

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Iraqi protesters storm US Embassy

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Dozens of Iraqi Shiite militiamen and their supporters shouting “Death to America” broke into the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad on Tuesday, smashing a main door and setting fire to a reception area, angered over deadly U.S. airstrikes targeting the Iran-backed militia. U.S. guards fired tear gas and palls of smoke rose over the grounds.

An Associated Press reporter at the scene saw flames rising from inside the compound and at least three U.S. soldiers on the roof of the main embassy building. There was a fire at the reception area near the compound’s parking lot but it was unclear what had started it. A man on a loudspeaker urged the mob not to enter the compound, saying, “The mes-

sage was delivered.”

There were no reports of casualties, but the unprecedented breach was one of the worst attacks on the embassy in memory. It followed deadly U.S. airstrikes on Sunday that killed 25 fighters of the Iran-backed militia in Iraq, the Kataeb Hezbollah. The U.S. military said the airstrikes were in retaliation for last week’s killing of an American contractor in a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base that it had blamed on the militia.

President Donald Trump blamed Iran for the embassy breach and called on Iraq to protect the diplomatic mission.

“Iran killed an American contractor, wounding many. We strongly responded, and always will. Now Iran is orchestrating an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. They will be held fully

responsible. In addition, we expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified!” he tweeted from his estate in Palm Beach, Fla.

By early evening, protesters had set up tents outside the embassy where they said they intended to stage a sit-in. Dozens of yellow flags belonging to Iran-backed Shiite militias fluttered atop the reception area and were plastered along the embassy’s concrete wall along with anti-U.S. graffiti.

Trump, who is spending the holiday week at his Florida home, is in “close touch” and receiving regular updates from his national security team, said White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham.

The U.S. will send more troops to protect the embassy compound and does not plan an evacuation, the Pentagon and

State Department said.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the U.S. has taken actions to “ensure the safety of American citizens, military personnel and diplomats” and to “ensure our right of self-defense. We are sending additional forces to support our personnel at the Embassy.”

The extra force will consist of a small additional detachment of Marine security guards, two defense officials in Washington said. They would be from the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group, which is trained specifically to provide security at U.S. diplomatic missions. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to be identified.

“U.S. personnel are secure,” added a State Department official. “There are no plans to evacuate Embassy Baghdad.”

Military, federal workers to get pay biggest pay raise in years

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC
Stars and Stripes

January will usher in the biggest pay raise since 2010 for U.S. service members, and also bring a long-awaited salary increase for federal civilian employees.

Service members and Defense Department civilians are each slated to receive an average 3.1% bump in annual pay as part of the \$737 billion military budget for 2020 — \$22 billion

more than last year’s defense measure.

Congress passed the record-setting defense bill in December with strong bipartisan support. It includes the creation of a Space Force, one of President Donald Trump’s top priorities for the Pentagon, and provisions aimed at improving military housing conditions. The Department of Veterans Affairs will get a 9% boost in funding, its largest budgetary increase ever.

The 2020 raise is the largest for service members since a 3.4% annual pay increase in 2010. Since then, annual increases have ranged between 1% and 2.6%.

For federal civilian employees, the 3.1% average increase will constitute the largest raise

since 2008, when they received a 3.5% average pay adjustment, statistics published by the Federal News Network stated. For much of the 2010s, federal employees received either no raise or a 1% annual increase.

The White House had originally planned to freeze federal pay in 2020 but reversed course in August and allowed a 2.6% across-the-board increase. On Friday, Trump signed an executive order putting into effect a measure that also includes locality pay averaging an extra 0.5%.

The civilian increases state-side should range from 2.85% to 3.52% with locality pay factored in, a Federal News Network analysis found. The highest average increases will come in the Washington metro

area and around other large cities.

Prior to the passage of the bill, the American Federation of Government Employees had complained that its members were earning less in 2019 than at the start of the decade because salaries had failed to keep pace with inflation. It said government agencies were struggling to recruit employees due to noncompetitive salaries that lagged behind private sector pay.

More than 30% of federal workers are veterans, the Office of Personnel Management stated in 2017.

Last week, the OPM published the 2020 pay tables and a general salary calculator at www.opm.gov.

To our readers

Stripes Lite will not publish on Jan. 1. It will return on Jan. 2.

As nuclear talk deadline passes, N. Korean leader calls for countermeasures

BY KIM GAMEL
AND YOO KYONG CHANG
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The stage was set for an increase in tensions as the United States missed North Korea's end-of-year deadline to break the deadlock in nuclear talks on Tuesday amid fears the communist state plans to resume long-range missile tests.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for "offensive political, diplomatic and military countermeasures" to protect his country's security and sovereignty in a seven-hour speech on Monday, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

The communist state has threatened to adopt an unspecified "new way" if Washington fails to propose a more flexible approach to talks that have stalled over conflicting demands for sanctions relief and more extensive steps toward denuclearization.

Kim, who was also widely expected to make a New Year's speech Wednesday, didn't mention nuclear weapons or specify the countermeasures that should be taken in his remarks to a meeting of the central

committee of the ruling Workers' Party. But he stressed the need to develop "the party into a militant party full of vitality and vigor," KCNA reported on Tuesday. The third-generation leader also called for measures to improve the country's economy, which has been hard-hit by international sanctions.

