than this win in Brooklyn in December, but when you're out there you don't think about that. You want to get this win bad and fight out there against a talented team."

Nowitzki came in needing 10 points to pass the 28,596 O'Neal scored in a career that could be capped with an induction into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame next year.

Nowitzki is sure to get there someday, too, whenever he ends a career that saw him redefine the power forward position.

"You're talking about a guy who's a generational great player. [He] totally redefined the game, redefined a position," Mavs coach Rick Carlisle said.

Nowitzki moved ahead of O'Neal with one of his high-arching jumpers from the corner with 9:51 left in the second quarter, when just about everything the Mavs threw up went in.

Nowitzki is eighth on the combined NBA-ABA scoring list, behind No. 6 Julius Erving and No. 7 Moses Malone.

Warriors 103, Jazz 85: Klay Thompson scored 20 points, Stephen Curry had 16 points and nine assists and Golden State remained unbeaten at home with a victory over the Utah Jazz.

Andrew Bogut added 10 points and 13 rebounds, and Draymond Green had 15 points, nine rebounds and six assists for the Warriors (27-1) in their final tuneup before an NBA Finals rematch against LeBron James and Cleveland on Christmas.

Cavaliers 91, Knicks 84: LeBron James scored 24 points, including three key baskets down the stretch, and host Cleveland beat short-handed New York.

Knicks star Carmelo Anthony didn't play because of a sprained right ankle. New York went scoreless for nearly 4 minutes after taking an 82-80 lead.

Bucks 113, 76ers 100: Giannis Antetokounmpo made his first 11 shots to finish with 22 points, Khris Middleton added 21 on 8-for-9 shooting and host Milwaukee beat hapless Philadelphia.

Philadelphia fell to an astonishing 1-30, including 0-18 on the road, and lost its 12th straight game.

Jahlil Okafor led the 76ers with 17 points and eight rebounds.

Spurs 108, Timberwolves 83: Kawhi Leonard had 19 points and six rebounds and visiting San Antonio beat Minnesota.

Danny Green broke out of a season-long shooting slump with 11 points, including 3-for-4 from three-point range, and seven rebounds in the seventh straight victory

for the Spurs (25-5).

Karl-Anthony Towns had 10 points and 11 rebounds for the Timberwolves (11-18).

Thunder 120, Lakers 85: Russell Westbrook had 23 points, eight assists and eight rebounds and visiting Oklahoma City steamrolled Los Angeles for the second time in five days.

Kevin Durant added 21 points for the Thunder in a rematch of their game at Oklahoma City, when they trounced the Lakers 118-78.

Kobe Bryant had 19 points on 7-for-22 shooting for the Lakers.

Magic 104, Rockets 101: Evan Fournier hit a short bank shot with 14.2 seconds left and Tobias Harris made two free throws with 1.1 seconds remaining in host Orlando's victory over Houston.

Nik Vucevic had 21 points to help the Magic win for fifth time in six games.

Marcus Thornton's three-pointer missed at the final horn, ending Houston's three-game winning streak. James Harden scored 10 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter to lead the Rockets.

Kings 108, Pacers 106: DeMarcus Cousins scored 25 points and had a season-high 16 rebounds, Darren Collison added a season-high 24 points and visiting Sacramento held off Indiana.

Rajon Rondo had 13 points and 16 assists to help the Kings (12-17) win for the fifth time in seven games. Indiana had a chance to force overtime, but Paul George's midrange jumper bounced off the back of the rim as the buzzer sounded.

Hawks 107, Pistons 100: Jeff Teague scored 23 points, Paul Millsap added 18

and host Atlanta beat Detroit for its fifth straight victory.

Al Horford finished with 15 points, and Dennis Schroder added 14 for the Hawks.

Andre Drummond led the Pistons with 25 points and 12 rebounds.

Nuggets 104, Suns 96: Randy Foye scored a season-high 31 points, hitting seven three-pointers in 16 attempts, and visiting Denver bounced back from an embarrassing loss to beat slumping Phoenix.

The Nuggets bolted to a 22-point lead in the first half, withstood a second-half Suns rally and pulled away.

Pelicans 115, Trail Blazers 89: Anthony Davis had 28 points and 12 rebounds to lead host New Orleans past Portland.

Tyreke Evans nearly added a triple-double, scoring 24 points to go with nine rebounds and eight assists, and reserve Jrue Holiday had 19 points as New Orleans won two straight games for just the second time this season.

Wizards 100, Grizzlies 91: John Wall had 14 points and 14 assists in host Washington's victory over Memphis.

Marcin Gortat added 12 points and 12 rebounds. Mike Conley led Memphis with 21 points.

