

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

Friday, December 22, 2017

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Navy alters policy on fitness-test failures

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy will forgive past fitness-test failures for all its sailors in the new year and will end its policy mandating discharges for sailors who fail two Physical Fitness Assessments in a three-year period, the service announced Thursday.

The Navy will no longer boot most sailors from the force solely for failing fitness tests, the service said in a Navy-wide message amending its three-year-old fitness regulations. The changes come as the Navy looks to increase the service by more than 4,000 sailors by the end of fiscal year 2018 on Sept. 30.

Vice Adm. Robert Burke, the chief of naval personal, wrote in a memorandum that the changes were designed to ensure the minimum fitness levels were met across the force, while retaining otherwise-qualified sailors to ensure the service grows as ordered by Congress in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act signed this month by President Donald Trump.

“My Number One priority is to keep the fleet properly manned,” Burke wrote. “Retention of every capable sailor is critical to the operational readiness of the Navy while ensuring every sailor has the opportunity

to safely achieve and maintain fitness and body composition standards.”

The Navy’s Physical Fitness Assessment, or PFA, consists of an assessment of a sailor’s weight and body fat content as well as a physical fitness test that grades them on their ability to perform push-ups, sit-ups and a 1.5-mile run based on their age.

In 2015, the Navy adjusted its fitness standards, altering its policy at the time from discharging sailors who failed three PFAs in four years to kicking out sailors who failed two in three years. Senior officials said at the time they hoped the changes would instill a greater culture of fitness in the Navy as the service reduced its force due to budget cuts.

In 2016, the Navy automatically discharged nearly 1,700 sailors for fitness-test failures, officials said. More than 43,000 sailors now have one fitness-test failure in the past three years on their records, and another nearly 5,500 have two such failures, which will be forgiven, according to Navy data.

Those sailors who had been slated to be discharged for fitness-test failures after March 31 will remain in the service, according to Burke’s guidance. Officers who were to be separated from the service be-

fore March 1 for such failures can request to remain on active duty, the memo reads.

The new regulations announced Thursday do include consequences for sailor’s failure to meet physical fitness standards.

Enlisted sailors who fail two or more consecutive PFAs will be ineligible for promotion or re-enlistment until they successfully pass a fitness test.

Officers who fail one fitness test will not be promoted until they pass the PFA, but they will be recommended for separation or retirement upon completion of their current assignments if they fail two consecutive tests, according to the new regulations. However, they can remain in the service if they pass an official PFA before they are separated from the service.

The new regulations additionally require all sailors to receive body content assessments upon arrival at a new assignment. Sailors who fail to maintain the proper weight and body fat content for their height will be automatically placed in their command’s Fitness Enhancement Program.

That program includes nutrition counseling, exercise programs and monthly fitness practice tests. Sailors can only be relieved from the program by passing a fitness test, the regulations state.

Official predicts ‘screaming’ over DOD restructuring

The Washington Post

The Defense Department will restructure its sprawling bureaucracy and will implement a new National Defense Strategy next year, separate efforts that are intended to making lasting change in the Pentagon, its No. 2 official said Thursday.

Deputy Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan predicted that the restructuring will be “great fodder for stories next year because you’ll probably hear screaming and yelling” among critics of the changes it spawns. It will be led by the Pentagon’s first chief manage-

ment officer and will focus on centralizing functions, including human resources, information technology and financial management, Shanahan told a group of reporters at the Pentagon.

“The emphasis on the word ‘restructuring’ is that we want to make sure that with the stroke of a pen or a few clicks of a keyboard, we can’t undo progress,” Shanahan said. “When you think about enduring change, you have to wire or alter the work so that you don’t regress. That’s the hard part about big bureaucracy, is making enduring change.”

The management officer will be John “Jay” Gibson II, who initially was appointed by President Donald Trump as deputy chief management officer. Gibson previously served as the chief executive officer at XCOR Aerospace, a start-up rocket-engine company that filed for bankruptcy last month after failing to find new investors.

His position was elevated in stature by Congress in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. The appointee in that role is expected to improve the Defense Department’s business operations. It isn’t clear

whether the restructuring will include any job reductions.

The Defense Department also will unveil a new defense strategy, a document the Pentagon typically updates every 10 years to help inform its priorities.

Shanahan said the new strategy will draw on Trump’s National Security Strategy, a separate-but-related effort mandated by Congress that the White House released Monday. In it, Trump cast China and Russia as competitors who want to reset global power to suit them but also as potential partners in shared interests.

President pays visit to wounded servicemembers

Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Donald Trump paid a holiday visit Thursday to wounded servicemembers at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, hailing them as “some of the bravest people anywhere in the world.”

During his visit, the president awarded the Purple Heart to 1st Lt. Victor Prato, of the 127th Airborne Engineer Battalion, who was injured last month while deployed in Afghanistan.

Prato, 25, of Somers, N.Y., suffered multiple soft-tissue injuries following a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device blast, according to the White House.

“One of the most powerful moments of my life watching @POTUS give the Purple Heart to this American Hero,” wrote press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders on Twitter, where she posted a photo of Prato. “Amazed by the strength and resilience of the men and women in our Armed Forces.”

