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Cost, time to double in Okinawa base move

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's Defense Ministry now estimates that moving a U.S. Marine Corps base on Okinawa will require more than twice the time and costs estimated earlier, prompting the island's Gov. Denny Tamaki to renew demands Thursday that Japan's central government halt construction.

Tamaki was responding to a Defense Ministry estimate that the project will take longer and cost more because the seabed at the planned reclamation is "as soft as mayonnaise," according to experts, and needs reinforcing.

U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is to be moved from densely populated Ginowan to the previously undeveloped Henoko area on Okinawa's eastern coast. Futenma's current base is to be closed and returned to Okinawa. Opponents of the relocation plan want the base moved entirely out of Okinawa

"In order to achieve a closure and return of Futenma air station as soon as possible, the construction work like this should immediately stop," Tamaki told reporters.

Delaying the relocation of the base adds to safety risks for the crowded Ginowan area, one of the main reasons for moving Futenma.

The Defense Ministry said moving the Futenma base to Henoko will cost \$8.5 billion and take 12 years, pushing its completion and the closure of Futenma into the 2030s. That adds more than a decade to the plan, which has already been delayed by more than 20 years because of local opposition and other reasons.

Under an earlier plan agreed to by Tokyo and Washington in 2013, construction was to cost about \$3.2 billion and take five years, with completion expected in about 2022.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga on Thursday de-

fended the relocation plan as "the only solution, taking into consideration the role of the Futenma air station as deterrence under the Japan-U.S. alliance and a removal of its risks."

Most of the additional cost and time is required to stabilize and strengthen reclaimed land off the coast of Henoko that will be used for runways, the Defense Ministry said. It presented its new estimate Wednesday to a panel of Japanese experts.

The heavy U.S. military presence on Okinawa is a longstanding source of conflict between the island and Washington and Tokyo.

Japan's central government began reclamation work in December 2018 despite repeated protests by Okinawans.

Tamaki says Tokyo's approach is high-handed and undemocratic. He has called for a three-way dialogue between Okinawa, Tokyo and Washing-

ton. He is expected to reject an application by the central government for a local government permit to carry out additional land reinforcements. That would likely reignite tensions and further delay the relocation.

Opponents of the relocation plan also contend it should be scrapped for environmental reasons because the site is a habitat for certain corals and for dugongs, a marine mammal similar to a manatee that the International Union for Conservation of Nature says is critically endangered, just a step away from extinction.

Washington and its ally Tokyo reaffirmed their commitment to pursue the Henoko plan in 2017, saying it was the only way to end the use of Futenma. The plan was developed after the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl for which three U.S. servicemen were convicted, reigniting simmering Okinawan opposition to the U.S. bases.

Report: US softens demand for S. Korea to pay more

Bloomberg News

SEOUL, South Korea — Days before a troop-funding deal was set to expire, the U.S. has dropped its demand that South Korea pay five times more to host its military personnel after receiving assurances Seoul would purchase more American weapons, a newspaper report said.

The Trump administration also likely eased up after South Korea indicated it would step up its presence in the Strait of Hormuz, helping U.S. efforts to protect oil flows in the region, South Korea's Chosun Ilbo newspaper reported Thursday, citing an unidentified diplomatic source. The increase now may be about 10% to 20% above the current level of nearly \$1 billion, it said.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

Last month, U.S. negotiators walked out of a meeting on troop funding in Seoul after South Korea balked at the fivefold increase seen as exorbitant by many in the country. The breakdown at that time raised questions about one of the U.S.' closest military alliances and a key piece of the Pentagon's strategy for countering North Korea and a rising China. The two sides resumed talks in December.

Even though the deal known as the Special Measures Agreement technically expires at the end of this year, both sides are likely to agree to some sort of temporary extension as they negotiate, allowing for the continued operations of the about 28,500 U.S. military personnel positioned on the peninsula.

The talks with South Korea could affect other countries that host U.S. troops, as the Trump administration is seeking funding

increases from other American allies.

President Donald Trump, arguing that South Korea is rich and should pay more for U.S. protection, has demanded Seoul contribute about \$5 billion for hosting U.S. troops. The price tag originated with the White House, according to people familiar with the matter, and administration officials justify it by saying it reflects the costs South Korea would incur if it takes operational control of combined U.S.-South Korean forces in the case of a conflict.

The request for more money hasn't sat well in South Korea, where many in President Moon Jae-in's progressive camp and opposition conservatives have come out against the demands. Moon, facing a sagging support rate, may not want to make any major concessions that further dent his popularity ahead of an election for parliament next year.

Report finds Army company commanders are overworked

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Army company-level leaders are overwhelmed by their workloads in part because they're reluctant to push back against excessive demands made on them by leadership, a new study suggests.

Company commanders and their senior enlisted leaders work on average 12.5 hours per day to complete tasks that range from ensuring unit combat readiness to cutting the grass on installations, said the report released this week by Rand Corp., a nonpartisan research group.

"There are so many different things that you have to track and do," one soldier told researchers who compiled the report on reducing time burdens for Army company leaders. "You are constantly playing Whack-a-Mole."

Work-life balance would improve for company leaders if on average they worked 12 hours

less per week, the study said.

