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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US agencies adjust to a shifting Afghanistan

BY HEATH DRUZIN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The largest U.S. aid group and the government's top watchdog in Afghanistan — two high-profile organizations inextricably linked and often at odds — are facing new challenges with fewer U.S. troops to provide security in a still dangerous environment.

One consequence of the drawdown of U.S. forces “is a reduction in their ability to protect us, to get us into places where we need to be,” said Dave Schwendiman, director of forward operations for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, which keeps a close watch on how U.S. taxpayer dollars in Afghanistan are spent.

American troop levels have dropped to less than 11,000 this year from a high of more than 100,000. In 2012, the international community pledged \$16 billion in continuing aid to Afghanistan through 2016, with roughly half of that coming from the U.S.

SIGAR and the taxpayer-funded United States Agency for International Development, the largest aid group in Afghanistan, are committed to continuing operations in Afghanistan, but officials acknowledge they are increasingly constrained

in where they can go and what they can do because of continued fighting between Afghan security forces and insurgents.

Larry Sampler, who leads USAID's Afghanistan and Pakistan missions, said the funding levels likely will decline and the agency's era of big infrastructure projects is largely over, but he wants the agency to continue pursuing “relentless progress” in Afghanistan, including an ambitious, \$200 million project to improve conditions for women.

“It's not a withdrawal — the United States is not leaving Afghanistan,” he said in a recent phone interview. “A part of our mission will be to reassure nervous Afghans that we're not walking away from Afghanistan.”

SIGAR officials say that despite constraints on their movements, they aren't planning to cut staff anytime soon. Their mandate is to operate in the country until there is less than \$250 million in U.S. tax dollars allocated to Afghanistan.

“We have our mandate, and our mandate is to do the work we do,” said Matt Dove, SIGAR's Kabul-based deputy inspector general for audits and inspections. “Until we're told otherwise, we're going to continue to do it at a rate and size we determine best.”

USAID has spent roughly \$17 billion on reconstruction projects across Afghanistan since the U.S. invaded in 2001 to oust the Taliban regime. USAID's success has been mixed. There have been undeniable gains in areas such as women's rights, education, and health care. Officials with USAID point to the 2014 Afghan presidential election as a step in the right direction, though it was bitterly contested over massive voter fraud. It was only settled with U.S. intervention that helped broker a power-sharing arrangement between President Ashraf Ghani and his election rival, Abdullah Abdullah, who was named to the newly created post of chief executive officer.

But the aid effort in Afghanistan has come under heavy scrutiny in recent years for wastefulness, poor planning and lack of transparency, flaws laid out in stark detail largely by SIGAR reports. A prime example of a project that has not succeeded despite massive funding is the Kajaki Dam in southern Afghanistan. Tens of millions of dollars over budget and 10 years behind schedule, few outside of USAID expect the power project ever to be completed.

And in January, USAID suspended one of its largest nonprofit contractors, Interna-

tional Relief and Development, for “serious misconduct” after giving the company \$2.4 billion since 2007, much of it for reconstruction in Afghanistan.

The key to SIGAR's efforts to shine a spotlight on aid initiatives in the country is the ability of investigators to get out in the field to see projects up close. That has become more and more difficult as U.S. bases closed and American security assets — from both the State Department and the military — have shrunk.

“There's no substitute for being there. There's no substitute for being exposed to this place outside the walls,” Schwendiman said in an interview at the organization's Kabul offices in the heavily fortified U.S. Embassy complex.

That has become more difficult with the reduction in the number of U.S. troops.

Both USAID and SIGAR are planning increased reliance on local staff and contractors to get to areas that would be treacherous for Americans.

“In some cases, we do still have Americans come out and visit a program,” Sampler said. “In other cases, we may use technology, overflights or crowdsourcing technology. We have to do that because we can't get out to all parts of Afghanistan.”