Trump also met with other sick and injured servicemembers from all branches of the armed forces, Sanders said.

Trump told reporters as he was leaving the White House en route to the medical center that he was going to “say hello to some of the bravest people anywhere in the world.”

“We’re just going to wish them a merry Christmas, a happy New Year,” he said. “We love those people.”

In surprise, Pence visits US troops in Afghanistan

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Vice President Mike Pence swooped into Afghanistan for a secret meeting with Afghan leaders and a visit with U.S. troops, pointing to progress four months after President Donald Trump announced a new strategy to end a stalemate in America’s longest war.

Pence’s unannounced trip was the first to the war-ravaged country by Trump or the vice president, and it came as the Trump administration is seeking to stabilize the country by strengthening Afghan forces and seeking a conclusion to the 16-year war there.

The vice president said Trump’s new strategy was “already bearing fruit” across the country, citing dramatic increases in American airstrikes and a partnership with the Afghan military that has “put the Taliban on the defensive.” He said the administration was pouring resources into the military to help them prevent terror attacks on U.S. soil.

“The road before you is promising, but it’s perilous. And this commander-in-chief is clear-eyed about the threats you face and the challenges that lie ahead,”

Pence said. “But today, let me assure you: President Trump has your back.”

Under heavy security, Pence landed Thursday at Bagram Air Base, the largest U.S. base in the country, shortly after sunset and then arrived by helicopter in the capital of Kabul to meet with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

“We’re here to see this through,” Pence told Ghani and Abdullah at the presidential palace.

Pence said that Ghani offered assurances that Afghanistan was preparing for parliamentary elections next year and a presidential election in 2019. He said the U.S. expected Afghanistan to continue to make political reforms and to root out corruption.

Later, at Bagram Air Field, Pence told hundreds of U.S. troops, “I believe victory is closer than ever before.”

“It’s because of all of you that we’re safe. It’s because of you that we’re free. It’s because of you that freedom has a future in Afghanistan and America and all across the wider world,” Pence said, his voice raspy from a cold.

Mattis gives troops pep talk at Guantanamo

Associated Press

GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis chose an unusual site Thursday to begin a preholiday tour of military bases, urging troops on the Guantanamo Bay Navy base to set a good example for politically divided Americans and be always ready for war. He gave no hint about the future of Guantanamo Bay as a prison for terrorism suspects and did not visit the detention center, which President Barack Obama tried unsuccessfully to close.

Mattis, the first defense secretary to visit the base since Donald Rumsfeld in January 2002, shortly after the first prisoners arrived from Afghanistan, said the main goal of his trip was to offer holiday cheer and to let the troops know their work is appreciated. He also made a point of defending the way prisoners have been treated at Guantanamo Bay, which has been called

an infamous torture center.

“I am confident that we’re doing the right thing here,” he said.

He recalled a conversation early this year with a woman, whom he did not name, who told him Guantanamo Bay was “a blot on our nation,” but when invited to accompany him to the detention center for an unannounced visit, she declined. “That shut her up. She didn’t have anything more to say to me,” he said.

Mattis wanted to buck up the troops at Guantanamo and at Naval Station Mayport, near Jacksonville, Fla., where he visited later Thursday. He was accompanied by an Associated Press reporter and planned on Friday to visit Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C., and soldiers at Fort Bragg, N.C.

The troops he saw Thursday seemed most curious about what some are calling the road to war with North Korea, whose nuclear weapons the Trump administration

says pose a grave and intolerable threat.

In a series of talks with troops throughout the day, North Korea came up time and again, mostly from the troops. Each time, Mattis said the focus is on finding a diplomatic solution with the help of China, Russia and others.

But he also made no bones about what might happen if the diplomats fail.

“If we have to do it (militarily), we expect to make it the worst day in North Korea’s life,” he said, adding that if war comes, “every submarine he’s got is to be sunk and every ship he’s got is to be sunk,” he said, referring to Kim Jong Un, the young North Korean leader who has threatened to use his nuclear weapons on the U.S.

Speaking to a few dozen Marines at a rifle range, Mattis described North Korea as a “not yet imminent but a direct threat to the United States.”

Congress has much to do in '18

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Republican-led Congress narrowly passed a temporary spending bill to avert a government shutdown, doing the bare minimum in a sprint toward the holidays and punting disputes on immigration, health care and the budget to next year.

The measure passed the House on Thursday on a 231-188 vote over Democratic opposition and then cleared the Senate 66-32, with Democrats from Republican-leaning states providing many of the key votes.

The stopgap legislation would keep the government from closing at midnight Friday. It has traversed a tortured path, encountering resistance from the GOP's most ardent allies of the military, as well as opposition from Democrats who demanded but were denied a vote on giving immigrants brought to the country as children and in the country illegally an opportunity to become citizens.

Congress will return in January facing enormous challenges on immigration, the federal budget, health care and national

security, along with legislation to increase the government's authority to borrow money.

Each of those items is sure to test the unity that Republicans are enjoying for the moment.

Democrats had pressed for adding their priorities to the measure, but once rebuffed on immigration, they worked to keep the bill mostly free of additions, figuring they'll hold greater leverage next month.