But to make that happen, the relatively junior officers who are today's company commanders need to learn to "selectively disobey" unreasonable orders from their chain of command, something they appear reluctant to do, the report said.

"Rather than pushing back on higher command tasking, soldiers may resort to lying, misrepresenting the truth, or seemingly tasking themselves and their subordinates beyond the limits of productivity and effectiveness," the study said.

Army leaders must encourage legitimate, tactful disagreement when garrison tasks consume more time than companies have to complete them, the report said.

During focus groups, company leaders also said that the extra time they needed to execute seemingly simple tasks often went unacknowledged by higher command.

"Battalion and above have no

visibility of what we are doing and what that takes," the report quoted one soldier as saying.

In 2018, the Army took some steps to ease the burden on soldiers by abolishing some online training requirements that were unrelated to combat, the report said.

In addition to fostering an environment in which company leaders feel they can speak candidly about their time constraints and question unreasonable orders, the Army would help to ease the burden on them by providing them with more administrative resources, the study said.

Shifting tasks such as maintenance and grass cutting to civilians would enable soldiers to focus on more important tasks, the study said.

"Soldiers don't think that they are soldiers anymore," one service member said in the report. "We are gardeners. It's crazy."

Tyndall air base to get \$2.4B to help rebuild

*The (Panama City, Fla.)
News-Herald*

PANAMA CITY — With President Donald Trump signing into law the \$1.4 trillion federal spending bill Friday, Tyndall Air Force Base has secured all of the necessary funding to rebuild.

The \$2.4 billion appropriated to Tyndall for construction will be available over the next five years, which means more flexibility to negotiate with contractors, according to Congressman Neal Dunn, R-Panama City.

"Military construction funding is allowed to be held for up to five years at a time, and if you appropriate the money on the front end, you can make a better contract with your contractors," said Dunn, who has been instrumental in introducing and supporting bills related to recovery from Hurricane Michael. "The contractors now have the guarantee the money is there and they'll be on the job this year, next year, (and so on). It really saves a huge amount of money to do it that way."

Alongside the funding to rebuild, the base also secured additional funds for the procurement of 28 F-35s. Also, about \$240 million was appropriated to the Naval Surface Warfare Center located on the beach and \$70 million to the Panama City station of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Dunn noted he had submitted the disaster tax relief bill back in November 2018 so that tax relief would be available as soon as possible following Hurricane Michael.

"I dropped that bill in 2018 and they just picked that up word for word (this year) and put it in this appropriations (package)," he said. "That's really outstanding."

Japan to base Ospreys in Chiba briefly

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A city in Chiba prefecture has agreed to temporarily host Japan Ground Self-Defense Force V-22 Ospreys while negotiations for a more permanent home on the island of Kyushu continue, officials said this week.

The mayor of Kisarazu city, Yoshikuni Watanabe, on Wednesday announced a temporary five-year deal to host the U.S.-made helicopter-plane hybrids at Ground Self-Defense Force Camp Kisarazu, about 25 miles southeast of Tokyo, Watanabe said Wednesday in

a statement posted on the city's website. Watanabe informed Japanese Defense Minister Taro Kono during a meeting that same day.

"We are in a position to basically cooperate with national defense policy as one local government as (the) security environment surrounding our country becomes ever more severe," Watanabe wrote in his statement. It was a "very difficult decision when thinking about the safety concerns residents have and the expected burden the residents living near the base will face from the deployment."

Kisarazu was chosen as an Osprey base because Japan

sees the defense of its southern island chain, including Okinawa, Miyako and the Senkakus, as an "urgent issue," according to a Defense Ministry report in May.

Plans were previously made to permanently base 17 Japanese Ospreys farther south at Saga Airport, in Saga prefecture on the island of Kyushu.

However, talks between the prefecture and a local fishery cooperative stalled over using the airport for military purposes, a ministry spokeswoman said Thursday.

Ministry officials plan to continue to try and reach an agreement with the cooperative, she said.

GOP senator 'disturbed' by McConnell's 'total coordination' remark on trial

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, said she was disturbed to hear Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell say there would be "total coordination" between the White House and the Senate over the upcoming presidential impeachment trial.

"And in fairness, when I heard that I was disturbed," Murkowski told KTUU on Tuesday before saying there should be distance between the White House and the Senate in how the trial is conducted.

"To me, it means that we have to take that step back from being hand in glove with the defense, and so I heard what leader McConnell had said; I happened to think that that has

further confused the process."

In a recent interview with Fox News' Sean Hannity, McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, described his planning with the White House.

"We'll be working through this process, hopefully, in a fairly short period of time in total coordination with the White House counsel's office and the people who are representing the president as well as the Senate," McConnell said.

Murkowski was critical of the impeachment process conducted in the House of Representatives, describing it as rushed.

Murkowski says the Senate is now being asked to cure deficiencies in evidence to be presented at the trial, particularly when it comes to whether key witnesses should be brought forward to testify, including

White House acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and former national security adviser John Bolton.

"How we will deal with witnesses remains to be seen," Murkowski said before saying the House should have gone to the courts if witnesses refused to appear before Congress.