South Korea said it was closely watching the party meeting but declined to speculate on the meaning behind Kim's words, Lee Sang-min, a spokesman for the Unification Ministry, said.

The meeting, which KCNA said was ongoing, was being closely watched for signs that Kim is preparing to abandon diplomacy with the United States in what would be a blow to a key foreign policy goal of President Donald Trump's administration.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed hope that diplomacy would prevail but offered no new proposals in an interview Monday with the "Fox & Friends" news program.

"We're watching what they're doing here in the closing days of this year, and we hope that they'll make a decision that will lead to a path of peace and not one towards confrontation," he said.

Tricare OKs laser therapy for some GIs' razor bumps

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The military's health care system will now pay for some service members with severe razor bumps to receive laser therapy treatment at civilian facilities.

Tricare says it will foot the laser bill for active-duty personnel suffering from pseudofolliculitis barbae, or PFB, once skin creams and other conservative treatments have failed.

Laser therapy can be expensive but it's considered the most effective treatment for severe PFB, a persistent irritation most common on the face and neck caused by shaving.

The new Tricare policy was announced in December and first reported by Military.com. It follows the Navy's decision in October to end permanent shaving waivers for sailors after concluding that facial hair

can hinder the effectiveness of breathing mask and respirator seals.

To qualify for laser therapy coverage outside the military medical network, service members must work in an environment where breathing protection may be required and laser therapy isn't available on base, according to the policy change, which is backdated to July 17, 2019.

Razor bumps are caused when curly hair curves back into the skin after being shaved, causing inflammation.

The Navy estimates that of more than 337,000 sailors in its ranks, about 6,000 are treated for the condition annually.

Some sailors with the condition previously received a shaving waiver, or "no-shave chit." Under the new policy, sailors are able to obtain only a temporary shaving waiver and must see a doctor every six months if the condition continues.

Former Marine pitches Aussie-US amphibious force

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. and Australia should establish a combined amphibious force including 2,000 Marines and a similar number of sailors based in Darwin, Australia, to build regional support for countering China's ambitions in the western Pacific, according to a former Marine colonel.

Grant Newsham, now a senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, Tokyo, said Monday that the Marine Corps, which rotated

2,500 Marines through Darwin during the summer, needs to see Australia as more than just a great place to train.

"I look at it as more of an opportunity to influence not just in Australia but right out to the heart of Southeast Asia," Newsham said.

Darwin is a lot farther from Chinese shore-based missile batteries than places where the Marines already have a permanent presence in the region, such as Okinawa.

Gen. David H. Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote in a commentary pub-

lished Dec. 5 by War on the Rocks, a website on national security, about the challenges posed by the rise of Chinese military power in the Pacific.

Berger wrote that U.S. "forward bases and legacy infrastructure within the adversary's weapons engagement zone are now extremely vulnerable."

Newsham said an "Australian-American Amphibious Force" supported by amphibious ships from both nations could solve that problem. Such a force could be home-ported in Darwin along with facilities

such as American schools and shops, he said.

The facility could serve as a schoolhouse for amphibious forces from other nations in the region such as New Zealand, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. And Darwin could host an amphibious version of the Rim of the Pacific exercise that is held in Hawaii every other year, he said.

"Draw foreign militaries into your orbit to have them see themselves as trusted partners and equals," he said.

Firearms instructor shot gunman at Texas church

Associated Press

WHITE SETTLEMENT, Texas — Alarms went off in Jack Wilson's head the moment a man wearing a fake beard, a wig, a hat and a long coat walked into a Texas church for Sunday services.

By the time the man approached a communion server and pulled out a shotgun, Wilson and another security volunteer were already reaching for their own guns.

The attacker shot the other volunteer, Richard White, and then the server, Anton "Tony" Wallace, sending congregants scrambling for cover. The gunman was heading toward the front of the sanctuary as Wilson searched for a clear line of fire.

"I didn't have a clear window," he said, referring to church members who "were jumping, going chaotic." Wilson, 71, a firearms instructor who has also been a reserve sheriff's deputy, said: "They were standing up. I had to wait about half a second, or a second, to get my shot. I fired one round. The subject went down."

Wilson's single shot quickly ended the attack that killed Wallace, 64, and White, 67, at the West Freeway Church of Christ in the Fort Worth-area town of White Settlement. He said the entire confrontation was over in no more than six seconds. More than 240 congregants were in the church at the time.

"The only clear shot I had was his head because I still had people in the pews that were not all the way down as low as they could. That was my one shot," Wilson said Monday from his home in nearby Granbury.

As Wilson approached the fallen attacker, he noticed five or six other members of the volunteer security team he had trained with their guns drawn. Wilson said they had their eyes on the man since he arrived. During the service, White and Wilson had stationed themselves at the back of the church, watching him.

The Texas Department of Public Safety on Monday identified the attacker as Keith Thomas Kinnunen, 43. His motive is under investigation.

