

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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No end in sight for partial shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Christmas has come and gone but the partial government shutdown is just getting started.

Wednesday brought the first full business day after several government departments and agencies closed up over the weekend due to a budgetary stalemate between President Donald Trump and Congress. And there is no end in sight.

The public and federal workers have largely been spared inconvenience and hardship because government is closed on weekends and federal employees were excused from work on Christmas Eve and Christmas, a federal holiday. The shutdown began at midnight last Friday.

Trump said Tuesday that the closed parts of the government will remain that way until Democrats agree to wall off the

U.S.-Mexico border to deter criminal elements. He said he's open to calling the wall something else as long as he ends up with an actual wall.

Asked when the government would reopen fully, Trump said he couldn't say.

"I can't tell you when the government's going to be open. I can tell you it's not going to be open until we have a wall or fence, whatever they'd like to call it," Trump said, referring to Democrats who staunchly oppose walling off the border.

"I'll call it whatever they want, but it's all the same thing," he told reporters after participating in a holiday video conference with representatives from all five branches of the military stationed in Alaska, Bahrain, Guam and Qatar.

Trump argued that drug flows and human trafficking can be stopped only by

a wall.

"We can't do it without a barrier. We can't do it without a wall," he said. "The only way you're going to do it is to have a physical barrier, meaning a wall. And if you don't have that then we're just not opening" the government.

Democrats oppose spending money on a wall, preferring instead to pump the dollars into fencing, technology and other means of controlling access to the border.

The stalemate over how much to spend and how to spend it caused the partial government shutdown that began Saturday following a lapse in funding for departments and agencies that make up about 25 percent of the government.

Some 800,000 government workers are affected. Many are on the job but must wait until after the shutdown to be paid again.

Mattis' replacement likely to face close scrutiny

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The departure of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis next week will thrust President Donald Trump's largely unknown choice for acting Pentagon chief into the military hot seat and shift attention to the search for a permanent replacement who will probably face sharp Capitol Hill questioning about the administration's murky foreign policy.

Trump tweeted Sunday that Deputy Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan will take over as acting head of the department on Jan. 1, elevating a former Boeing Co. senior executive with little experience in international affairs. Shanahan worked for Boeing for more than three decades and was a senior vice president when he became Pentagon deputy in July 2017. His time on the job has been mainly focused on the business side of the department and its budget in excess of \$700 billion.

A White House official said that in the new year Trump wants to focus on streamlining purchases at the Pentagon, an issue on which Shanahan has already been working. The official asked not to be identified publicly discussing personnel matters.

But there are looming policy questions about the wars in Syria and Afghanistan, including critical decisions about how the Pentagon will carry out Trump's order last week to pull all 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria and withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American forces in Afghanistan.

Both decisions trigger massive logistical challenges to get the troops and equipment out of both war zones safely, without further inflaming U.S. allies or boosting the aspirations of the enemy.

A key unanswered question is what the administration will do for the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, which have gotten weapons and training to fight Islamic State insurgents. The SDF will face almost certain attacks from Turkey, the Syrian government and ISIS once the U.S. leaves, and officials don't know if the Syrian rebels will have to return the weapons to the U.S.

Shanahan hasn't been to either war zone, and officials say he's likely to depend heavily on Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Dunford is scheduled to leave the job and retire Sept. 30, and Trump has already said he is nominating Gen. Mark Milley, the Army chief,

as the next chairman.

Dunford, who was in Afghanistan on Monday with a USO show, has been telling troops that so far the mission in Afghanistan has not changed, said his spokesman, Air Force Col. Pat Ryder. Ryder said Dunford "told them that they're American soldiers, they have a mission to do, and to just get after it."

Mattis' departure signals an acrimonious end to a tense relationship between him and Trump that had eroded in recent months.

Mattis hand-delivered a scathing resignation letter to the president Thursday in protest over Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. In the letter, Mattis made clear that he didn't see eye to eye with a president who has expressed disdain for NATO. That drew a critical tweet from Trump on Monday.

"We are substantially subsidizing the Militaries of many VERY rich countries all over the world, while at the same time these countries take total advantage of the U.S., and our TAXPAYERS, on Trade," Trump tweeted. "General Mattis did not see this as a problem. I DO, and it is being fixed!"

Trump in Iraq; says he won't remove troops

Associated Press

AL-ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq — President Donald Trump, who is visiting Iraq, says he has “no plans at all” to remove U.S. troops from the country.

Trump made his unannounced visit to Iraq on Wednesday, leaving behind a partially shuttered U.S. government to greet American troops helping hold off extremists in a country where thousands of Americans died during the recent war.

It comes a week after Trump stunned his national security advisers by announcing that he would withdraw U.S. troops from neighboring Syria where they have been fighting Islamic State militants. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis abruptly resigned following the announcement, and Trump's decision rattled allies around the world, including in Iraq.

Trump's trip was shrouded in secrecy. Air Force One flew overnight from Washington, landing at an airbase west of Baghdad under the cover of darkness Wednesday evening. It is his first visit with troops stationed in a troubled region.