Murkowski also spoke of her desire for a "full and fair process," potentially using the impeachment hearings of President Bill Clinton as a template.

Murkowski remained undecided about how she would vote when the trial takes place.

"For me to prejudge and say there's nothing there or on the other hand, he should be impeached yesterday, that's wrong; in my view, that's wrong."

Trump decries attacks in Syria

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump is speaking out against the "carnage" involving thousands of civilians in a rebel stronghold in Syria.

In a tweet Thursday, Trump wrote: "Russia, Syria, and Iran are killing, or on their way to killing, thousands of innocent civilians in Idlib Province. Don't do it! Turkey is working hard to stop this carnage."

The tweet refers to an intense air and ground bombardment by government forces in southern and eastern Idlib province, the last rebel-held bastion. Syrian government forces about a month ago launched a renewed effort to take the province, which is dominated by al-Qaida-linked militants and is also home to 3 million civilians. The United Nations has warned of the growing risk of a humanitarian catastrophe along the Turkish border.

A Syrian relief group said Wednesday that more than 200,000 men, women and children fled their homes in buses, trucks and cars in recent weeks. Many have been heading toward the Turkish border.

Before a ground offensive began a week ago, the U.N. reported that some 60,000 Idlib residents had already been displaced since the bombing campaign started late last month.

Trump also addressed the plight of civilians in Idlib in June, accusing Russia, Syria and Iran of "indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians" in a bombing campaign. Several months later he announced he would withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria.

Baltimore nears record homicide rate

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Baltimore could wrap up 2019 with its highest per-capita homicide rate on record as killings of adults and minors alike for drugs, retribution, money or no clear reason continue to add up and city officials appear unable to stop the violence.

Police recorded 338 homicides as of Tuesday, following a week of relentless gunfire that saw eight people shot — three of them fatally — in one day and nine others — one fatally — another day. That total is up from 309 in 2018 and four shy of the 342 killings tallied in 2017 and 2015, the year when the city's homicide rate suddenly spiked.

With just over 600,000 residents, Baltimore's homicide rate would reach approximately 57 per 100,000 residents if the death toll reaches 342. That would eclipse the rate of 1993, when the city had a record 353 killings but was also much more populous.

By contrast, New York City, with more than 8 million residents, had 306 homicides through Dec. 15.

Police yellow tape and make-

shift memorials with flowers, stuffed animals and balloons have become common in some neighborhoods of this deeply segregated city. Memorials can be found within blocks of each other at the same time.

"It's a major concern for me, not just as a hopeful man but as a citizen of Baltimore who grew up in inner city Baltimore," said Carmichael "Stokey" Canady, a reformed drug dealer turned community activist who wants to be mayor. "I remember when a person had a conflict and would have a fight at best. Now these young kids, at the age of 13, 14 years old, are finding handguns in their possession and they use them as toys. ... The whole system needs to be revamped."

This is the fifth year in a row this Mid-Atlantic community dubbed "Charm City" has reported more than 300 killings. Before 2015, that number had generally been on the decline, but the trend reversed after civil unrest followed the death in police custody of a young black man, Freddie Gray.

Reasons for the upward trend vary and are subject to interpretation. Many accuse police

of taking a hands-off approach to crime-fighting since six of their own were charged in connection with Gray's death. Others attribute it to the apparent free flow of illegal guns, the effects of a punishing opioid epidemic, social inequalities and a lack of decent jobs for many in disenfranchised neighborhoods. Some say political incompetence at City Hall also contributed.

Police Commissioner Michael Harrison, who was tapped this year to fix a dispirited department and regain residents' trust, unveiled a five-year crime-fighting plan in July that includes a goal of responding to calls within 10 minutes and prioritizing those threatening life or property. The plan also contains recruitment strategies, community engagement efforts and accountability measures.

"People can expect that number to go down. We are building capacity, but we need to have some type of effect on the poverty, the housing, the education, the addiction, the skills, the jobs and the lack thereof, together at the same time," Harrison told The Associated Press.

Typhoon kills at least 20 at Christmas in Philippines

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — A strong typhoon that barreled through the central Philippines left at least 20 people dead and forced thousands to flee their homes, devastating Christmas celebrations in the predominantly Catholic country.

Typhoon Phanfone stranded many people in sea ports and airports at the peak of holiday travel, set off landslides, flooded low-lying villages, destroyed houses, downed trees and electrical poles and knocked out power in entire provinces. One disaster response officer described the battered coastal town of Batad in Iloilo province as a “ghost town” on Christmas Day.

“You can’t see anybody because there was a total blackout; you can’t hear anything. The town looked like a ghost town,” Cindy Ferrer, of the regional Office of the Civil Defense, said by phone.

The storm weakened slightly Thursday as it blew into the South China Sea with sustained winds of 74 miles per hour and gusts of 93 mph after lashing

island after island with fierce winds and pounding rain on Christmas Day, the weather agency said.

Most of the 20 deaths reported by national police and local officials were due to drowning, falling trees and accidental electrocution.

A father, his three children and another relative were among those missing in hard-hit Iloilo province after a swollen river inundated their shanty, officials said.