Wilson described the attacker's gun as a short-barreled 12-gauge shotgun with a pistol grip. Shotguns with barrels less than 18 inches long are restricted under federal law and can be legally owned in Texas only if they are registered with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

After the shooting, Texas officials hailed the state's gun laws, including a measure enacted this year that affirmed the right of licensed handgun holders to carry a weapon in places of worship unless the facility bans them.

Officials: Hanukkah attack suspect researched Hitler

Associated Press

MONSEY, N.Y. — A man charged with federal hate crimes Monday in a bloody attack on a Hanukkah celebration had handwritten journals containing anti-Semitic references and had recently used his phone to look up information on Hitler and the location of synagogues, authorities said.

Grafton Thomas, 37, was held without bail after appearing in federal court in White Plains on five counts of obstructing the free exercise of religious beliefs by attempting to kill with a dangerous weapon. Five people were stabbed and slashed in the Saturday attack north of New York City.

A blood-stained 18-inch machete was recovered from his car, along with a knife smeared with dried blood and hair, prosecutors said in a criminal complaint.

Thomas' court-appointed attorney, Susanne Brody, said Thomas has struggled with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Another attorney retained by his family, Michael Sussman, said Thomas had been hearing voices and may have stopped taking psychiatric medications recently.

A phone recovered from Thomas' car included repeated internet searches for "Why did Hitler hate the Jews" as well as "German Jewish Temples near me" and "Prominent companies founded by Jews in America," the complaint said.

Thomas' family said he was raised to embrace tolerance but has a long history of mental illness.

Taliban prisoners see peace deal as ticket to freedom

Associated Press

PUL-E-CHARKHI, Afghanistan — Thousands of Taliban prisoners jailed in Afghanistan as insurgents see a peace deal being hammered out between the United States and the Taliban as their ticket to freedom.

They know a prisoner release is a key pillar of any agreement that brings an end to Afghanistan's 18-year war, Washington's longest military engagement.

A list of about 5,000 Taliban prisoners has been given to the Americans, and their release has been written into the agreement under discussion, said a Taliban official familiar with

the on-again, off-again talks taking place in Qatar. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. U.S. and Afghan government officials have said a prisoner release is part of the negotiation.

But some analysts say freeing prisoners could undermine peace in Afghanistan.

The Associated Press interviewed more than a dozen Taliban prisoners inside the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison on the eastern edge of the capital, Kabul. Several of them were nostalgic for the Taliban's Afghanistan, ruled by the mighty hand of their previous leader, the reclusive Mullah

Mohammed Omar, who died several years ago.

But they also insisted that they accept it would not be the same now and that, though they still wanted what they call Islamic rule, they no longer call for some of their strict edicts, like the ban on education and on girls and women working.

On Sunday, the Taliban ruling council agreed to a temporary cease-fire in Afghanistan, providing a window in which a peace agreement with the U.S. can be signed, Taliban officials said. They didn't say when it would begin.

Maulvi Niaz Mohammad emerged as the leader among the prisoners, although no one

identified him as such. He was sentenced to 15 years. During the Taliban rule, he served with Qari Ahmadullah, a Taliban intelligence commander who controlled much of northern Afghanistan.

He said barely 1,000 of the prisoners in the block are actually Taliban. The rest were accused of being sympathizers or members of the group, often to settle old scores; others were criminals.

Analysts and even the United States' own Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko said neither Afghanistan nor the U.S. is ready for the Taliban prisoners' release.

Australia wildfires trap seaside residents

Associated Press

PERTH, Australia — Wildfires burning across Australia's two most populous states on Tuesday trapped residents of a seaside town in apocalyptic conditions, destroyed many properties and caused at least two fatalities.

About 12.35 million acres of land have burned nationwide during the wildfire crisis, with 12 people confirmed dead and more than 1,000 homes destroyed.

The annual Australian fire season, which peaks during the Southern Hemisphere summer, started early after an unusually warm and dry winter. Record-breaking

heat and windy conditions triggered wildfires in New South Wales and Queensland states in September.

In the southeastern town of Mallacoota in Victoria state, around 4,000 residents fled toward the waterside as winds pushed an emergency-level wildfire toward their homes. The town was shrouded in darkness from the smoke before turning an unnerving shade of bright red.

Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews said there were plans to evacuate the trapped people by sea. There also were grave fears for four people missing. "We can't confirm their whereabouts," An-

draws told reporters Tuesday.

Andrews has requested assistance from 70 firefighters from the United States and Canada.

Police in New South Wales said Tuesday that two men, believed to be father and son, died in a house in the wildfire-ravaged southeast town of Cobargo, while there are fears for another man missing.

On Monday, a firefighter was killed when extreme winds flipped his truck. Samuel McPaul, 28, was the third volunteer firefighter in New South Wales to have died in the past two weeks. He was an expectant father.

In 2019, Florida leads way in weird news

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG — In 2019, Florida Banana managed to eclipse Florida Man. From alligator antics to naked people doing wacky things, Florida did not disappoint in the weird news department this year.

(So. Many. Naked. People.)