Among the items left behind was \$81 billion worth of disaster aid, which passed the House on a bipartisan 251-169 tally but stalled in the Senate. The measure would have brought this year's tally for aid to hurricane victims in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean, as well as fire-ravaged California, to more than \$130 billion. But Republicans and Democrats in the Senate want changes, and it was among the items Democrats sought to hold onto for leverage next year.

Immigration is among the most difficult issues confronting lawmakers in January, thrust upon them in September after Trump rescinded an order by then-President Barack

Obama giving so-called Dreamers protection against deportation, though he gave Congress a March deadline to come up with a legislative solution.

Also left unfinished were bipartisan efforts to smash budget limits that are imposing a freeze on the Pentagon and domestic agencies, a long-term extension of the popular Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, for 9 million low-income kids and Senate legislation aimed at stabilizing health insurance markets.

Lawmakers struggled to achieve the must-do: a \$2.1 billion fix for an expiring program that pays for veterans to seek care outside the Department of Veterans Affairs system; a temporary fix to ensure states facing shortfalls from CHIP won't have to purge children from the program; and a short-term extension for an expiring overseas wiretapping program aimed at tracking terrorists.

The legislation also has a provision to turn off automatic cuts to many "mandatory" spending programs, including Medicare, that otherwise would be triggered by the tax cut bill.

Senate paid \$1.5M over 20 years for 'harassment'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate released a bare-bones report late Thursday on what a statement called "harassment settlement" data, showing nearly \$1.5 million in taxpayers' money has been spent during the past two decades to cover claims against lawmakers and other Senate offices.

The release contained no names of senators or victims. It said \$599,000 was for 13 settlements involving "member-led" Senate offices, while the remaining \$853,000 was for 10 settlements involving "other" Senate offices.

The Senate's Rules and Appropriations committees released the information on the evening of Congress' final work day this year. It came during a period that has seen several lawmakers resign or announce their retirements following sexual harassment accusations, and growing condemnation for the secrecy with which Congress has guarded information about such cases.

While the release called the information "harassment settlement data," none of the terse descriptions of each case used those words. Four of the cases involved sex discrimination, including two that also involved "reprisal," while most of the rest were for race, age or disability discrimination.

The document said the largest Senate settlement was \$421,000 and was for "race discrimination and reprisal."

Similar figures released this week show \$342,000 in federal funds has been used to settle workplace discrimination cases involving House members between 2008 and 2012. That included almost \$175,000 for sexual harassment and discrimination allegations.

The statement said the data came from the Office of Compliance, which oversees the congressional workplace. It covered 1998 through 2017.

GOP, Dems race over Russia probe narratives

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans and Democrats are scrambling in the final days of 2017 to establish their own narratives on Russia investigations and the integrity of the investigators, a messaging battle that has intensified as special counsel Robert Mueller has appeared to focus more intently on President Donald Trump and his inner circle.

Congressional Republicans who have endured almost a year's worth of speculation and investigations into Trump's ties to Russia are hoping to move on from that topic in 2018, renewing focus on Democrat Hillary Clinton and stepping up criticism of Mueller. Democrats remain focused on Trump and are pushing to keep congressional investigations on Russia going.

On Thursday, Republicans brought the topic back to Clinton as two committees began conducting interviews in a new investigation of the FBI and its 2016 inquiry into Clinton's email server. The House Judiciary and Oversight committees spent hours behind closed doors with Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe, who was involved in that probe. It was the second time this week McCabe has met with lawmakers behind closed

doors as Republicans charge there is an anti-Trump bias within the ranks of the bureau.

Democrats are accusing the GOP of diversionary tactics and say their criticism could embolden Trump to take steps to fire Mueller.

Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, made a speech Wednesday on the Senate floor warning Trump not to take any action relating to Mueller. He said Thursday that he gave the speech because the "tone and tenor" coming from the White House and its allies "should send a chill through all of us."

Trump and White House officials have insisted in recent weeks that the president has no intention of firing Mueller, a decision that likely would be up to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who appointed the special counsel.

Some Republicans say Democrats' pushback is disingenuous, given Trump's recent words.

Both the House and Senate intelligence panels have spent most of the year investigating Russian interference in the 2016 elections. While the more bipartisan Senate probe is expected to continue well into 2018, House Republicans were conducting some of their final interviews this week.

Deported former Marine returns to US

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Former Marine Marco Chavez could not sleep the night before he was set to cross the border and return to the United States, a country he considers home, after he was deported to Mexico 15 years ago following a dog beating conviction.

When Chavez finally walked Thursday into the U.S. through the Tijuana-San Diego border crossing on Thursday, he was speechless and still in disbelief that he had won his battle to regain his U.S. residency.

It was a historic day for the

Mexican-born father of three who returned to the U.S. as a grandfather. He is among the few former servicemembers to regain permanent residency out of hundreds of veterans who have been deported.

Chavez was met by hugs and screams of “Welcome!” and “Bienvenidos!” by a group of veterans and immigrant-rights advocates waving U.S. flags.

Chavez said it will be an unforgettable Christmas because he will spend it with his family.