The typhoon slammed into Eastern Samar province on Christmas Eve and then plowed across the archipelago’s central region on Christmas, slamming into seven coastal towns and island provinces without losing power, government forecasters said.

Provincial officials, army troops, police and volunteers spent Christmas away from home to tend to thousands of displaced residents in town gymnasiums and schools turned into emergency shelters. Many more people spent Christmas Eve, traditionally a time for family reunions, in bus terminals.

More than 25,000 people were stranded in sea ports across the central region and outlying provinces after the coast guard prohibited ferries and cargo ships from venturing into dangerously choppy waters.

Dozens of international and domestic flights to and from the region were canceled, including to popular beach and surfing resorts.

About 20 typhoons and storms batter the Philippines each year. The Southeast Asian nation is also located in the Pacific “Ring of Fire,” where earthquakes and volcanic eruptions often occur, making the country of more than 100 million people one of the world’s most disaster prone.

Phanfone, a Laotian word for animal, traveled along a path similar to that of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most ferocious storms on record, which left more than 7,300 people dead and missing, flattened entire villages, swept ships inland and displaced more than 5 million people in the central Philippines in 2013.

Teen sought in NY slaying is located

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York City police say they have located a 14-year-old boy suspected of fatally stabbing a Barnard College freshman as she walked through a park near the school.

Chief of Detectives Rodney Harrison tweeted Thursday that the boy had been found but gave no other details.

He is one of three youths police believe were involved in the stabbing of Tessa Majors, 18, on Dec. 11 in Morningside Park in Manhattan.

Police tracked down the teen after taking the unusual step last Friday of releasing photographs of him, but not his name or any other identifying information.

A police spokeswoman declined to answer questions about where and how the teen was located, referring back to Harrison’s tweet and saying “the investigation remains active and ongoing.”

Of the two other suspects, only one has been charged.

A 13-year-old boy arrested Dec. 13 and charged as a juvenile with felony murder told detectives he was at the park with the other youths but wasn’t the one who stabbed Majors, police said.

Another juvenile suspect was questioned for several hours, also on Dec. 13, but police let him go, Harrison said. He has declined to say why that boy wasn’t charged.

Majors was stabbed while walking in the park just before 7 p.m., two days before the start of final exams at Barnard, an all-women’s school that is part of the Ivy League’s Columbia University.

She staggered up a flight of stairs to street level and collapsed in a crosswalk.

Her death has troubled city and college leaders, both for its proximity to campus and its apparent randomness.

Notre Dame may be too fragile to save

Associated Press

PARIS — The rector of Notre Dame Cathedral says the Paris landmark is still so fragile that there’s a “50% chance” the structure might not be saved because scaffolding installed before this year’s fire is threatening the vaults of the Gothic monument.

Monsignor Patrick Chauvet said restoration work isn’t likely to begin until 2021 — and described his “heartache” that Notre Dame couldn’t hold Christmas services this year, for the first time since the

French Revolution.

“Today it is not out of danger,” he said. “It will be out of danger when we take out the remaining scaffolding.”

“Today we can say that there is maybe a 50% chance that it will be saved. There is also 50% chance of scaffolding falling onto the three vaults, so as you can see the building is still very fragile,” he said.

The 12th-century cathedral was under renovation at the time of the accidental April fire, which destroyed its roof and collapsed its spire. With no more roof to keep the massive

stone structure stable, the cathedral’s surviving vaults are crucial to keep it standing, but they are vulnerable.

Some 50,000 tubes of scaffolding crisscrossed the back of the edifice at the time of the fire, and some were damaged. Removing them without causing further problems is one of the toughest parts of the clean-up effort.

“We need to remove completely the scaffolding in order to make the building safe, so in 2021 we will probably start the restoration of the cathedral,” Chauvet said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Crop duster drops holy water on town

LA ABBEVILLE — A Roman Catholic church in Louisiana decided to disperse some blessings to a local town via crop dusters.

According to a Facebook post from the Diocese of Lafayette on Sunday, members of St. Anne Church in Cow Island called upon crop duster pilots to help spread their blessing to the community.

The Rev. Matthew Barzare and parishioners of the church loaded 100 gallons of holy water into the planes, and the pilots sprayed the water onto the town and nearby farms, KATCTV reported.

Officials seize \$800K in fake merchandise

NC FAYETTEVILLE — Officials in North Carolina said they've seized \$800,000 in counterfeit merchandise at shopping centers and flea markets.

The Raleigh News & Observer reported that the sham goods included fake UGG boots, fake Louis Vuitton handbags and fake North Face jackets.

The North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State said the sweep was conducted in the Fayetteville area.

Woman accused of faking cancer

IA NORTHWOOD — An Iowa woman was accused of lying about a cancer diagnosis so she could collect donations.

Jennifer Hope Mikesell, of Northwood, is charged with ongoing criminal conduct, fraudulent practices and forgery.

The Worth County Sheriff's Office said Mikesell, 43, had

told people she was diagnosed with cancer and was receiving cancer treatments at Mayo Clinic Health System in Rochester, Minn. Iowa court records said Mayo had no record of Mikesell being diagnosed or treated there.