Fifteen years after the 2003 invasion, the U.S. still has more than 5,000 troops in Iraq supporting the government as it continues the fight against remaining pockets of resistance by Islamic State. ISIS has lost a significant amount of territory

in Iraq and Syria but is still seen as a threat.

Trump, who speaks often about his support for the U.S. military, had faced criticism for not yet visiting U.S. troops stationed in harm's way as he comes up on his two-year mark in office. He told The Associated Press in an interview in October that he “will do that at some point, but I don't think it's overly necessary.” He later began to signal that such a troop visit was in the offing.

Trump had planned to spend Christmas at his private club in Florida, but stayed behind in Washington due to the partial government shutdown. It's unclear whether his trip to Iraq was added after it became apparent that parts of the government would be shut down indefinitely due to a stalemate between Trump and congressional Democrats over the president's demand for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Adding to the tumult, the stock market has been experiencing heavy losses over concerns about a slowing global economy, Trump's trade war with China and the president's public slamming of the Federal Reserve and its chairman over interest rate increases by the independent agency.

Trump's visit comes at a time when his Middle East policy is in flux. He went against the

views of his top national security advisers in announcing the Syria withdrawal, a decision that risks creating a vacuum for extremists to thrive.

There are dire implications in particular for neighboring Iraq. The Iraqi government now has control of all the country's cities, towns and villages after fighting its last urban battles against ISIS in December 2017. But its political, military and economic situation remains uncertain, and the country continues to experience sporadic bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, which most people attribute to ISIS.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi recently said Iraqi troops could deploy into Syria to protect Iraq from threats across its borders. Iraq keeps reinforcements along its frontier to guard against infiltration by ISIS militants, who hold a pocket of territory along the Euphrates River.

Trump campaigned for office on a platform of ending U.S. involvement in foreign trouble spots, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Syria decision will ultimately affect all of the approximately 2,000 troops deployed in the war-torn country. The Pentagon is also said to be developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving in Afghanistan.

During the presidential campaign, Trump blamed Democrat Hillary Clinton for the rise of ISIS, due to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011 during her tenure as secretary of state.

President George W. Bush is the one who set the 2011 withdrawal date as part of an agreement with the Iraqi government to gradually shrink the U.S. presence and slowly hand off security responsibilities to the government and Iraqi security forces.

His successor, President Barack Obama, wanted to leave a residual force in Iraq to help the government manage ongoing security challenges. But he ultimately went ahead with the scheduled pullout in 2011 after Iraq's political leaders rejected terms the U.S. sought for legal protections for the U.S. troops that would have remained.

Two of Trump's recent predecessors visited Iraq early in their terms.

Bush visited Iraq in November 2003, about eight months after that conflict began. Due to security concerns, Bush waited until 2006 to make his first visit to Afghanistan.

Obama visited Iraq in April 2009, the first year of his eight years in office, as part of an overseas tour. He visited Afghanistan in 2010.

Turkey seeks to expel US-allied Kurdish forces in Syria

Associated Press

ISTANBUL — Turkey said Tuesday it is working with the United States to coordinate the withdrawal of American forces but remains “determined” to clear U.S.-allied Kurdish fighters from northeastern Syria.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters that “if Turkey says it will enter, it will” in comments carried by private DHA news agency. His comments came amid reports that Turkey-backed Syrian reb-

els are getting ready to begin a military operation in and near the northern town of Manbij that is controlled by Kurdish-led fighters.

For weeks, Turkey has been threatening to launch a new offensive against the Kurdish fighters, who partnered with the U.S. to drive Islamic State out of much of northern and eastern Syria. Ankara views the Kurdish forces as terrorists because of their links to an insurgent group inside Turkey.

President Donald Trump

announced the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces after a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan earlier this month.

The minister also said Ankara and Washington have agreed to complete a road map on Manbij until the U.S. withdraws. Under the June deal, Kurdish forces would leave Manbij, in the western Euphrates valley, but delays have infuriated Turkey.

Turkey-backed Syrian opposition fighters have been mov-

ing to the outskirts of Manbij, and the Turkish army continued to dispatch tanks, artillery and other equipment to the border and an area administered by Turkey in northern Syria, according to Turkish media reports.

Maj. Youssef Hammoud, of the Turkey-backed Syrian rebels known as the National Army, said the military operation against Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria is “near but has not started yet.”

Medical checks ordered after second immigrant child dies

Associated Press

HOUSTON — U.S. Customs and Border Protection have ordered medical checks on every child in its custody after an 8-year-old boy from Guatemala died, marking the second death of an immigrant child in the agency's care this month.

The death came during an ongoing dispute over border security and with a partial government shutdown underway over President Donald Trump's demand for border wall funding.

The boy, identified by Guatemalan authorities as Felipe Gomez Alonzo, had been in CBP's custody with his father, Agustin Gomez, since Dec. 18. CBP said in a statement late Tuesday that an agent first noticed the boy had a cough and "glossy eyes" about 9 a.m. Monday. He was eventually hospitalized twice and died just before midnight, the agency said.

CBP said in the statement that it needs the help of other government agencies to provide health care.

The agency "is considering options for surge medical assistance" from the Coast Guard and may request help from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Defense and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

A CBP spokesman could not immediately answer how many children are currently in the

agency's custody. But with border crossings surging, CBP processes thousands of children — both alone and with their parents — every month.