“I’ll be able to wake up Christmas morning, and hug them and let them know I’m home,”

Chavez said, his father by his side.

His father, Antonio Chavez, told reporters in English and Spanish that he was grateful to have his son finally home.

“I’m very thankful and happy,” Antonio Chavez said, his voice quivering as Marco Chavez hugged him.

The return gives hope to the other deported U.S. military veterans, said Nathan Fletcher, a Marine veteran whose organization lobbied on Chavez’s behalf.

Fletcher, a former California state lawmaker, founded the

Honorably Discharged/Dishonorably Deported Coalition that tries to help deported veterans get back to the U.S.

Earlier this year at the request of Fletcher’s organization, California Gov. Jerry Brown pardoned Chavez for a 1998 conviction for animal cruelty in a dog beating. Chavez said another person was responsible.

Months after he was pardoned, an immigration judge granted Chavez’s request to return.

Brown, a Democrat, said Chavez served the U.S. and deserved “to come back home.”

Request to delay transgender recruitment denied

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — A federal appeals court on Thursday denied a Trump administration request to delay a requirement that it begin allowing transgender people to enlist in the military on Jan. 1.

A three-judge panel of the Richmond-based 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wrote in a short order that it would not grant the request as an ap-

peal of a lower-court ruling proceeds.

President Donald Trump tweeted in July that the federal government “will not accept or allow” transgender individuals to serve “in any capacity” in the military. That would reverse a 2016 policy change under President Barack Obama allowing transgender people to serve openly.

Trump later formally directed the Pentagon to extend in-

definitely a ban on transgender individuals joining the military, and he gave Defense Secretary Jim Mattis six months to come up with a policy on how to deal with those currently serving.

Several legal challenges to that proposed ban are ongoing.

Thursday’s order came in a lawsuit filed in Maryland by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of six current members of the armed forces who are transgender.

A U.S. district judge in Baltimore halted the proposed ban in November, and the government is appealing. The Department of Justice disagrees with the court’s ruling and is currently evaluating next steps, spokeswoman Lauren Ehram said.

The Pentagon said last week that the enlistment of transgender recruits will start Jan. 1 and go on amid the legal battles.

Girl gets 25 years at mental hospital in Slender Man case

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — One of two Wisconsin girls who tried to kill a classmate to win favor with a fictional horror character named Slender Man was sentenced to 25 years in a mental hospital, the maximum punishment possible.

Anissa Weier, 16, pleaded guilty in August to being a party to attempted second-degree intentional homicide, but she claimed she wasn’t responsible for her actions because she was mentally ill. In September, a jury agreed.

Waukesha County Circuit Judge Michael Bohren on Thursday sentenced Weier to 25 years in a psychiatric institution, retroactive to the date of the crime. That means she would be institutionalized until age 37.

Weier and Morgan Geyser lured Payton Leutner into a wooded park in Waukesha, a

Milwaukee suburb, in 2014. Geyser stabbed Leutner 19 times while Weier urged her on, according to investigators. Leutner survived after she crawled out of the woods to a path where a passing bicyclist found her.

Both Weier and Geyser told detectives they felt they had to kill Leutner to become Slender Man’s “proxies,” or servants, and protect their families from him. All three girls were 12 years old at the time.

Weier apologized in brief comments before her sentencing.

“I do hold myself accountable for this and that I will do whatever I have to do to make sure I don’t get any sort of delusion or whatever again,” Weier told the judge as she sat next to her attorney. “I want everybody involved to know I deeply regret everything that happened that day. I know that nothing I say is going to make this

right, and nothing I say is going to fix what I broke.”

Leutner family spokesman Steve Lyons said they were pleased with the sentence.

“They believe that justice was served,” Lyons said. “The sentence today allows for some additional closure for Payton and her family, and it also keeps both Payton, her family and the community safe.”

Leutner’s mother, Stacie Leutner, sent the judge a letter this week in which she wrote that the trauma of the attack “has defined our lives” and that her daughter still fears for her life. For months, Payton slept with scissors under her pillow for protection, and she still keeps her bedroom windows closed and locked.

“She will struggle with the events of that day and physical and emotional scars it left for the rest of her life,” her mother wrote.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man offering illegal pot for sheriff's SUV

CO COLORADO SPRINGS — A Colorado man landed in jail after offering to trade illegal home-grown marijuana for an SUV listed on Craigslist — a vehicle that happened to be owned by a sheriff.

The Gazette reported Teller County Sheriff Jason Mikesell recently received a text from a Vail man offering to buy his SUV.

The man sent photos of the product, and Mikesell said he showed the texts to detectives. A meet-up was scheduled in Woodland Park in late November.

The man and a woman arrived for the swap and were arrested. Authorities said they found about 4 pounds of illegal marijuana in the duo's car.

The man, 39, and the woman, 41, were charged with possession with intent to sell.

Charity must pay hole-in-one rewards

WV CHARLESTON — Most golfers like short par 3s, but West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice probably wishes No. 18 at the Greenbrier Classic in 2015 was a little longer — 33 yards longer, to be exact.