Mikesell received multiple donations of money, food and other supplies, as well as a bedroom makeover from My Happy Haven, the court records said.

Officials: City Hall hit by bedbug infestation

AZ TUCSON — Officials said Tucson City Hall had been bugged for several months — with bedbugs that is.

The Arizona Daily Star reported officials said it took nearly three months to remove the small insects from the Arizona municipal building.

Officials believe the bedbugs were brought in accidentally from an outside source.

Tucson spokesman Andy Squire said that after the three-month removal, the city had to hire a Phoenix company to bring in a specially trained dog to sniff out the remaining bugs.

Police: Thieves stole from rehabbed homes

MO ST. LOUIS — Two suspects now in custody are accused of stealing more than 800 items from St. Louis homes that were under rehabilitation.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that detectives believe the thieves monitored the rehabbed homes, waited until dark, and took hundreds of items that included stained glass windows, lawn mowers, generators and many other items.

Police said around 150 to 200 stolen items have been returned to their owners.

Thousands flock to giant holiday display

GA STATESBORO — Roy Thompson's farm in southeast Georgia lights up after dark like a Christmas wonderland — not just the house, but the fields and even surrounding woods.

He said more than 45,000 carloads of people came to see the massive display during the holidays last year. This year, the family plans to welcome visitors through Sunday.

Tours are free, though the Thompsons encourage visitors to donate canned food, children's toys, pet food and money to help area families facing hardships.

City mulls ending ban on throwing snowballs

WI WAUSAU — For decades, those who participated in snowball fights in one Wisconsin city risked getting in trouble with the law. But that may be about to change.

A 1962 ban on throwing projectiles in Wausau lumps snowballs into the same category as rocks and other items that can cause serious harm.

City Council President Lisa Rasmussen said that recent negative national attention over the rarely used ordinance has raised questions about whether it could be time to take snowballs off the naughty list.

The City Council will consider decriminalizing snowball fights at a meeting next month.

Nonprofit repairs, gives away bikes

MI LANSING — A Lansing nonprofit distributed nearly 50 bicycles to children after a dozen volunteers spent several weeks

cleaning and repairing them.

The Lansing Bike Co-op staged the giveaway, offering the 49 used bikes to anyone on a first-come, first-served basis, the Lansing State Journal reported. There were no rules or requirements.

Thief sends money for stolen receptacle

KS TOPEKA — A Kansas County has an extra \$75 in its coffers thanks to a former thief with a guilty conscience.

The Topeka Capital-Journal reported that someone anonymously sent the money to Shawnee County along with a letter dated Dec. 18.

The letter states that the sender is in a 12-step program and working to make financial amends. It states that many years ago the writer stole a receptacle meant for cigarette ashes that was in front of the courthouse.

Seagulls bring beach sounds to city

IN TERRE HAUTE — Unusually large flocks of seagulls descended on a western Indiana city, bringing the sounds of the beach to a local reservoir where the birds began gathering in late November.

Peter Scott, a retired Indiana State University ecology professor who directs an annual Christmas Bird Count around Terre Haute, estimated that between 400 and 1,000 of the birds have congregated at the lake.

He said ring-billed gulls aren't uncommon in Indiana but they prefer to winter around larger bodies of water.

Scott said the birds are most likely feeding on small fish in the lake.

From wire reports

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Game-breaking WRs lead Playoff offenses

Associated Press

A flick of the wrist, a slight shift of the shoulder and they're off.

Talented receivers are a big part of this year's College Football Playoff. Never before have there been four teams in the CFP so prolific at scoring points. And it's in large part due to a growing — think 6-foot or taller — list of game-breaking receivers keen on quick cuts, one-handed grabs and the ability to catch almost any pass thrown their way.

"Not always sure how we do it," said Clemson's top receiver Tee Higgins.

Neither is anyone else who has seen the impressive weekly grabs by Higgins and the other receivers in the CFP who have become must-see TV:

- No. 1 LSU has a pair of 1,000-yard receivers in Ja'Marr Chase and Justin Jefferson, who have combined for 32 touchdowns this season.

- No. 2 Ohio State features K.J. Hill and Chris Olave. The duo has 21 touchdown catches between them.

- Third-ranked Clemson pairs Higgins with Justyn Ross, a combination that has helped the defending national champions win their past 28 games.

- And Oklahoma showcases CeeDee Lamb. All Lamb has done is average nearly 21 yards a catch and haul in 14 touchdown receptions.

It's the first time the four CFP participants enter the national semifinals averaging more than 43 points a game — which gives offense-crazed fans the promise of two potentially explosive showdowns when LSU faces Oklahoma in the Peach Bowl

and Ohio State takes on Clemson in the Fiesta Bowl on Saturday.

CBS Sports analyst Gary Danielson has seen the evolution of the game go from big, physical bruisers getting 35 carries a contest to teams relying more on lightning fast, shifty pass catchers with sticky hands.

"There's no doubt things have changed," he said.

It was only four years ago LSU was a run-heavy team with Leonard Fournette leading the charge. His 22 touchdowns were more than the 13 the Tigers passed for that 2015 season.

Now, Heisman Trophy winning quarterback Joe Burrow has LSU in Air Raid mode with his school-record 48 TD passes.