Immigration advocates and human rights groups sharply criticized CBP in the wake of Felipe's death. The body of Jakelin Caal, 7, who died earlier this month, was returned last week to her village in Guatemala for burial.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan said Wednesday that the agency has more than 1,500 emergency medical technicians on staff and that officers are taking dozens of sick children to hospitals every day.

"This is an extraordinarily rare occurrence," McAleenan told "CBS This Morning" of the recent child deaths. "It's been more than a decade since we've had a child pass away anywhere in a CBP process, so this is just devastating for us."

Margaret Huang, executive director of Amnesty International USA, said the Trump administration's "policies of cruelty toward migrants and asylum-seekers at the border must cease immediately before any more children are harmed."

The White House referred questions about the latest case to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, CBP's parent agency. CBP officers and the Border Patrol remain on the job despite the shutdown.

Afghan vote delayed by tech issues

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan's presidential election, initially scheduled for April, will be postponed for several months to allow time to fix technical problems that surfaced during October's parliamentary elections, officials said Wednesday.

More time is needed to verify voter lists and train staff on a biometric identification system designed to reduce fraud, said Abdul Aziz Ibrahimi, deputy spokesman for the Independent Election Commission.

Parliamentary elections were fraught with delays after the few staff trained on the biometric system did not show up at the polling booths and countless registered voters could not find their names on voter lists. Polling had to continue for a second day after hundreds of polling stations opened several hours late. Several legal complaints have been filed to challenge the results.

No new date for the presidential election has yet been set.

The last presidential election, held in 2014, was mired in controversy and widespread allegations of fraud.

The two leading candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, fought a tight race that went to a second vote. But before the results of the runoff could be announced, Abdullah alleged massive vote fraud and warned of widespread protests. John Kerry, then U.S. secretary of state, interceded and helped cobble together a unity government and convinced the election commission to hold off on announcing the results of the runoff, which Ghani seemed poised to win.

Ghani was named president and Abdullah was given a newly created title of chief executive. The arrangement was intended to last only two years but has continued up to the present, resulting in a government marked by deep divisions that has struggled to combat a resurgent Taliban.

Trump's UN contribution plan falls short

Bloomberg

President Donald Trump's promise to save American taxpayers money by getting other countries to contribute more to international organizations has been put to the test at the United Nations. It didn't go well.

American diplomats in New York lobbied countries including India, Brazil and Turkey to increase their financial support for the United Nations' \$6.7 billion-a-year peacekeeping budget, but they came up short during negotiations this month.

That will leave the "blue helmets," who monitor conflict zones from South Sudan to Lebanon, with a \$220 million shortfall for the year as the U.S. refuses to pay more than a quarter of the total budget.

"Unfortunately, in a deeply

dissatisfying and disappointing turn of events, every country decided reform was good and right for the U.N., but not for how it is financed," Ambassador Cherith Norman Chalet, the U.S. representative for U.N. reform, said Saturday.

The impasse underscores the difficulty the Trump administration faces as it pushes countries to put up more money for international organizations — from the UN to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — where the U.S. has traditionally been the largest donor. The president tweeted Monday that other countries "take advantage of their friendship with the United States."

The U.S. remains the top contributor to U.N. budgets, paying more than \$10 billion

a year when all expenditures are totaled. It had been paying about 28 percent of the peacekeeping budget, but Congress has capped those payments at 25 percent.

The Obama administration, emphasizing the need for multi-lateral cooperation, waived the cap, but it has been reimposed by the Trump administration, which says many of the peacekeeping efforts are wasteful and ineffective.

As U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley steps down with the arrival of the new year, Trump's nominee to replace her, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert, is expected to double down on the administration's criticism of the U.N. and what it sees as its anti-Israel bias and its inefficiencies.

Quake from Mount Etna volcano jolts Sicily

Associated Press

ROME — A quake triggered by Mount Etna's ongoing eruption jolted eastern Sicily before dawn Wednesday, slightly injuring 10 people and prompting frightened Italian villagers to flee their homes.

Italy's Civil Protection officials said the quake, which struck at 3:19 a.m., was part of a swarm of some 1,000 tremors, most of them barely perceptible, linked to Etna's volcanic eruption this week.

The quake struck north of Catania, the largest city in the eastern part of the Mediterranean island, but no injuries or damages were reported there.

Italy's national seismology institute said it registered a magnitude of 4.8 and oc-

curred at a relatively shallow depth, 0.6 miles under the mountain's surface.

The temblor damaged some rural homes, including structures that had been abandoned years ago, toppled a Madonna statue in a church in the town of Santa Venerina and opened up cracks on a highway, which was closed for inspection, Rai state radio said.

One 80-year-old man was safely extracted from the rubble of his home, the Italian news agency ANSA said.

A woman told state radio that a heavy armoire in her home had toppled over, trapping her sister, who was then safely pulled out by her father. In another house, a ceiling collapsed.

"Etna remains a dangerous volcano,

and this country of ours is unfortunately fragile," government undersecretary Vito Crimi said, adding there were no fatalities and 10 slight injuries.