In 2015, Justice's charity promised fans at the 18th hole \$100 for the first hole-in-one and \$500 for the second in 2015. Professionals George McNeill and Justin Thomas aced the 137-yard hole, forcing the charity to give almost \$200,000 to fans around the green.

The charity took out an insurance policy on the payouts, but a federal appeals court says the policy only covered holes at

least 170 yards long.

Old White Charities Inc. accused the insurer of breach of contract for not covering the payout, but the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected that claim.

Teen steals trooper's SUV for crimes: Cops

NJ NORTH BRUNSWICK — State police say a 16-year-old boy stole an unmarked police SUV from a trooper's home last weekend and used it in two robberies and the theft of gas from a service station.

The teen was arrested Wednesday on numerous counts including burglary, robbery and impersonating a law enforcement officer. His name wasn't released due to his age.

Authorities announced the arrest Thursday. They say two issued weapons that were inside the SUV when it was stolen on Sunday have been recovered.

Authorities say the teen stopped a truck driver Sunday morning and tried unsuccessfully to make the driver pay a fine for speeding. He later stopped two other vehicles and stole money from those drivers.

The teen also is accused of fueling the SUV at a gas station and leaving without paying.

Santa Claus helps police catch shoplifter

WY CASPER — Casper police say they arrested a shoplifter with the help of a man dressed as Santa Claus.

The Casper Star-Tribune reported the man who only identified himself as St. Nick said he noticed the thief drop something among the trees at his Christmas tree lot on Monday.

He says he did not think the act was suspicious until he noticed a police officer.

A Rocky Mountain Discount Sports store employee had accused a man of shoplifting.

The suspect initially denied it until St. Nick showed Sgt. Scott Jones the grove of trees where the thief had stashed the stolen merchandise.

Jones said the thief admitted to the theft, but was not arrested.

Jones said he instead was cited for the crime.

Rescue try ends after arrow falls from goose

CA LOS ANGELES — Rescuers tried to seize a goose that was impaled by an arrow.

The Los Angeles Times reported the animal control officers failed Wednesday to rescue the Canada bird, but they did watch as it appeared to jettison the arrow and flew out of reach.

The rescue attempt was the latest of several over three weeks.

Los Angeles County Dept. of Animal Care and Control public information officer Don Barre said, "We're happy that the arrow has fallen out. It's the best possible outcome."

The distressed goose had been spotted Dec. 1 at Frank G. Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas. The arrow had lodged in the bird's shoulder and neck tissue at a 45-degree angle.

Small town to burn sculpture of bears

UT BLUFF — A small Utah town will burn a dancing bears sculpture for an annual celebration of the winter solstice and to honor the former Bears Ears National Monument.

The Salt Lake Tribune reports Bluff residents and friends

Thursday night will burn the 15-foot-high effigy created by local artist Joe Pachak. The sculpture, made of willows and branches, depicts a traditional Ute dance step.

Pachak began the annual creation on his flammable art five years ago as a way to reflect on the achievements of the past year and to look ahead to the next.

About 400 people are expected to attend, which is nearly double the town's population.

President Donald Trump trimmed and broke up the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah earlier this month.

Father-in-law's toupee repeatedly scares man

NY NEW YORK — A New York City man who said he has a fear of the Tasmanian devil claims his father-in-law repeatedly scared him with a toupee that looks like the cartoon character.

The New York Post reported Yunes Doleh was arrested in November for violating a restraining order filed by his son-in-law, Mazen Dayem, 36, who said Doleh terrorized him at a funeral by waving the hair piece and snarling.

The Staten Island man said he's had a fear of the Tasmanian devil his entire life. Dayem claimed his father-in-law has taken advantage of his phobia since 2013. Dayem filed a restraining order in September following an altercation with Doleh at a restaurant.

An attorney for Doleh labeled the case a "family dispute."

Doleh faces charges of criminal contempt and aggravated harassment.

From wire reports

On a mission to provide objective reporting to America's military, wherever they serve.
Read us online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

USA Hockey's youth program on the rise

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — In the first 20 years of the world junior hockey championship, Team USA managed two podium finishes good for bronze medals in 1986 and 1992. The American youngsters couldn't keep up with teams from Canada and other nations where hockey is more deeply woven into the sporting culture.

That has changed. U.S. amateur hockey has caught up and then some.

At the annual tournament for the world's best players 20 and younger, the results reflect the development work and higher profile of a sport that usually plays second fiddle to football, baseball, basketball and more: The Americans have won gold medals three times since 2010, including last January, when they beat Canada in a riveting final.

The U.S., however, has never successfully defended a title or been able to win juniors at home. That will be the objective when the 10-nation tournament begins Dec. 26 in Buffalo, N.Y.

Coach Bob Motzko tried to drive that message home with the players — seven from last year's gold-medal team — who trained in Ohio this month.

"At our meeting, Coach basically said this is probably one of the best times USA Hockey is going through right now, with the strength of the teams we have, the players in the NHL, the strength of colleges nowadays," said defenseman Andrew Peeke, who is playing college hockey at Notre Dame. "It's just an awesome time."