"We're not going to slow down," Tigers coach Ed Orgeron said.

None of the four teams in the CFP are expected to slow down, not with the pieces in place to blow opponents out.

LSU's Chase won the Biletnikoff award as the game's top receiver. His 18 touchdowns tied the Southeastern Conference's single season mark — one it seems likely he'll obliterate with more games left.

Chase said his route-running has improved considerably this season, particularly because he has gotten better at creating separation early when defensive backs try to disrupt his pass pattern.

"Executing coming off the line most of the time has been a big difference from last year to this year," Chase said. "It's more about footwork and hand-eye coordination."

All the talented receivers in the CFP have shown great hand-eye coordination.

Perhaps the most talked-about play in Clemson's 62-17 destruction of Virginia in the Atlantic Coast Conference title game was Higgins' highlight-reel sideline grab — reaching out of bounds while keeping his toes inbounds to complete the catch.

"Every time I see that I say, 'Man, I really caught that. It's crazy,'" Higgins said with a smile.

Typically, Higgins or Justyn Ross (he had three TD catches in Clemson's 44-16 blowout of Alabama to win the national title a year ago) has created enough space to catch passes from quarterback Trevor Lawrence.

Ross said teams can't put extra defenders on him, given Clemson's deep, talented group of playmakers.

Oklahoma's Lamb also has been a nightmare for defenders, even with his frustration at times when he feels he is not getting the ball when he's open.

Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley said Lamb is "so invested in this team and sometimes he wants it so much you've got to take a deep breath and go on to the next one."

At Ohio State, Hill has already surpassed David Boston's career mark with 195 catches. A reception against Clemson will give him another Buckeyes' record with a catch in 49 straight games.

Second-year Buckeyes coach Ryan Day wasn't at Ohio State for all of Hill's five seasons, but appreciates what he has seen firsthand, saying Hill has consistently excelled. "He's been clutch," Day said, "very, very productive."

He's not alone, and that could make for an entertaining College Football Playoff.

Fighting Irish not taking Iowa State lightly

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Brian Kelly need not worry that No. 14 Notre Dame isn't focused on Iowa State, its opponent Saturday in the Camping World Bowl.

After a week of final exams, his Fighting Irish (10-2) aren't taking Matt Campbell's Cyclones (7-5) lightly.

"I think there are a lot of people who don't know how good they are," offensive tackle Liam Eichenberg said Saturday after the sixth practice in a hectic week for the Irish, who ended the season on a five-game winning streak. "They lost to (No.

8) Baylor by two points and (No. 4) Oklahoma by one point."

The Cyclones, who also had a one-point loss to No. 19 Iowa in September, finished in a four-way tie for third place in the high-scoring and competitive Big 12 after a 27-17 loss at Kansas State Nov. 30. They outscored their opposition 409-304, including 139-74 in the fourth quarter.

The Cyclones' Brock Purdy, a 6-foot-1, 210-pound elusive sophomore, has thrown for 3,760 yards and 27 touchdowns with just nine interceptions and he's rushed for 265 yards and eight more scores.

"(Purdy) is a special player —

he's really good and you can tell he's a leader," linebacker Drew White said. "They have receivers who can make big plays. They are really electric."

Wide receivers Deshaunte Jones (72 receptions, 832 yards, 2 touchdowns), Tarique Milton (33-689-3) and La'Michael Pettway (51-622-6), tight end Charlie Kolar (48-675-7) and runningback Breece Hall (1,100 yards rushing and passing) have Notre Dame's attention.

"They match up with the top teams we've played this year," Kelly said.

The Irish will counter with a defense that finished the regular season allowing just

325.8 yards (22nd nationally) and 18.7 points (17th) with a turnover margin of 1.25 (third) thanks to 17 fumble recoveries and nine interceptions.

Offensively, quarterback Ian Book threw for 2,787 yards and 33 touchdowns with just six interceptions and was the second-leading rusher (516 yards, four TDs).

Book, who could return next season, wants to finish this season on a high note.

"The season is not over," he said. "We should be proud. It's a good bowl game and we want to go there, and we want to win. That's what it's all about."

Lynch providing spark to Seattle morale

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — When Marshawn Lynch played his last game for Seattle in January 2016, a playoff loss to Carolina, the idea of him ever wearing a Seahawks uniform again seemed preposterous.

Yet here was Lynch on Tuesday going through his first practice with Seattle in nearly four years, and potentially tasked with playing a major role on Sunday against San Francisco with the NFC West title on the line.

When it comes to NFL reunions, this is as unlikely as it gets. Not just Lynch back on a football field after more than a year away, but back in Seattle.

“What I needed to hear from him is where his heart is. Is he in it and does he want to go for it, which he totally does,” Seattle coach Pete Carroll said. “He’s worked to prove that. I don’t doubt him one bit about that. He’s very sincere about how he presents himself to this game and it’s very important to him to be at his best and do well,

and he’s going to do everything he can to make that happen.”

The arrival of Lynch was a spark of energy inside a Seattle locker room that was left reeling after Sunday’s 27-13 loss to Arizona. Not only were the Seahawks run over by the Cardinals, they lost their most direct path to the No. 1 seed in the NFC playoffs and their top two running backs to injury.