Celtics 102, Hornets 89: Kelly Olynyk scored 20 points, Jae Crowder added 19 points and 12 rebounds and visiting Boston held off Charlotte.

Isaiah Thomas and Avery Bradley had 18 points each for the Celtics. Frank Kaminsky scored a season-high 23 points, and Nicholas Batum added 17 for Charlotte.

Cardinals among contenders lurking behind Panthers in NFC

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — The unbeaten Carolina Panthers are understandably hogging attention in the NFC, but the Arizona Cardinals have been just as successful over the past two months. And the Seattle Seahawks are making their trademark late-season surge.

Don't count out the Green Bay Packers, either. They know a thing or two about playoff football.

Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson doesn't begrudge the Panthers their share of the limelight.

"They deserve all the attention," he said. "They're undefeated in the National Football League, and they beat us. That's the honesty of it. It comes down to winning games, and they beat us in a tough environment (in Seattle). So you've got to give them a lot of respect."

That Carolina victory in Seattle came back on Oct. 18. The Seahawks (9-5) have won five straight since their home loss to Arizona and would hold the top wild-card spot if the playoffs were to begin today.

There's a strong possibility Seattle could play at Carolina in the NFC's divisional round. And the Seahawks, led by Wilson's near-flawless performances, are a long way from being the team that sputtered to a 2-4 start.

Seattle coach Pete Carroll uses the words "balance" and "harmony" to describe the reasons for his team's change of fortune.

"It's like tuning in on the radio dial," he said. "You've got to get it right. It's a big challenge. It's what everybody's seeking as they go through these seasons. You can see it. Look what happened to Kansas City, look how they've turned it around and got going, and put together a great year and a great run. It finally hits, and you try to hold on to it as long as you can."

Odds-makers certainly aren't overwhelmed by Carolina.

VegasInsider.com rates the Panthers' chance of winning the Super Bowl at 5 to 1, only slightly better than Arizona and Seattle at 6 to 1. The Packers are a longer shot at 12 to 1, which doesn't bother Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers at all.

"I like where we're at," he said. "People are talking about everybody else, which has always been a good position for us, and rightfully so. Arizona's playing great. Carson's (Palmer) having a hell of a year. Carolina's undefeated. Seattle's coming on. We're just kind of hanging here at 10-4, knowing that we're going to be a tough team in the playoffs."

Green Bay plays at Arizona (12-2) on Sunday with plenty at stake for both teams. The Cardinals can clinch at least the No. 2 seed in the NFC and the first-round bye that goes with it. A Green Bay win ensures the Packers will remain alone in first place in the NFC North and would

leave them just a game behind Arizona for the NFC's No. 2 seed heading into the final week of the schedule.

The Cardinals conclude their regular season with a home game against Seattle, while Green Bay hosts the Minnesota Vikings, who enter this week a game behind the Packers in the NFC North.

So a loss to Green Bay would put the Cardinals, currently flying high with an eight-game winning streak, in a precarious position to lose that precious first-round bye.

"They've been that way for a month," Cardinals coach Bruce Arians said of this game's importance. "There ain't nothing different about this one."

Any of those four matchups over the next two weeks could be a preview of a playoff game. Arians said he hopes he sees the Packers or Seahawks again down the road.

"We've got to win so we do see them again, hopefully at our place," he said.

The Cardinals aren't sneaking up on anyone anymore. They have played on prime-time television five times in the last eight weeks and have won all five games.

"That's what we want as players. We want to play in front of everybody and play in big games," Palmer said. "We've been fortunate to play well in prime-time games and we want to keep that going."

Secondary health up in the air for Philadelphia

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Philadelphia Eagles defensive coordinator Billy Davis expressed optimism that injured cornerbacks Byron Maxwell and Eric Rowe would be able to play Saturday in a key game against the Washington Redskins.

"We're confident we'll have both of them, Saturday," Davis said, Tuesday. "I'm confident they'll be there."

Maxwell, a big free agent signing last offseason, suffered a shoulder/collarbone injury in Sunday's 40-17 loss to the Arizona Cardinals and underwent an MRI on Monday.

The team did not reveal the results of the MRI.

After the game Sunday, Maxwell said X-rays came back negative.

Rowe, the rookie second-round pick, suffered a concussion in the same game and was going through the NFL's concussion protocol. He has to be cleared to be able to return to practice and then before he can play.

If the Eagles beat the Redskins, they can win their second NFC East title in three years with a win the following week against the New York Giants.

If they lose to the Redskins, they would miss the playoffs for the second consecutive year and for the fourth time in the past five years.