Militants who attacked Iraq base were disguised as soldiers

The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — The Islamic State fighters who attacked a base used by U.S. troops on Friday were suicide bombers disguised as Iraqi soldiers, an Iraqi official said.

Iraqi security forces supported by “surveillance assets” from the U.S.-led coalition killed eight militants who tried to carry out a “direct attack” on the Al Asad Air Base in Iraq's Anbar province at 7:20

a.m., the Combined Joint Task Force said in a statement. The men were would-be suicide bombers who sought to enter the base disguised as Iraqi army soldiers, said Sulaiman al-Kubbaisi, a spokesman for Anbar's provincial council.

Three of the militants reportedly were able to set off their explosives before the rest were killed.

The attack came a day after militants

took control of most of Baghdadi, a town less than five miles from the base, where 320 U.S. servicemembers have been training Iraqi troops and tribal fighters.

U.S. forces were “several kilometers” from the attack and were at no stage under direct threat, the statement said. Still, the targeting of a base hosting U.S. troops underscored the risk that Americans could be drawn into real engagement with the militants.

Subpoenas arrive after Ore. governor resigns

The Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — Just hours after Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber announced his decision to resign, a subpoena arrived in a state office building confirming that federal agents are looking into the influence-peddling scandal that led to the abrupt end of a four-decade political career.

The Democratic governor gave in to mounting pressure Friday, abandoning his office amid suspicions that his live-in

fiancee used her relationship with him to land contracts for her green-energy consulting business.

His resignation, which takes effect Wednesday, cleared the way for Secretary of State Kate Brown to assume Oregon's highest office and to become the nation's first openly bisexual governor.

"This is a sad day for Oregon. But I am confident that legislators are ready to come together to move Oregon forward," said Brown, also a Democrat. Un-

like most states, Oregon does not have a lieutenant governor. The secretary of state is next in line to succeed the governor.

When Kitzhaber closes the door on his life in public office, the scandal that toppled Oregon's longest-serving governor will still linger. Subpoenas delivered to the Department of Administrative Services Friday request a massive array of documents from Kitzhaber's administration.

The subpoena was the first acknowledgment of a federal

investigation against Kitzhaber, 67, and his fiancée, Cylvia Hayes, 47. It seeks records pertaining to 15 other people besides Kitzhaber and Hayes, including Kitzhaber's chief of staff, policy advisers, Kitzhaber's lawyer and secretaries.

The subpoena orders the agency to produce documents for a federal grand jury before March 10. An agency spokesman, Matt Shelby, said it would provide whatever requested records are in its possession.

Obama: Private sector must help vs. cyberattacks

The Associated Press

PALO ALTO, Calif. — Cyberspace is the new "Wild West," President Barack Obama said Friday, with everyone looking to the government to be the sheriff. But he told the private sector it must do more to stop cyberattacks aimed at the U.S. every day.

"Everybody is online, and everybody is vulnerable," Obama said during a White House cybersecurity summit at Stanford University, just miles from Google, Facebook, Intel and other Internet giants.

Obama told more than 1,500 business leaders, students, professors and reporters that information about threats must be shared and responded to quickly. And he signed an executive order aimed at making it easier for private firms to have access to classified information about cyberattacks.

New England girds for next storm

The Associated Press

BOSTON — Mother Nature isn't showing New England any love.

Yet another winter storm was due to arrive in the region for Valentine's Day, promising snow and heavy winds even as some areas are already staggering under 6 feet of snow or more.

A blizzard warning was in effect for coastal areas from Connecticut to Maine starting Saturday afternoon for the fourth major storm the region has seen in less than a month. The storm was expected to arrive Saturday afternoon and intensify overnight into Sunday, bringing bone-chilling cold behind it.

Wind gusts could howl at 70 mph and north-facing coastal areas could suffer moderate flooding and beach erosion from the "monster storm," said Bill Simpson, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Taunton, Mass.

"Snow amounts will not be as much as the previous big storms, but still, when you

have 8 to 14 inches of snow, wind driven-snow, the cold air and the snow that is already there it's probably going to be very difficult for a lot of people," he said.