The quake was also felt in the upscale Sicilian resort town of Taormina.

The Civil Protection agency said temporary shelters were being set up for people whose houses were damaged or who were too alarmed to return to their homes.

In recent days, Etna's latest eruption has been shooting volcanic ash, heavy smoke and lava stones into the air, coating roads and homes nearby with ash. A new fracture has opened near Etna's southeast crater, and lava has been flowing down an uninhabited slope.

Indonesia issues coastal tsunami warning

Associated Press

CARITA BEACH, Indonesia — Indonesian authorities asked people to avoid the coast in areas where a tsunami killed at least 430 people last weekend in a fresh warning issued on the anniversary of the catastrophic 2004 Asian earthquake and tsunami.

The big waves that followed an eruption on a volcanic island hit communities along the Sunda Strait on Saturday night. The eruption of Anak Krakatau, or "Child of Krakatoa," is believed to have set off a large landslide on the volcano, apparently on its slope and underwater, displacing water that slammed into Java and Sumatra islands.

Indonesia's Meteorology, Geophysics and Climatology Agency asked people late Tuesday to stay at least 1,640 feet and less than a mile from the coastline along the strait, which lies between the two islands.

The agency was monitoring Anak Krakatau's eruptions as stormy weather and high surf continued to plague the area, said agency head Dwikorita Karnawati.

"All these conditions could potentially cause landslides at the cliffs of the crater into the sea, and we fear that that could trigger a tsunami," Karnawati said at a news conference. She asked that communities remain vigilant and not to panic.

The warning was reiterated by the country's disaster agency on Wednesday.

The tsunami struck without warning, taking people by surprise even in a country familiar with seismic disaster. No big earthquake shook the ground beforehand, and it hit at night on a holiday weekend while people were enjoying concerts and other beach and resort activities.

It was a sharp contrast to the disaster that struck 14 years ago off the northwestern tip of Sumatra island. An enormous magnitude 9.1 earthquake rocked the area the morning after Christmas, creating gigantic waves that surged far inland and swallowed everything in their path. The wall of water killed some 230,000 people in a dozen countries, more than half in Indonesia's Aceh province.

Japan to resume whaling, but not in Antarctic

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan announced Wednesday that it is leaving the International Whaling Commission to resume commercial hunts for the animals for the first time in 30 years, but said it would no longer go to the Antarctic for its much-criticized annual killings.

Japan switched to what it calls research whaling after the IWC imposed a moratorium on commercial whaling in the 1980s, and now says stocks have recovered enough to resume commercial hunts.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Japan would resume commercial whaling in July "in line with Japan's basic policy of promoting sustainable use

of aquatic living resources based on scientific evidence."

He added that Japan is disappointed that the IWC — which he said is dominated by conservationists — focuses on the protection of whale stocks even though the commission has a treaty mandate for both whale conservation and the development of the whaling industry.

"Regrettably, we have reached a decision that it is impossible in the IWC to seek the coexistence of states with different views," he said at a news conference.

Suga said the commercial hunts would be limited to Japan's territorial waters and its 200-mile exclusive economic zone along its coasts. He said Japan would stop its an-

nual whaling expeditions to the Antarctic and northwest Pacific oceans. Nonsignatory states are not allowed to do so, according to Japanese Fisheries Agency officials.

The IWC imposed the moratorium on commercial whaling three decades ago due to a dwindling whale population. In 1987, Japan switched to what it calls research whaling, but the program has been criticized as a cover for commercial hunting since the meat is sold on the market at home.

Japanese officials said Japan, even after leaving the whaling convention, will remain as an observer to the IWC and plans to continue participating in the group's scientific meetings and annual conferences.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City rents out light display on water tower

IA ALTOONA — A Des Moines suburb is renting out the light color display on the city water tower.

The Des Moines Register reported that Altoona charges people \$50 an hour for the display. They make selections from the LED lighting colors and some limited effects. Officials say it's a unique way to mark special occasions.

The tower is visible throughout the city and can be seen from Interstate 80.

Altoona regularly lights the tower with colors marking events and causes such as cancer awareness and holidays. The city lists the causes behind the colors on its online calendar.

University scientists ID extinct species

TN GRAY — East Tennessee State University scientists have discovered the remains of two extinct species of ancient peccaries at the Gray Fossil Site.

According to the school, peccaries, also known as javelinas, are medium-sized omnivorous animals with small tusks. They look something like pigs but are actually unrelated.

Crewmembers at the fossil site have been pulling up peccary bones for many years, but a new study revealed the species of peccary that roamed the ancient forests of Tennessee. Neither of the two species has been found in this part of the country before.

Woman with 26 dogs charged with cruelty

VA LYNCHBURG — A Lynchburg woman was charged with animal cruelty

after police seized 26 dogs from a cramped home.

The News & Advance reported that Katherine Tate was charged Dec. 18 after police found the animals living in an 852-square-foot house that smelled of feces, urine and ammonia.

Court documents said police went to Tate's home after a neighbor called and reported hearing "yelling and hitting sounds" inside.

Tate was charged with five counts of misdemeanor animal cruelty. The police department's animal control unit turned over the dogs to the Lynchburg Humane Society.