Peeke, a second-round draft pick by the

Columbus Blue Jackets in 2016, is one of two players on the preliminary roster from Florida, a region not exactly known for producing elite hockey prospects. But the growth of the NHL — Miami and Tampa got teams in the early 1990s — and more media exposure has helped youth hockey make inroads in nontraditional markets in the South and West.

"You look at a kid like Auston Matthews coming from Arizona," said Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski, regarding his former teammate in World Juniors. Both are just 20 and already established NHL stars.

"Kids coming from all over are playing," said Werenski, who grew up in suburban Detroit. "The training and what everyone knows now is way more in-depth on what you need to work on at a young age, the skills you need and just how to play at a fast pace."

The game has seen tremendous growth in the U.S. since the early 1990s, leading to more rinks, kids getting involved earlier, better instruction and more competitive select leagues. The 555,000 registered hockey players in America this year is up from about 195,000 in 1991, according to USA Hockey. Participation is up 21 percent just in the past decade.

All that means there are more elite players to choose from for the national teams.

"A lot of respect for what some other countries have done, but we feel like we're going on a great path now," said Jim Johansson, general manager of the U.S. Junior team. "We have more depth at every

level and any championship we show up to, we feel like we can compete with anybody in the tournament."

Motzko, who coaches at St. Cloud State in Minnesota, said traditional hockey states in the Northeast and Midwest continue to put the bulk of talented youth players on the ice. A third of the players on the 28-man early roster this time are from Minnesota. But there are also a few from Missouri. Peeke and defenseman Quinn Hughes came from Florida. Forward Kailer Yamamoto, who grew up in Spokane, Wash., has already played in nine NHL games with the Edmonton Oilers. California has been well represented in recent years.

"We're in strong traditional markets that are still producing players, but it's fun to see this spread out and grow now," Motzko said.

Team USA routed Belarus 14-0 on Wednesday and had another exhibition game Friday night against Sweden ahead of the tournament's opening round next week. The U.S. team has Dec. 29 circled and recircled on the calendar — that's the day the Americans play Canada in the tournament's first outdoor game, at New Era Field, home of the Buffalo Bills.

No pressure, right?

"There will be a little bit of pressure knowing you're the defending champ, but I think it's kind of more a motivation to want to defend rather than the pressure of it," Peeke said. "Especially that it's on home soil. You want to be able to give people the opportunity to see that we can defend it and cherish the opportunity to defend it."

NBA roundup

James leads Cavaliers past surging Bulls

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James scored 34 points, Kevin Love added 27 and the Cleveland Cavaliers won their 12th straight home game, 115-112 over the Chicago Bulls on Thursday night as injured point guard Isaiah Thomas moved even closer to his return.

James had 11 points in the fourth quarter and dropped a pair of free throws with 11.1 seconds left as the Cavs won for the 19th time in 21 games and ended Chicago's seven-game winning streak.

With Cleveland's Jae Crowder

guarding him closely, Chicago's Denzel Valentine was short with a tying three-pointer in the final second. Rookie Lauri Markkanen scored 25 points for the Bulls.

Cavs coach Tyronn Lue missed the game with an undisclosed illness. Assistant coach Larry Drew filled in for Lue.

Raptors 114, 76ers 109: DeMar DeRozan scored a career-high 45 points and visiting Toronto overcame a 22-point deficit to beat Joel Embiid-less Philadelphia.

DeRozan also set a career high with six three-pointers.

Embiid missed two games with back tightness after logging a career-high 49 minutes in a triple-overtime loss to Oklahoma City last Friday. Embiid didn't show any discomfort during pregame drills, but was ruled out about 30 minutes before tipoff.

Knicks 102, Celtics 93: Michael Beasley scored 28 of his season-high 32 points in the second half, helping host New York shake off Kristaps Porzingis' dismal return to beat Boston.

Beasley went back to the bench with Porzingis back

from a knee injury, but he was on the floor in the fourth quarter while Porzingis watched from the sideline as the former No. 2 overall pick punished the Celtics inside and out to help the Knicks pull away.

Suns 97, Grizzlies 95: Former Memphis guard Troy Daniels hit a three-pointer with 17 seconds to play to give his team the lead, and host Phoenix held off Daniels' former team for its third victory in four games.

Jazz 100, Spurs 89: Rodney Hood scored 29 points and host Utah fended off multiple comeback attempts by San Antonio.

Army to hit field in Armed Forces Bowl

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Two of college football's most dominant rushing attacks will clash when San Diego State faces Army in Saturday's Armed Forces Bowl — even though the two offenses are dramatically different.

The pro-style offense used by San Diego State (10-2) is led by the top rusher in the Bowl Subdivision, senior Rashaad Penny. The consensus All-American finished fifth in the Heisman Trophy voting, ran for 2,027 yards and needs 107 more to break the school's single-season mark set last year by Donnel Pumphrey.

Army (9-3) leads the nation in averaging 368.1 yards rushing per game and is last with 29.6 yards passing using a triple-option formation that chugs methodically downfield. It's led by senior quarterback Ahmad Bradshaw, whose 1,566 yards rushing rank fifth nationally.