In December, a Miami couple spent more than \$100,000 on the "unicorn of the art world" — a banana duct-taped to a wall — during Art Basel. The piece was widely copied and mocked on social media, and then someone at the art fair ripped it off the wall and ate it.

Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan sold three editions of "Comedian," each in the \$120,000 to \$150,000 range.

"We are acutely aware of the blatant absurdity of the fact that 'Comedian' is an otherwise inexpensive and perishable piece of produce and a couple inches of duct tape," one couple that purchased the banana said. "Ultimately, we sense that Cattelan's banana will become an iconic historical object."

Florida is known for many things. Sunshine, beaches and oranges. The magic of Disney and the glamour of South Beach. It's also known for having the most bananas news in the United States.

As they often do, alligators topped the list of odd stories. Perhaps the most visually interesting happened in October, when Paul Bedard, who is contracted with the state's nuisance alligator program, responded to a call of a gator in a swimming pool in Parkland. Bedard "played" with the 8-foot long reptile until it became tired. Then he lifted it out of the water and held it over his head for an Instagram photo.

"I haven't had a good-sized gator in a swimming pool in probably a year, so I was kind of looking forward to this when I got

the call," he said. The alligator was relocated to a wildlife park.

Humans tangled with gators in a multitude of other ways. One reptile knocked on a woman's door the night before Thanksgiving in Fort Myers. In Martin County, two men poured Coors beer into an alligator's mouth. They were arrested.

Alligators weren't the only animals making headlines in Florida. In August, a restaurant in Stuart canceled its "Monkey Mondays" when a 9-month-old capuchin named JoJo bit a child's finger.

Also in August, a Lake Worth Beach man began feeding a kinkajou (a raccoon relative with a prehensile tail that's native to Central and South America), but one day, it attacked his leg. "It was not a nice kinkajou. It was super aggressive," the man's girlfriend told The Palm Beach Post.

And a Labrador retriever somehow got behind the wheel of a car and did doughnuts in Port St. Lucie.

Some claim Florida's weird news surfaces because of the state's open public records laws, while others chalk it up to the fact that it's the third-largest state, with more than 21 million people packed on a peninsula — many wearing scant clothing because of infernal heat most of the year.

Whatever the reason, taking stock of the year's strange stories in Florida is a time-honored tradition. This year's no different, because the unusual is met with a chuckle and shrug precisely because it's so normal. (Honestly. In 1986, the state's official tourism slogan was "Florida ... The Rules Are Different Here").

Consider Patrick Eldridge, of Jacksonville, who parked his tiny Smart Car in his kitchen because he was worried it would blow away during Hurricane Dorian.

The owners of a Port Orange funeral

home gave away a free cremation as part of its grand reopening.

A toilet exploded in Port Charlotte when lighting struck the home's septic tank. No one was injured, and homeowner Marylou Ward expressed relief: "I'm just glad none of us were on the toilet."

Folks attacked one another with all manner of items, including (but not limited to) pancake batter, Pop-Tarts, a fake Christmas tree, swords, McDonald's condiment packets and roach spray.

In the city of Port Richey, two mayors were arrested in the span of 20 days — one on charges of obstruction of justice; the other on allegations he was practicing medicine without a license in his home.

Lest you think all Floridians are strange, a few did some remarkably kind things.

Chicago Bears linebacker Khalil Mack went to his hometown of Fort Pierce and stopped by a Walmart store in December. He paid off all the layaways, to the tune of \$80,000, according to the Chicago Tribune.

A Florida 9-year-old gave his third grade teacher all the feels when he offered his \$15 of birthday money as a solution to the problem of teachers being underpaid.

But it's the weird that attracts the most attention here. A number of people were nude, or partially nude, when they made the news.

In Polk County in December, a Florida man was "buck naked" when he showed up to the front door of a home where an undercover sex sting operation was being conducted, sheriff's officials said. A naked Florida man burglarized an elementary school in Apopka and spread feces throughout the building. Cops chased a lot of naked people through parking lots, swamps and stores, too many to list here.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Big buoy missing for 2 years has beached

FL NEW SMYRNA BEACH — A big red navigation buoy that bounced along Atlantic waves for two years has beached in Florida, where it's drawing attention.

Crowds of spectators streamed to New Smyrna Beach for a close-up view and some pictures with the buoy navigational marker that some described as "the size of a truck," news outlets reported.

The beacon came from South Carolina and was displaced since 2017, said Petty Officer 2nd Class Ryan Dickinson, spokesman for the U.S. Coast Guard Sector Jacksonville.

The Coast Guard plans to bring in a crane sometime this week to remove the buoy.

Workers help woman who mouthed 'help'

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Workers at a McDonald's in northern California helped rescue a woman who mouthed the words "help me" as she pulled up to the drive-thru window.

The woman initially entered the restaurant asking employees to call 911 and urging them to hide her from a reportedly violent man, The San Francisco Chronicle reported.

The woman then returned to the counter to place an order after using the bathroom but was stopped by the suspect, San Joaquin County deputies said. The man allegedly demanded she return to the car and use the drive-thru where she silently signaled for help at the window, authorities said.

The woman accused the man of threatening to shoot her unless she drove him to see his family, authorities said. The

man was arrested for criminal threats, stolen property and felon in possession of a firearm, deputies said.