Lynch may end up being great in Seattle’s backfield. He may end up looking like a 33-year-old who hasn’t played in more than a year. But the idea of “Beast Mode” carrying the ball once again in a Seattle uniform galvanized not only the fan base, but a locker room of players who mostly haven’t had Lynch as a teammate.

Linebacker K.J. Wright, one of the few holdovers from Lynch’s last season, said some of the younger players seemed a bit in awe of Lynch being back in Seattle’s locker room.

“Only one person can pull this off and that’s No. 24,” Wright said. “Back in the build-

ing, it feels good. When I heard the news I was like, ‘Perfect.’ He’s just the ultimate teammate, cool dude, just ballin’. I’m glad to have him back.”

Seattle made official the signings of Lynch and Robert Turbin — the same backfield combo it used from 2012-14 — on Tuesday. The Seahawks placed injured running backs Chris Carson (hip) and C.J. Proise (arm) on injured reserve to open up the roster spots.

Lynch made a surprise media appearance after practice for all of 9 seconds, saying, “Happy holidays. Merry New Year. You all have a great day. It’s a great feeling to be back.”

But he did expand on his decision in a video posted on his Beast Mode Productions YouTube channel that was shot a few days ago. It was clear in the video that there had been discussions of a return to Seattle before news broke on Monday.

What’s uncertain is what Lynch can provide Seattle’s offense. The scheme is similar to the last time he was with the

Seahawks, but the team has a different offensive coordinator and different offensive line coach. None of the linemen who will block for Lynch on Sunday were around the last time he had a carry for the Seahawks — a divisional-round playoff loss to Carolina on Jan. 17, 2016.

Lynch averaged 4.2 yards per carry last season with Oakland before suffering a season-ending core muscle injury. Seattle would gladly take that kind of production in concert with Turbin and rookie sixth-round pick Travis Homer.

“What he brings and what he offers, he brings a lot to the table,” Carroll said. “He’s as physical a player as I’ve ever been around, as great a competitor as I’ve ever been around and when you get to add somebody like that to your team it only helps and enhances kind of the mentality that we already cherish anyway. We’ll find out how he can play and how he does. It’s been a little while off.”

Texans’ Watt could return for postseason games

Associated Press

HOUSTON — J.J. Watt returned to practice with the Houston Texans on Tuesday, clearing the way for the star defensive end to play in the team’s playoff game in two weeks.

Watt has been out since Oct. 27 after tearing a pectoral muscle, an injury that required surgery.

“I feel really good,” Watt said. “We’ve worked extremely hard at rehab. We’ve had a very smooth process and everything’s been going extremely well. So I’m really, really excited to back in the field with everybody and to get back out there helping my team and playing for this city.”

The Texans will have 21 days from Tuesday to take him off the injured reserve and add him to the active roster. If they plan to play him in their first

playoff game during the weekend of Jan. 4-5, they’ll have to activate him by 4 p.m. EST the day before the game.

Watt has been working out with the team’s trainers and medical staff away for a while and said he’s felt good during those workouts. He said he’s been wearing a harness during those workouts and that he’ll continue to wear that to protect himself during team practices. The harness keeps his arm from being pulled too far backward, but it will not restrict him from moving his arm forward or raising it up.

Watt said that he began thinking he might be able to return for the postseason not long after he was injured.

“When I got hurt I just assumed I was done,” he said. “I didn’t even know there was a possibility. And then literally a

couple days after the surgery I was feeling so good that I asked — ‘is it remotely possible?’ We left the ... door open for a possibility.”

Players on injured reserve must miss eight games before returning and Watt has only missed seven so far, meaning he could not play in Houston’s regular-season finale against Tennessee on Sunday.

This is the third time in four seasons that the three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year has had a major injury. He missed the last 13 games of 2016 with a back injury that required surgery and played just five games in 2017 before breaking his leg. He played all 16 games last season and was a first-team All-Pro.

Watt said that recovering from his most recent injury was much easier than his rehabilitation from his leg and back

injuries.

“(Those were) two massive, massive things that really affect movement,” he said. “But the nice thing about this surgery was this whole time I’ve been able to run, I’ve been able to work out my legs, do agility drills, position drills. So that has been a huge help both mentally and physically for this recovery.”

While Watt said he expects to play in Houston’s first playoff game, he was careful to point out that it’s unlikely that he’ll participate in as many snaps as he has throughout his career.

“I’m sure it’s not going to be an every play type of thing, just for the first one back,” he said. “I don’t think that would be the best situation. But we’ll see how it feels over the next two weeks and get a gauge for it before we go into that game. I’m sure we’ll have a good plan.”

NBA roundup

Clippers rally to knock off rival Lakers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Clippers were resilient and dominant in the second half to put away the Los Angeles Lakers, using the NBA's marquee Christmas game to show why the city and the Western Conference might belong to them this season.

Kawhi Leonard scored 11 of his 35 points in the fourth quarter and had 12 rebounds and five assists to help the Clippers beat the Lakers 111-106 on Wednesday night.