Strong winds destroy church's steeple

DE BETHANY BEACH — Fierce winds destroyed the steeple of a Catholic church in Delaware.

The Daily Times of Salisbury, Md., reported Saturday that windy weather in Bethany Beach blew off the steeple of the St. Ann Catholic Church late last week.

The steeple was attached to the church's parish hall, which was the original church when the structure was built in 1955. The church's priest, the Rev. John Klevence, said the steeple toppled sometime between Thursday and Friday.

The steeple's loss won't affect the ringing of the church's bells. Klevence said the steeple didn't contain real bells, but instead housed a speaker that played a recording. He said the speaker wasn't damaged.

Parking tickets turn into food for hungry

KY LEXINGTON — The parking authority in Kentucky's second-largest city said it collected three tons of food this year to pay off more

than \$10,000 in parking and other citations.

The Lexington Herald-Leader reported that 7,360 food items were donated that paid \$10,765 in citations from Nov. 19 through Dec. 14.

The Lexington Parking Authority said the program allows people to bring in 10 cans of food in exchange for \$15 off a parking citation.

State claims US' top spot for dog owners

ID BOISE — Idaho is one of the most pet-friendly places in the country and tops the charts when it comes to dog ownership, a recent study has found.

The Idaho Statesman reported Idaho had the highest percentage of dog ownership in the country at the end of 2016, the most recent year the full dataset is available.

The American Veterinary Medical Association said 38 percent of households in the U.S. have a pet dog, but in Idaho, 58 percent of households have a dog.

When it comes to cats, Idahoans are significantly less enthusiastic. Only 33 percent of Idaho households have a cat as a pet. Still, Idaho made the top 10 list for cat ownership, coming in eighth on a roster led by Vermont.

Waterfowl droppings a year-round problem

SD RAPID CITY — People who watch and feed the ducks and geese in Rapid City's parks should also watch their step.

Parks Division Manager Scott Anderson told the Rapid City Journal that waterfowl droppings are a messy problem year-round in areas of the city with open water. In spite of the city's annual efforts, geese and

ducks gather during the fall and spring migrations on water that remains unfrozen.

The city will work with Game, Fish & Parks to reduce the resident Canada goose population in the summer.

Program volunteers donate fresh produce

ME ORONO — The University of Maine said volunteers to its annual Harvest for Hunger program donated more than 230,000 pounds of produce this year.

The University of Maine Cooperative Extension runs the program, which began in 2000. The school said the donations went directly to neighbors as well as to 187 sites such as food pantries and low-income senior centers. Volunteers spent more than 2,600 hours growing, collecting and transporting donated food to distribution sites for the program.

Agreement signed to preserve shipwreck

FL TALLAHASSEE — France and Florida have signed a "declaration of intent" to preserve, protect and research a 16th-century shipwreck off the state's coast.

Florida Secretary of State Ken Detzner and Consul General of France in Miami Clement Leclerc announced the agreement to protect what remains of La Trinite, which sank off the coast of Cape Canaveral during a 1565 hurricane. The Trinite was the flagship of a fleet captained by Jean Ribault that was part of a conflict with Spain as the nations fought to colonize Florida.

The agreement calls for artifacts removed from the site to be put on public display in Florida.

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'Generation Z' QBs a different breed

Associated Press

Trent Dilfer has been head coach for the national high school quarterback competition known as Elite 11 since 2011, and even in that short period of time the quality of players coming through the program has drastically improved.

"We've always had our handful of clearly the best," said Dilfer, the former first-round NFL Draft pick and Super Bowl-winning quarterback with Baltimore. "One through three, one through five basically have kind of been the same every year. You just know they're going to make it. But five through 50 is 50 percent better now than it was when I started."

Generation Z quarterbacks who grew up with personal coaches, 7-on-7 spring leagues and all they ever wanted to know about two-deep coverage on YouTube have taken over college football. Combined with offensive innovation that many of these young QBs have seen since middle school, the

passing game has reached new heights this season.

With 25 bowls and the College Football Playoff national championship game left to play, interceptions are at an all-time low (0.82 per team per game) and the frequency of passes resulting in a touchdown (5.48 percent) is at an all-time high in the Bowl Subdivision. Major-college quarterbacks are completing passes at a near-record percentage (59.9) while average yards per attempt (7.41) is the best it has ever been.

The current passer efficiency rating for all of FBS is 134.99, which would break the previous mark of 133.83 set in 2012.

The latest statistical surge has been led by the quarterbacks who will play in the Orange Bowl semifinal on Dec. 29, when No. 1 Alabama faces No. 4 Oklahoma. Both Heisman Trophy winner Kyler Murray (205.72) of Oklahoma and Alabama's Tua Tagovailoa (202.30) are on pace to break the record for passer efficiency rating set by former Sooners quarterback

Baker Mayfield (198.92) last season. The quarterbacks in the Cotton Bowl playoff game have also done their part. No. 2 Clemson, led by freshman Trevor Lawrence (154.02 rating), faces No. 3 Notre Dame and quarterback Ian Book (162.50 rating).