Officials remove bear from campus stadium

TN KNOXVILLE — A 200-pound black bear showed up as a walk-on at the University of Tennessee's baseball stadium but ended up being sent back to its home territory.

A UT police officer notified the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, saying the bear had been wandering around campus and got stuck inside Lindsey Nelson Stadium, according to a post on the agency's official Facebook page.

Sgt. Roy Smith and Wildlife Officer Jeff Roberson were able to tranquilize and remove the bear with the help of UT police.

The officers released the bear into the Foothills Wildlife Management Area in Blount County.

Couple returns to Dunkin' to take vows

MA WORCESTER — A Massachusetts couple reunited for extra-sweet wedding vows at the same Dunkin' Donuts where their young love splintered nearly 30 years ago.

Valerie Sneade and Jason Roy were joined by family, friends and customers buying coffee and pastries at a Dunkin' Donuts in Worcester.

Sneade and Roy mostly didn't see each other for 25 years after a conversation about their future at the same shop in 1992 led the young, in-love couple to step back from their relationship.

When Roy learned Sneade was performing a Valentine's Day-themed musical revue in Worcester in February 2018, he showed up and sat in the front

row. Roy proposed that New Year's Eve.

Family follows GPS onto snowmobile trail

NH CRAWFORD'S PURCHASE — A family was stranded for nearly seven hours in northern New Hampshire after their minivan got stuck on a snowmobile trail.

Two adults and five children from Burlington, Mass., were trying to get from the Bretton Woods ski area to a hotel when their vehicle's GPS directed them to a seasonal road that is open only to snowmobile traffic in winter, according to the New Hampshire Fish and Game department.

The driver, Dattu Prajapati, 45, ignored posted signs about the road closure and continued for several miles before turning around, authorities said. The minivan then slid off the road and got stuck in a ditch.

Fish and Game, state police and local rescue crews used an ATV and snowmobile to fetch the family members. Authorities used a special ATV and winch to free the vehicle.

Creamery fined for dumping milk in river

OR SALEM — The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality fined a creamery for river water pollution caused by dumping milk, officials said.

The \$26,574 fine was levied against Organic Valley for dumping by its McMinnville Creamery, The Statesman Journal reported.

The creamery discharged 87 gallons of condensed skim milk and 384 pounds of milk solids into a storm drain that leads to a tributary of the South Yamhill River on Jan. 5, the environmental quality department

said.

The creamery discharged milk into the same drain June 25, which turned the creek white for nearly three-quarters of a mile, the department said.

Another library ends overdue book fines

OH CHARDON — Another Ohio library is moving to a fine-free system, becoming part of a national trend of dropping fines to eliminate barriers to library access.

The Geauga County Public Library in northeastern Ohio eliminated overdue fines beginning Wednesday except for telescopes, new video games and Blu-Ray DVDs, The News-Herald reported.

Rather than amassing fines, borrowers will have their cards blocked 21 days after the due date. Returning the overdue items unblocks the card.

Mom takes selfie; misses proposal

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A future mother-in-law tasked with making a phone recording of her future son-in-law proposing to her daughter apparently missed the moment.

She ended up recording a selfie on her reaction to what she was seeing.

KOB-TV reported Susan Griego somehow took a selfie video of herself watching as Benjamin Steele Bacon proposed to her daughter. She did capture the moment Bacon popped the question to Amber Griego by the penguin exhibit at the Albuquerque Biopark. Her mother admitted she's probably "not very good at photography."

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Woods' win at Masters voted top story

Associated Press

A green jacket. A heart-melting embrace. A stirring return to the top of golf by one of the sport's all-time greats.

In choosing Tiger Woods' victory at the Masters as The Associated Press sports story of the year, voters went with the uplifting escape of a great comeback over options that were as much about sports as the issues that enveloped them in 2019: politics, money and the growing push for equal pay and equal rights for women.

The voters, a mix of AP member sports editors and AP beat writers, elevated Woods' rousing victory at Augusta National over the runner-up entry: the U.S. women's soccer team's victory at the World Cup. That monthlong competition was punctuated by star Megan Rapinoe's push for pay equality for the women's team and an ongoing war of words with President Donald Trump.

Rapinoe's efforts to use sports as a platform to discuss bigger issues was hardly a one-off in 2019. Of the top 12 stories in the balloting, only three — titles won by the Toronto Raptors, Washington Nationals and University of Virginia basketball

team — stuck mainly to what happened between the lines.

The rest — including the blown call that cost the Saints a chance at the Super Bowl, a California law that threatens to upend the NCAA and Simone Biles' dominance at the gymnastics world championships, set against the backdrop of the sex-abuse crisis consuming the sport in the U.S. — were long-running sagas that went beyond a day or event. They painted sports not as an escape from the world's problems but merely another window into them.

It's no stretch to say that the whole of the Woods saga — namely, the sordid, pain-riddled, decadelong prelude to his victory in April — also fit into that category.

His downfall began in the wee hours the day after Thanksgiving in 2009, when he ran over a fire hydrant outside his house in Florida, triggering an avalanche of stories about infidelity that would lead to the breakup of his marriage and play into the near-destruction of his career.