In winning the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy for the first time since 1996, the Black Knights attempted no passes against Air Force, one against Navy (complete for 20 yards)

and 19 all season. San Diego State offensive coordinator Jeff Horton said his unit was "like an Air Raid team" compared to Army's grind-it-out, keep-the-ball approach.

"It's a very difficult scheme to stop with any consistency," Aztecs coach Rocky Long said of the Black Knights' option. "We are only going to get the ball five or six times for the entire football game. It's very unusual, but for a true football fan, it's going to be very interesting to watch."

San Diego State is the first FBS program with consecutive 2,000-yard rushing seasons from different players. Penny could become the fourth player to compile five straight games of 200 yards, and Army coach Jeff Monken knows his defense will need to slow him down.

"He's proven he's one of the best players in the nation, if not the best," Monken said.

Some other things to watch for in Saturday's game at the home stadium of TCU:

No-slouch defenses

For all the attention on the

offenses, both teams have respectable defenses: San Diego State is 11th in the FBS in total defense and Army ranks 35th.

Bowl pride

San Diego State's 6-0 start included wins over Stanford and Arizona State. Then the Aztecs lost at home to Boise State and Fresno State, realistically ending their chances of winning a third consecutive Mountain West championship, and have since won four straight. SDSU is playing in its eighth consecutive bowl, the last seven under Long. The program appeared in eight total bowls prior to this streak. Army ties a school record with a second straight bowl appearance, equaling the 1984-85 teams that were the first in West Point history to accept invitations.

Streaks

San Diego State is seeking 11 wins for the third consecutive season. The only other FBS schools to achieve that during the 2015-17 seasons are Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State

and Oklahoma. ... Monken, in his fourth season at West Point, has led the Black Knights to three straight winning seasons for the first time since 1988-90. A victory would equal the West Point record for wins in a season, owned by the 1996 team that went 10-2.

"It's a challenge for us, playing a great team like San Diego State, but exciting to have that opportunity," Monken said. "It's something that we're certainly conscious of."

Lineman hurt

Aztecs senior right guard Antonio Rosales injured his left ankle early this season and hasn't played since mid-October. Long said he plans to start Rosales in his final college game and see how long he can play in trying to open holes for Penny.

Army's field general

Bradshaw needs just 22 yards to have the best rushing season at a service academy. Navy's Napoleon McCallum ran for 1,587 yards in 1983.

Nutile leads Temple past FIU in Gasparilla Bowl

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Geoff Collins has lofty expectations for Temple.

"The future is bright," the first-year coach said after Frank Nutile threw for 254 yards and a touchdown to lead the Owls to a 28-3 victory over Florida International in the Gasparilla Bowl on Thursday night.

Nutile teamed with Isaiah Wright on 45-yard TD play in the fourth quarter and also scored on a 4-yard run to give the Owls (7-6) an early lead. He completed passes of 13 and 17 yards to escape a first-and-30 hole before throwing 39 yards to Adonis Jennings to set up another TD.

The victory was the fourth in five games for Temple, which rebounded from a 3-5 start to finish with a winning record. The Owls, American Athletic Conference champions a year ago, won a bowl game for the first time since the 2011 New Mexico Bowl.

FIU (8-5) matched a school record for victories in its first year under Butch Davis, the former Miami, North Carolina and Cleveland Browns coach.

"Nobody's ever happy about losing a game," Davis said. "But what these kids accomplished this year, nobody thought was even remotely possible."

The Panthers played most of the night without quarterback Alex McGough, who left in the opening quarter with what

Davis said was a fractured collarbone. Maurice Alexander replaced him, but had limited success throwing the ball and was intercepted twice.

Nutile finished 17-for-27 passing with no interceptions and was named game's MVP. He threw 13 yards to Keith Kirkwood and 17 yards to Isaiah Wright on consecutive plays before Jennings' long reception moved the Owls into position to go up 14-3 on David Hood's 1-yard TD run.

Wright's TD reception made it 21-3 midway through the fourth quarter. Ryquell Armstead also scored on a 5-yard run for Temple.

"It means a lot. ... We've been through a lot," Nutile said. "Our team's mindset was to go

out there and leave it all on the field."

Forced into action: Alexander completed 16 of 33 passes for 162 yards for FIU. The Panthers were unable to run the ball consistently to take pressure off the backup quarterback, finishing with 88 yards on the ground and avoiding a shutout with Jose Borregales' 27-yard field goal in the third quarter.

What a rush: Temple's defense set a Gasparilla Bowl record with seven sacks. LB William Kwenkeu led the way with two. The Owls also forced three turnovers, including a fumble that Freddie Booth-Lloyd recovered to set up Armstead's late TD.

College basketball roundup

Bridges leads Michigan State to rout

Associated Press

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Miles Bridges had 17 points and nine rebounds as part of a balanced offense that gave No. 2 Michigan State a 102-60 victory over Long Beach State on Thursday night.

The Spartans (12-1) have won 11 straight with all the victories by double digits and many by 20-plus points.

The 49ers (5-9) trailed by just five points midway through the first half before Michigan State pulled away. The Spartans led by 16 points at halftime and dominated at both ends of the court to quickly turn the game into another rout.