Murray, Tagovailoa and Lawrence were five-star talents who fall into Dilfer's "clearly the best" category. But polished passers are being churned out as if by a factory.

"They have had 'Outlier' reps from doing all this stuff," said former UCLA coach and quarterback Rick Neuheisel, referring to Malcolm Gladwell's book that theorized 10,000 hours of practice is necessary to become an expert in a field.

Or as Dilfer puts it: "They've had more opportunity to be the quarterback."

Oliver Luck was the quarterback at West Virginia before being drafted by the Houston Oilers in the second round in 1982. Growing up in Cleveland, football was played during foot-

ball season.

"As soon as the season was over, that football would gather dust because you were more than likely involved in other sports," said Luck, who is now the commissioner of the XFL.

By the time his son was in high school in Houston, spring practice was common and 7-on-7 — a pared-down version of football with no linemen or tackling, just quarterbacks, receivers and defensive backs — was growing. Andrew Luck was a two-time Heisman runner-up at Stanford and the first overall pick in the 2012 NFL Draft by the Colts. He didn't dabble in private coaches until he was preparing for the draft.

"I don't know what the number is but, if I threw 5,000 passes (combining practices, games and workouts) in my high school career I bet Andrew threw 50,000 and today's kids might throw 100,000," Oliver Luck said. "A significant increase in the number and the quality of the repetitions. That's just the physical part."

Jeudy following in footsteps of other Tide star WRs

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Jerry Jeudy's ambitions grew with every college camp he attended and every highly rated defensive back he beat head to head.

His recruiting stock rose, and so did his goals.

Now Alabama's latest All-America wide receiver, Jeudy ratcheted up his workout routine, started eating healthier and buckled down in the classroom for his senior year at Deerfield Beach High School in Florida.

"When he got out there and started feeling like, 'I'm going against guys that were supposed to be five-stars and I'm taking it to them. I can do it,'" Deerfield coach Jevon Glenn said. "Then he put himself in that class and after that, it was a wrap."

It's not a wrap quite yet, with

at least one more season at Alabama awaiting, plus the College Football Playoffs. Alabama faces Oklahoma in an Orange Bowl semifinal matchup in Miami — an hour from Jeudy's hometown — on Dec. 29.

The 6-foot-1, 192-pound Jeudy has followed fellow south Florida products Amari Cooper and Calvin Ridley to receiving stardom with the Crimson Tide. He became a five-star recruit, like them. And the go-to receiver for a national title contender, also like them.

Like Cooper in 2014, the sophomore also won the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's top receiver.

Jeudy has put up big numbers like his predecessors, including Atlanta Falcons star Julio Jones. The other three all became first-round NFL Draft picks.

He has the benefit of catch-

ing passes from an elite quarterback in Heisman Trophy runner-up Tua Tagovailoa in a more pass-oriented offense. But Jeudy also shares the ball with a deeper pool of talented receivers than any of them.

Jeudy has already put up bigger numbers than Ridley did in either of his final two seasons in a much more run-first offense. He has 59 catches for 1,103 yards — an 18.7-yard average — and 12 touchdowns.

Jeudy worked out every other day with Ridley as a 10th-grader and they still keep in touch.

"Great player, works really hard and deserves everything coming his way," Ridley said. "We played high school together and grew up together a little bit. Just seeing him grow and becoming the player he is — that's the most exciting thing."

All that time working with or watching Ridley and Co-

per helped give the ambitious Jeudy specific targets. Their success, he said, "just made me go harder."

"They taught me a lot," Jeudy said. "Hard work beats talent, so if you've got talent and you work hard, you can turn into something serious."

That's why his success at all-star games and camps served as such a motivator. You can be good with a good work ethic, and with a better one you could really be "something serious."

Glenn also offers an anecdote showing that Jeudy's increased focus transferred into the classroom, too. He said the receiver called him before the Under Armour All-American game, insisting that a B-plus he received in his final semester had to be a mistake. The teacher agreed that it was a calculating error and Jeudy wound up with straight A's, the coach said.

NFC playoff picture clear; AFC muddled

Associated Press

Barring ties in Week 17—and there are some wild scenarios should certain games end in draws Sunday—the road to the playoffs is quite straight in the NFC. The path to a first-round bye in the AFC has a bunch of curves in it.

Already in are NFC division winners Dallas (East), New Orleans (South), Chicago (North) and the Los Angeles Rams (West). AFC divisions clinched belong to New England in the East and, well, nobody else. But there are clear leaders.

Seattle owns an NFC wild card, and the LA Chargers have one in the AFC, though they can still win the AFC West.

“You either believe in something or you don’t,” said coach Pete Carroll, whose 9-6 Seahawks made the postseason in what was considered a rebuilding year. “I think just staying the course and knowing we’re on to something. Believing in the history. We know what we’re capable of doing. We’ve shown it over a lot of years. You’re always adapting, but it’s staying what you’re true to.

I think that’s what is happening. We look like a team that we have seen before, and that’s powerful.”

Most powerful so far has been New Orleans, with the league’s best record at 13-2, and a dynamic offense led by Drew Brees. The Saints have home-field advantage throughout the conference playoffs.