Part 2 was the injuries. He didn't play in 2016 or 2017, and at the end of '17, he conceded his back was so bad that his days of competitive golf might be be-

hind him.

There were four risky back surgeries. Woods also required a good deal of inner healing after a mortifying DUI arrest in 2017 that exposed his reliance on painkillers.

Through it all, Woods somehow kept nurturing his love for golf. And eventually, he found his game again.

It was on the hallowed grounds of Augusta National where Woods set the marker. He blew away the field by 12 strokes in 1997 to win the first of his five green jackets and 15 major titles.

On that day, Woods came off the 18th green and wrapped himself in a warm embrace with his father, Earl, whose death in 2006 left an undeniable void in the player's life.

Although there had been a handful of close calls between his U.S. Open victory in 2008 and the start of 2019, it was clear that if there was a course where Woods could conjure the old magic and end a major drought, it would be Augusta National.

At one time, he might have overpowered the course and intimidated the competition. In 2019, he simply outlasted them both. He avoided mistakes

while everyone else was making them. Instead of taking a lead into the last day, then never giving anyone a whiff of hope, this was a comeback. He started the day two shots behind.

As AP golf writer Doug Ferguson wrote in his wrapup of the final day: "Woods never missed a shot that mattered over the final seven holes, taking the lead with a 5-iron to the fat of the green on the par-5 15th for a two-putt birdie, delivering the knockout with an 8-iron that rode down the ridge by the cup and settled 2 feet away for birdie on the par-3 16th."

When it was over, Woods came to the same spot where he'd met Earl 22 years before. He scooped up his son, Charlie, and held him in a long embrace, then did the same with his 11-year-old daughter, Sam, and mother, Tilda.

"For them to see what it's like to have their dad win a major championship, I hope that's something they will never forget," Woods said.

Very few golf fans will. And in a sports year dominated by weightier topics, Woods at the Masters stood out — a comeback story that left people smiling at the end.

Karma had a hand in year's feel-good moments

Associated Press

Karma had a career year in 2019.

She draped a green jacket on Tiger Woods, handed soccer's World Cup to a tough-as-nails U.S. Women's National Team, shipped the NBA's Larry O'Brien Trophy to a cool-as-they-come rookie coach and players from the Great White North, and turned a baseball tribute to a fallen teammate into something truly unforgettable.

Here are the top feel-good stories of 2019:

■ Fourteen years after his last Masters win and 11 years after his last major, after fighting through chronic back problems, multiple surgeries, a bout with painkillers and long after

just about everybody had written him off, Woods claimed his fifth green jacket in April.

His win was called the "greatest comeback in sports," and "the feel-good story of the century."

■ The U.S. National Women's Team hardly needed reassuring. If anything, captain Megan Rapinoe and her teammates were deemed too brash as they gallivanted across France in pursuit of their third World Cup — and second in a row. Along the way, they sparred with President Donald Trump over politics and highlighted a gender-discrimination lawsuit against their own federation in a fight for recognition and equal pay.

■ The Toronto Raptors, on

the other hand, weren't marked for greatness until that moment in Game 7 of a playoff series against Philadelphia, when Kawhi Leonard's buzzer-beating, fadeaway jumper bounced four times on the rim before capping a 92-90 win.

They outlasted Milwaukee in the Eastern Conference final and, riding Leonard's masterful performances on both ends of the floor, ended the Golden State Warriors' dynastic dreams in six games.

■ The sudden death of popular Los Angeles Angels left-hander Tyler Skaggs in early July rocked the baseball world. His death led to a rare agreement between MLB and the players union to add a treatment-based approach and eval-

uation protocol regarding opioid use to the current drug-testing program.

But the Angels weren't thinking long-term when they planned to honor Skaggs in their first home game after more than a week away. The Angels players donned jerseys with Skaggs' name and his No. 45 on the back. His mother, Debbie, threw out the first pitch. Then the magic started.

Mike Trout hit a 454-foot home run to open the scoring. Pitchers Taylor Cole and Felix Pena combined to throw a no-hitter.

After the final out, the Angels ventured out to the mound and laid their jerseys on the bump.

"We're always going to be thinking about him," Trout said.

Jags keep Marrone, Caldwell despite losses

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — The Jacksonville Jaguars are retaining coach Doug Marrone and general manager Dave Caldwell despite consecutive losing seasons.

Owner Shad Khan made the announcement Tuesday after “positive meetings” with Marrone, Caldwell, their staffs and several players.

“This is not the time to consider an overhaul of our organization,” Khan said.

Marrone and Caldwell have two years remaining on their contracts, and Khan made it clear that expectations are high for 2020.

Jacksonville has two first-round draft picks, Nos. 9 and 20 overall, to help rebuild a roster that lacks talent and depth. Rookies Gardner Minshew, Josh Allen and Jawaan Taylor are a few of the building blocks in place for Marrone and Caldwell

moving forward.

But there are plenty of holes, especially if the Jaguars part ways with several expensive veterans to create salary cap space.