No. 8 Texas A&M 89, Buffalo 73: Duane Wilson scored 23 points and Savion Flagg added 21 for the host Aggies, who were playing without three suspended players.

A&M (11-1) announced before the game that junior guard D.J. Hogg, the team's leading scorer at 14.6 points per game, was suspended for three games for a violation of university policy. In addition, freshman guards J.J. Caldwell and T.J. Starks missed the game because of violations of team rules.

San Diego State 72, No. 12 Gonzaga 70: Senior Trey Kell scored 10 of his 14 points in the

final 2:56 and redshirt freshman Jalen McDaniels scored 10 of his 15 points in the second half and had 10 rebounds for the host Aztecs.

No. 14 Kansas 75, Stanford 54: Udoka Azubuike scored his team's initial 10 points and dunked seven times on the way to 24 points for the visiting Jayhawks.

No. 16 Purdue 97, Tennessee State 48: Carsen Edwards scored 26 points and P.J. Thompson finished with 17 for the host Boilermakers.

No. 18 Arizona 73, UConn 58: Rawle Alkins scored 20 points and Dusan Ristic had 18 points and 10 rebounds for the

host Wildcats, who used a late run to pull away.

No. 20 Cincinnati 81, Cleveland State 62: Gary Clark scored 18 points as the Bearcats extended their home-court winning streak to 33 games, the longest in the nation.

No. 24 Florida State 98, Southern Mississippi 45: P.J. Savoy scored 17 points and the host Seminoles made 19 three-pointers.

Lipscomb 73, Navy 64: Garrison Mathews scored 20 of his 27 points in the second half as the visiting Bisons (9-4) held off the Midshipmen in the first meeting between the schools.

NHL roundup

Point, Stamkos lead Lightning past Senators in SO

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — It took longer than the Lightning wanted, but the NHL's top team finally prevailed against a struggling Atlantic Division foe.

Tampa Bay never led against the Ottawa Senators until Brayden Point and Steven Stamkos scored the only shootout goals, lifting the Lightning to a 4-3 victory on Thursday night, their eighth win in nine games.

"We're a veteran team," Stamkos said. "We're seasoned, and we understand that the game is 60 minutes. It may take 65 and a couple of shootouts to win the game. There's just no panic in this group."

Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped shots by Ottawa's Tom Pyatt and Matt Duchene in the shootout.

Tampa Bay threatened to win on a power play at the end of overtime, but Nikita Kucherov's shot past Craig Anderson was launched a split-second after the buzzer.

Ottawa broke out on top in unusual fashion. Bobby Ryan was credited with an unassisted goal 6:31 into the game after Dan Girardi's attempt to clear a rebound glanced off the shin of fellow Lightning defenseman Braydon Coburn and past Vasilevskiy.

Twelve minutes into the second period, Tampa Bay pulled even on a delayed penalty with a deflected goal of its own. Kucherov blasted a shot from the top of the right circle that glanced off teammates Tyler Johnson and Alex Killorn and through the legs of Anderson.

The Senators regained the lead on a backhander by Cody Ceci with 5:26 remaining in the second. Yanni Gourde tied it again just over a minute later.

Ottawa took its third lead six minutes into the third period on a power-play goal by Derick Brassard. Vladislav Namestnikov answered for Tampa Bay about five minutes later.

"Once we get the lead, we get a little passive, and that's something that we're going to have

to work on," Senators captain Erik Karlsson said. "We gave them a little too much room. We were up by a goal and we let them come back a little too easy. That's going to happen, unfortunately, against good teams like this."

Vasilevskiy needed to make only 18 saves in his league-leading 22nd victory. Anderson made 35 stops for Ottawa, which has lost all but three of its last 17 games.

Stars 4, Blackhawks 0: Tyler Seguin scored two goals in the second period, Ben Bishop earned his 22nd career shutout and host Dallas beat Chicago.

Oilers 3, Blues 2: Drake Caggiula scored with less than a minute remaining, and host Edmonton won its third straight game for the first time this season, beating St. Louis.

Devils 4, Rangers 3 (SO): Brian Boyle scored the tying goal in the third period and the game-winner in a shootout against his former team, and host New Jersey overcame a

season-high 45 saves by Henrik Lundqvist to beat New York.

Penguins 3, Blue Jackets 2 (SO): Kris Letang scored the deciding goal in the shootout, and host Pittsburgh beat Columbus.

Bruins 2, Jets 1 (SO): Charlie McAvoy celebrated his 20th birthday by scoring the decisive goal in the shootout, Tuukka Rask made 37 saves and host Boston beat Winnipeg.

Hurricanes 4, Predators 1: Noah Hanifin had a goal and two assists to lead an early outburst that carried visiting Carolina past Nashville.

Ducks 5, Islanders 4 (OT): Hampus Lindholm scored his third goal of the game in overtime to give visiting Anaheim the victory over New York.

Kings 2, Avalanche 1 (OT): Playing in his 1,000th career game, Dustin Brown scored in overtime to lift host Los Angeles over Colorado.

Sharks 5, Canucks 4 (OT): Kevin Labanc scored 1:53 into overtime and host San Jose beat Vancouver.