The Clippers trailed by 12 points at halftime, by 15 in the third quarter, and by seven in the fourth quarter with 6:39 remaining, but they rallied to improve to 2-0 against the Lakers this season.

"And we didn't flinch," Clippers coach Doc Rivers said. "Like, we just kind of hung in there. Almost felt like we were biding our time and just trying to make a run. That's something you have to have when things aren't going great for you. You just got to hang in there, and I thought we did that tonight."

Leonard set a franchise record for points on Christmas, and he became the 10th player in NBA history with at least 35 points, 10 rebounds and five assists on Dec. 25.

Los Angeles had a chance to tie in the final seconds, but video review showed LeBron James touched the ball last after Patrick Beverly knocked it away as James went up for a three. Paul George hit two free throws for the final margin.

"That wasn't the game right there," James said. "I mean, it's a big play and you want to try to get it right, but it wasn't where the game was lost."

76ers 121, Bucks 109: Joel Embiid outplayed Giannis Antetokounmpo in his team's first home Christmas game in 31 years, finishing with 31 points and 11 rebounds to help three-point happy Philadelphia beat Milwaukee.

Tobias Harris sank five threes, Josh Richardson and Furkan Korkmaz each had four and even Embiid hit three as part of Philly's season-high 21 threes (on 44 attempts) against

a Bucks team that had the best record in the NBA.

Harris and Al Horford hit threes over the final 90 seconds to push back a late Bucks run, and the Sixers improved to 16-2 at home.

Pelicans 112, Nuggets 100: Brandon Ingram scored 31 points, Derrick Favors grabbed 13 rebounds and visiting New Orleans halted Denver's seven-game winning streak.

The 9-23 Pelicans are now 2-0 against the Nuggets this season. They spoiled the festive mood at the Pepsi Center as the Nuggets played at home on Christmas for the first time in 25 years.

New Orleans sprang the upset despite committing 19 turnovers. The Pelicans pulled away late courtesy of the long-range shooting of Lonzo Ball and Ingram. They also out-rebounded the Nuggets, including 14 offensive boards.

New Orleans finished a four-game trip with a 3-1 mark, which includes consecutive wins for the first time in a month.

Celtics 118, Raptors 102: Jaylen Brown scored 30 points, Kemba Walker had 22 and Boston beat Toronto in the first Christmas Day game played in Canada.

Enes Kanter had 12 points and 11 rebounds as the Celtics snapped an eight-game losing streak north of the border and became the first Atlantic Division opponent to win in Toronto in more than four years.

Toronto had gone an NBA-record 34 games between home losses to division foes. The Raptors' last home loss to an Atlantic team was a 111-109 defeat to the New York Knicks on Nov. 10, 2015.

Warriors 116, Rockets 104: Draymond Green scored 16 of his 20 points in the second half, Damion Lee had 22 points and a career-high 15 rebounds and host Golden State beat Houston.

D'Angelo Russell added 20 points, and Glenn Robinson III had 18 to help the Warriors win their third straight and end the Rockets' four-game winning streak.

West-leading Blues cruise into holiday break

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Christmas marked a turning point for the St. Louis Blues last season as they went from last place at the holiday to winning the Stanley Cup.

Heading into the three-day break this year, the Blues are on top of the Western Conference and look more than ready to defend their title.

Brayden Schenn scored twice in St. Louis' four-goal first period and the Blues won their sixth straight game, 4-1 over the Los Angeles Kings on Monday night.

"It's crazy what a little bit of winning and confidence can do to a hockey team, and, you know, obviously we're feeling it as a group right now," Schenn said after the Blues improved to 55-20-11 in the regular season since last Christmas. "We believe in one another coming to the rink."

Vince Dunn had a goal and an assist, and

Jaden Schwartz scored on the power play for the Blues. Jordan Binnington made 29 saves in his first start since Dec. 16 against Colorado. Alex Pietrangelo and David Peron each had two assists.

Alex Iafallo had a power-play goal and Jonathan Quick made 24 saves, but the Kings lost their third in a row.

Kings coach Todd McLellan was wary about the last game before time off, and his concerns were justified when the Blues scored four times in the first 12:21.

Schenn opened the scoring at 4:51 and wrapped the flurry by getting a power-play goal that gave St. Louis a 4-0 lead with his 17th of the season. Schenn has the same number of goals in 38 games this year as he had in 72 games last season.

"I've started getting some puck luck, which has been huge," said Schenn, who has three goals and two assists in his past three games. "Every player definitely

needs that, and just try and shoot the puck at the right time and it's been going in."

Schwartz tipped in Pietrangelo's shot on the power play for a 2-0 lead at 5:43, and Dunn made it 3-0 at 11:22.

Everything seems to be clicking for the Blues, who have won eight straight games against Western Conference opponents. The power play is 5-for-12 in the past four games after needed just 33 seconds to convert two chances against the Kings.

But Schenn insists the lessons from last season's turnaround will keep this Blues team focused on the next game, not the bigger picture.

"I mean, we're obviously not going to get too far ahead of ourselves by any means," he said. "It's very hard to repeat as we've seen, but we feel — just kind of what we've been through last year — we don't try and get too high or low just 'cause it can eat away at you."