Khan fired top executive Tom Coughlin two weeks ago, identifying the old-school coach’s overbearing ways as the main problem. Coughlin’s heavy-handed approach upset players, with cornerback Jalen Ramsey forcing his trade to the Los Angeles Rams, as well as some assistants. Coughlin had difficulty making the transition from the sideline to the front office.

Coughlin’s position as executive vice president of football operations will not be filled. Marrone and Caldwell will report directly to Khan.

Khan expressed his disappointment with the team’s 6-10 season. Jacksonville was 4-4 and in the hunt in the AFC South before losing five straight and falling out of play-

off contention. The Jags responded by losing all five by at least 17 points. Marrone is 23-28 in three seasons, including 11-21 following a trip to the 2017 AFC title game.

The slide began in the offseason. The Jaguars had to cut several good players, including defensive tackle Malik Jackson and safety Tashaun Gipson, after botching the quarterback position again. Caldwell chose Blake Bortles with the third overall pick in the 2014 draft, and even though the quarterback showed more struggles than strides, Caldwell and Coughlin gave him a three-year extension worth \$54 million.

Jacksonville released Bortles in March, and signed former Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles to a four-year, \$88 million deal. Foles broke his left collarbone in the opener, missed eight games and was benched in his third game back. Minshew was one of several bright spots, going 6-6 in 12 starts.

Malkin’s 2 goals spark Penguins’ rout of Senators

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Evgeni Malkin’s goal in the first minute sparked the Pittsburgh Penguins to a victory that ended with distressing thud.

Malkin scored twice but teammate Jake Guentzel was injured right after getting his 20th goal of the season in the Penguins’ 5-2 win Monday night over the Ottawa Senators.

Guentzel had a three-point night but left after scoring 6:55 into the third period. Guentzel, who was selected to his first All-Star Game on Monday, tapped one into a partially empty net off Malkin’s feed, then crashed hard into the wall following contact with Ottawa’s Thomas Chabot.

Guentzel immediately went to the dressing room after getting his 200th career point.

“I hope he’s not out long,” Malkin said. “It didn’t look good. But everyone understands it’s hockey. It’s tough. I need to play better next game if Jake doesn’t play.”

Penguins coach Mike Sullivan didn’t have an update on Guentzel.

“It was really scary,” Sullivan said. “Those are always dangerous when you fall that distance from the boards. He’s being evaluated. We’ll probably have more information on him (Tuesday).”

Malkin stretched his points streak to six games. He has seven goals and 24 points in his past 13 contests. Patric Hornqvist and Dominik Simon also scored the Penguins, who have won three straight and 10 of 12.

Tristan Jarry stopped 24 shots to win his sixth straight game. He has won eight of his last nine starts and allowed no more than two goals in 14 of 18 appearances this season.

Nick Paul scored twice for the Senators, who ended a five-game points streak. Paul has three goals in his last two games.

Marcus Hogberg made 28 saves for the Senators.

“We were unable to contain their top guys,” Senators coach D.J. Smith said. “Defensively in our zone and off the rush, Malkin just kind of ate us up tonight.”

Perine has 3 TDs in Gators’ Orange Bowl win over Cavs

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Lamical Perine scored on a 61-yard run in the opening minute and didn’t stop until he climbed onto a platform for the postgame ceremony to receive the Orange Bowl’s most valuable player trophy.

Perine totaled 181 yards rushing and receiving with three touchdowns Monday to help No. 6 Florida beat Virginia 36-28.

The win means the Gators (11-2) will likely finish in the Top 10 in consecutive seasons for the first time since 2008-09. Second-year coach Dan Mullen credited Perine and the rest of the senior class with leading the resurgence.

“They restored the Gator standards and are building what we want to build,” said Mullen, who improved to 21-5 at Florida.

“My sophomore year, we were 4-7,” Perine said. “We came back and had two double-digit win seasons. It’s great, man.”

Perine carried 13 times for a career-high 138 yards rushing at the end of a so-so senior

season. He came into the game with only 538 yards rushing this year in the Gators’ pass-oriented offense.

“He’s one of the top running backs in the SEC,” Mullen said. “People say, ‘The stats say this, the stats say that.’ But every time we needed a big run this season, he came up with it.”

Perine was too quick and speedy for the Cavaliers, as his dash through their secondary on the first series showed. He also scored on a 10-yard run and caught a 16-yard touchdown pass from Kyle Trask.

The Cavaliers (9-5) lost their final two games but still posted their highest win total since 2007.

Trask capped a storybook junior season by throwing for 305 yards. He was lightly recruited and in late September became a starter for the first time since the ninth grade.

Florida totaled 549 yards, including a season-high 244 rushing, and didn’t punt until midway through the third quarter. The Gators exposed the weaknesses in a Virginia defense that allowed more than 23 points per game.

NBA roundup

Antetokounmpo's back, keys Bucks' win

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Giannis Antetokounmpo had 23 points and 10 rebounds after missing two games with a sore back, and the Milwaukee Bucks pulled away in the second half for a 123-102 victory over the Chicago Bulls on Monday night.