The Rams (12-3) get the other opening-round bye if they beat San Francisco on Sunday. If they lose and the Bears win at Minnesota, Chicago (11-4) earns the week off and Los Angeles drops to the third seed.

A Bears win also could keep the Vikings (8-6-1) out of the postseason, providing defending champion Philadelphia (8-7) wins at Washington. Only the Vikings or Eagles can get the second NFC wild card.

“We’ve got to empty the bucket, and that’s the way we’ve got to play next week at home,” Vikings tight end Kyle Rudolph says. “I’m really looking forward to that environment.”

In the AFC, seeding is more muddled. Any of four teams could be the top or second seed.

The simplest route is if Kansas City (11-4) and New England (10-5), currently the top two in the conference, both win Sunday. But if the Chiefs lose at home to Oakland and the Chargers (11-4) win at Denver, Los Angeles moves into the top spot.

Houston (10-5) also could wind up No. 1 in the AFC with losses by the Chiefs, Patriots against the Jets, and Chargers. New England, the only unbeaten team at home this year, would get the first seed with a victory and losses by the Chiefs and Chargers.

And get this: Houston doesn’t even own a division title. If the Texans fall at home to Jacksonville, the winner of the Colts at Titans game in Tennessee takes the AFC South, and the Texans become a wild card, joining either the Chiefs or Chargers.

Texans coach Bill O’Brien, whose club began the season 0-3, is intrigued by the division being so ensconced in the playoff picture this year.

“I think that’s an interesting question because I can remember the question was, two years ago, ‘Why is the AFC South so

bad?’” he says. “Now, ‘Why is it so good?’”

“I’ve never thought it was bad. I think every year it’s been extremely difficult to win games in the division. I just think there’s a lot of great coaches. You’ve got Frank (Reich) in Indy, Mike (Vrabel) in Tennessee, Doug (Marrone) in Jacksonville. You’ve got a lot of great players, quarterbacks, so you’ve got a tough division.”

The AFC division often looked at as the toughest has been the North, which, not surprisingly, has come down to Baltimore vs. Pittsburgh. Except the Ravens (9-6) host the Browns, while the Steelers (8-6-1) must beat visiting Cincinnati and hope their archenemies from Cleveland sidetrack Baltimore, either beating or tying the Ravens.

Neither the Ravens nor the Steelers can be a wild card—except if Pittsburgh ties the Bengals, then Indianapolis and Tennessee also tie. Then the Steelers are in.

Of course, Pittsburgh also can win the North with a draw and a loss by Baltimore.

Your head spinning yet?

Gurley will play if healthy as Rams seek playoff bye

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif.— Effectively locked into their playoff seed last season, the Los Angeles Rams rested nearly all of their key players against the San Francisco 49ers in Week 17.

The Rams will again host the 49ers in the regular-season finale on Sunday, but have plenty to play for this time around.

Coach Sean McVay said the Rams would go all out to try to secure a first-round bye, including playing running back Todd Gurley if he is healthy.

“We want to do what’s best for Todd most importantly, and what’s best for Todd is also what’s best for our football team,” McVay said Monday.

The Rams (12-3) will clinch

the No. 2 seed and a first-round bye in the NFC with a win or a Chicago loss at Minnesota. They can’t get the top spot, which belongs to the Saints.

Gurley was not active for the 31-9 win over Arizona on Sunday because of soreness in his knee. McVay felt Gurley made progress during the week and would like to play him against the 49ers. Gurley rushed for 63 yards and two touchdowns and had four receptions for 23 yards and one touchdown in a 39-10 win at San Francisco in Week 7.

Gurley leads the NFL with 17 rushing touchdowns and 21 total touchdowns from scrimmage. He also ranks second with 1,251 yards rushing and fourth with 1,831 yards from scrimmage.

McVay also said he would have no concerns about going

into a possible NFC divisional-round playoff game with Gurley not having played in three weeks should the Rams earn a bye.

“Would it be ideal? No. But is it something you’re going to be concerned with? No,” McVay said, “I think we have a lot of confidence in Todd, and if he’s ready to go then he’ll be good to go and he’ll be sharp, whenever that is.”

McVay compared the possible extended absence for Gurley to his decision to hold out the Rams’ starting offense in the preseason.

“Guys come back from injuries all the time, and it was a long break that we had before we started this season with those guys, and Todd did a pretty good job against Oak-

land running the football and making a lot of big plays,” said McVay, referencing the 33-13 win over the Raiders in the season opener. “You’d obviously like to be able to get these guys as much work as possible, but most importantly is the health.”

The Rams found a suitable backup for Gurley in veteran C.J. Anderson, who rushed for 167 yards and one touchdown on 20 carries against the Cardinals after signing with Los Angeles as a free agent last Tuesday. However, McVay said Anderson’s impressive debut would not sway his decision on whether Gurley plays this week.

“We don’t want to do anything where we’re putting him in harm’s way,” McVay said.

NBA roundup

LeBron hurt in Lakers' rout of Warriors

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — LeBron James prides himself on his durability, being available night after night, game after grueling game.

That's why the Lakers star is so mad he got hurt.