Antetokounmpo, the NBA's second-leading scorer with an average of 30.5 points per game entering this one, played only 27 minutes and sat out the final 5½ because of the lopsided score. He was 8-for-14 from the field with six assists.

Khris Middleton scored 25 points for the Bucks and Eric Bledsoe had 15 points in 16 minutes after missing the previous eight games with a fractured right leg. Milwaukee improved to a league-best 30-5.

Zach LaVine scored 19 points for the Bulls but shot just 7-for-23 from the field.

Wizards 123, Heat 105: Jordan McRae scored a season-high 29 points, Garrison Mathews had a career-high 28 and Ian Mahinmi added a career-best 25 as depleted Washington beat visiting Miami.

With the Wizards (10-22) minus All-Star shooting guard Bradley Beal and five other key members of their rotation, they got huge contributions from an unexpected trio. McRae, a third-year player, Mathews, in his 11th NBA game, and Mahinmi, a 13-year veteran, enjoyed nights to remember against the Heat (24-9), which had its five-game winning streak snapped. The Heat entered with the second-best record in the East and lost for just the third time in 20 games against conference opponents.

Suns 122, Trail Blazers 116: Devin Booker scored 33 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. had 29 and Phoenix rallied to win at Portland.

After trailing by 19, the Suns roared back to win their second consecutive game and hand the Trail Blazers their fourth straight defeat.

Jazz 104, Pistons 81: Donovan Mitchell scored 23 points and Jordan Clarkson added 20 to lead host Utah over Detroit.

Rudy Gobert added 13 points and 19 rebounds for the surging Jazz, and Bojan Bogdanovic scored 17. Utah won for the

eighth time in nine games.

Timberwolves 122, Nets 115 (OT): Shabazz Napier scored a season-high 24 points, Jarrett Culver added 21 and short-handed Minnesota rallied past visiting Brooklyn in overtime.

The Timberwolves had lost 12 of 13 and were again without injured Karl-Anthony Towns and ill Andrew Wiggins. Gorgui Dieng started in Towns' place and had 11 points and 20 rebounds.

Hawks 101, Magic 93: Brandon Goodwin scored 21 points, Kevin Huerter added 19 and Atlanta won at Orlando to end a 10-game skid.

Playing without injured guard Trae Young (ankle) for the second straight game, the Hawks trailed by 18 during the first half but rallied in the third quarter.

Alex Len scored eight of his 18 points to fuel a 15-4 run, while Atlanta's defense yielded only six field goals in the period.

Top 25 roundup

Clutch Gillespie lifts No. 10 Villanova past Xavier

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Villanova coach Jay Wright leaned on Collin Gillespie in crunch time, and the sophomore guard delivered.

Gillespie scored 16 of his game-high 24 points in the second half to lead No. 10 Villanova to a 68-62 victory over Xavier on Monday night in the Big East Conference opener for both teams.

"I really liked his decision making in the second half," Wright said of his point guard. "He made great decisions on when to take it at them, when to get someone else a shot, and when to take a three."

Gillespie got hot after half-time and drained a key three-pointer with 4:37 remaining that gave the Wildcats a 60-49 lead and some needed breathing room. The Musketeers had

been inching closer behind the strong interior play of Naji Marshall, who netted 10 of 12 Xavier points during one second-half stretch.

"Just be a leader vocally and leading by example on the court," Gillespie said.

Jermaine Samuels added 14 points for Villanova (10-2), which has won six in a row. The Wildcats hadn't played since a 56-55 victory over then-No. 1 Kansas on Dec. 21.

The victory was more of the same for the Wildcats, who have dominated the Big East since the conference realignment in 2013. They have won five of the six regular-season titles and four of six tournament titles, including the past three.

Villanova starts three sophomores and a freshman, along with a junior.

"That's what the Big East is going to be like every night,

home or away," Wright said. "It's going to be a grinder. There are just so many good teams in this league. This is going to be incredible this season. It's a great learning experience for us."

Marshall had 19 points to pace Xavier (9-3).

No. 1 Gonzaga 93, Detroit Mercy 72: Filip Petrushev scored 22 points as the host Zags wrapped up their nonconference season with a win.

Ryan Woolridge added 21 points and eight assists for Gonzaga (14-1), which has won 31 consecutive home games, the longest streak in the nation.

No. 6 Baylor 83, Jackson State 57: Jared Butler scored 18 points, Freddie Gillespie had another double-double and the host Bears won their ninth straight game.

Baylor (10-1) missed its first six shots and didn't score until

MaCio Teague had a three-point play but made 11 of 13 field goals during a game-deciding 32-6 run.

No. 9 Memphis 84, Tulane 73: Lester Quinones scored 16 points, Damion Baugh finished with 15 and the host Tigers weathered a second-half rally in the teams' American Athletic Conference opener. Precious Achiuwa finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds as Memphis (12-1, 1-0 AAC) won its 10th straight.

No. 20 Dayton 77, North Florida 59: Obi Toppin scored a career-high 31 points as the host Flyers used their front-line advantage and pulled away.

Dayton (11-2) took advantage of its mismatch and used its quickness to force 21 turnovers that set up easy baskets. Dayton scored 52 points in the paint.