The Los Angeles Lakers lost LeBron in the third quarter to a strained left groin then went out and beat the two-time defending champions without him Tuesday night, getting King James' 17 points, 13 rebounds and five assists before the injury in a surprising 127-101 rout of the Golden State Warriors.

"I take a lot of pride in it," James said of always playing. "That's why it [angered me] not to be able to go back into the game. It's more than anything being available to my teammates, being available to my coaching staff. That's something I take more personal than anything. Hopefully, it's not a long thing."

James grabbed at his left groin area with 7:51 left in the third after slipping under the Warriors' basket while trying for a loose ball. He tried to stretch it out, awkwardly

walked toward the Lakers bench trying to loosen up before leaving on his own, though gingerly, out the tunnel to the locker room.

He is scheduled for an MRI exam Wednesday and coach Luke Walton is preparing to be without James on Thursday night in Sacramento.

Celtics 121, 76ers 114 (OT): Kyrie Irving hit back-to-back three-pointers in overtime for six of his 40 points and host Boston rallied to beat Philadelphia.

Irving, who forced OT on a jump shot with 20 seconds left in the fourth, also pulled down 10 rebounds for the Celtics, who trailed 113-108 with 3:33 left in the extra period before rallying behind Irving down the stretch.

Ben Simmons' two free throws with 2:15 left put the Sixers up 114-112, but Philadelphia didn't score again.

Irving's three-pointer with 3:01 left gave Boston its first lead of overtime at 115-114, then after a miss by Philadelphia, Irving hit another three-pointer with 1:28 left and Boston fans leaped to their feet and cheered louder than they

had all night.

Rockets 113, Thunder 109: James Harden scored 41 points and host Houston beat Oklahoma City for its seventh win in the past eight games.

Harden has scored 30 points or more in a career-high seven games in a row, marking the first time a player has done that since Russell Westbrook had eight consecutive 30-point games in November 2016.

A three-pointer by Paul George with less than two minutes left got Oklahoma City within 4 before Harden missed a three. Westbrook missed a shot for the Thunder, but George stole the ball from Harden and was fouled.

George made both free throws to get the Thunder within two with 43.6 seconds left. Harden then drove past George and into the lane for a layup to make it 112-108 with 20.4 seconds left.

Westbrook made one of two free throws to cut it to three with 15 seconds left, and Austin Rivers made a free throw with 7.4 seconds left to secure the win.

Bucks 109, Knicks 95: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30

points and 14 rebounds in his Christmas debut, and visiting Milwaukee celebrated its return to the holiday schedule by beating New York.

Brook Lopez scored 20 points for the Bucks, who played on Christmas for the first time since 1977. They were selected for the showcase slate of games largely because of Antetokounmpo but the timing also was perfect to show an emerging team, which improved the NBA's second-best record to 23-10.

Malcolm Brogdon finished with 17 points for the Bucks, who bounced back from a loss to Miami on Saturday to win for the fifth time in six games.

Jazz 117, Trail Blazers 96: Rudy Gobert had 18 points, 14 rebounds and seven blocks while Donovan Mitchell added 19 points to lead host Utah to a rout of Portland.

Joe Ingles chipped in 15 points, seven rebounds, and five assists for the Jazz (17-18), who won for the fifth time in their last six home games while shooting 55 percent from the floor.

Damian Lillard scored 20 points to lead Portland.

Transfer fees help NHL build feeder system abroad

Associated Press

When Rasmus Dahlin put pen to paper on his first NHL contract, the reverberations carried to Gothenburg and Lidköping in his native Sweden.

The No. 1 overall pick signing with the Buffalo Sabres earned Sweden more than \$250,000 to put back into development.

"It's unreal," Dahlin said. "We need all the money we can get."

Last year alone, the NHL paid more than \$35 million in transfer fees as teams signed European players. There are agreements in place with all the major hockey-producing countries except Russia and

Switzerland that allow the free flow of players to the best league in the world.

"The purpose I suppose is to help prime the pump for hockey development," deputy NHL Commissioner Bill Daly said. "The pool of players who can play in the National Hockey League continues to increase on a regular basis. ... There's more better players than ever before."

When the world junior championship begins Wednesday in Canada, it will be a showcase of that emerging talent spurred along in Europe and North America by this money. The NHL also sends junior leagues in Canada and the United States

over \$12 million annually and provides financial support for USA Hockey.

That feeder system is partially responsible for the game's explosion of young talent in recent years. Nowhere is that more evident than Sweden, which received roughly \$8 million last year for Dahlin and more than 30 other players signing NHL contracts.

"That money is obviously huge," said Detroit Red Wings defenseman Niklas Kronwall, who is Swedish. "It doesn't just go to the pro teams. I think it funnels down to your first team and the teams that are developing you and have been taking you on this ride. And that

money is doing the same for the next generation of players: setting up with the right facilities and the right coaches and just try to surround them with the best circumstances that they can so they can succeed. That's one of the reasons why Sweden's been able to keep producing players."

The trick is making sure the money goes to what it's designed for. Daly, who has been in charge of transfer fees since the end of the 2004-05 lockout, said federations are responsible for reporting where the funds go because the goal is to keep churning out players who one day could make it to the NHL.