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority announced late Friday it would suspend all rail, bus and ferry service in the Boston area on Sunday, the latest in a series of disruptions for the nation's oldest public transit network.

The Coast Guard had an airplane flying in the Gulf of Maine Friday broadcasting a warning to mariners about the impending storm, said Lt. Scott McCann.

Back on land, crews worked urgently to remove the massive snow piles that have clogged streets and triggered numerous roof collapses.

Massachusetts called up hundreds of National Guard troops to assist with snow removal, and the Hanscom Air Force base outside Boston became a staging area for heavy equipment pouring in from eight other Northeast states to help in the effort.

Fighting persists in Ukraine ahead of cease-fire

The Associated Press

SVITLODARSK, Ukraine — Heavy artillery fire roared Saturday in eastern Ukraine as fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists continued hours before a cease-fire was to take effect in the conflict that has killed more than 5,300 people.

Associated Press reporters saw the artillery barrage near the town of Svitlodarsk as well as considerable movement of Ukrainian forces' armored vehicles and rocket launchers along the road.

Svitlodarsk is about 12 miles north of Debaltseve, a strategically important railroad

junction city where Ukrainian forces have been under siege by rebels. Eduard Basurin, a rebel spokesman, was quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency as saying that the fighters would not allow the Ukrainian forces to escape the city but would offer the opportunity to surrender.

Under an agreement reached Thursday, the warring sides are to cease firing at midnight.

However, a previous cease-fire called in September failed to take hold and after fighting escalated sharply in January, expectations for the new agreement are clouded.

NYC chilly host for All-Star game

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA's All-Star show has arrived on Brrr-oadway.

After years of performing only in warm-weather cities in the South and West, the midseason spectacle has come back to the bitterly cold Big Apple, where the most popular person at the player hotel Friday may not have been LeBron James or Stephen Curry, but the one handing out complimentary hot chocolates in the lobby.

Players love being in New York and can't wait for the curtain to rise at Madison Square Garden on Sunday night, but the bright lights in the big city aren't doing anything to help the teeth-chattering chilly temperatures down below.

"New York is cold as hell, man. But it's nice, it's cool," Miami's Dwyane Wade said. "I feel like the All-Star had to be in New York one of these years. Since I've been in the league, 12 years now, it hasn't been in New York and it's mind-boggling that it hasn't, but I think it's cool that it's finally here. There's just a different vibe in New York than anywhere else."

Wade is injured and can't play Sunday, but the guys who will say it will be a special night because it will be on one of their favorite stages.

"It's going to be the best All-Star Game for me, to be able to be in the Garden," James said. "I love my fans back in Cleveland. I loved my fans when I was in Miami. But if I could have 82 regular-season games in the Garden, you know I would, because it's the mecca of basketball. You get a great feeling when you

walk in there because there is so much history. It's going to be fun."

The game hasn't been in New York since 1998, Michael Jordan's last with the Chicago Bulls and the first of many for Kobe Bryant and Tim Duncan. The NBA's preference has been places where it's warm in February, and cities such as Houston and New Orleans have hosted it multiple times in recent years.

But when the Garden underwent a three-year renovation and Barclays Center in Brooklyn was built, both with \$1 billion price tags, the league decided the venues would share the weekend. The Rising Stars challenge and All-Star Saturday night went to the home of the Nets, with the game set for the Knicks' home court.

Players arrived to find painfully cold temperatures in the teens, feeling much lower with the wind, and snow possible on Sunday, when the forecast was for a low near zero degrees. Sacramento's DeMarcus Cousins, who usually spends All-Star weekend back home in Alabama, was still wearing his winter hat when he conducted his media day interviews in a hotel ballroom.

The Knicks' Carmelo Anthony wasn't worried about showing players around the city because "nobody wants to be out in this cold anyway."

"You talk about people that're in other cold climates that're complaining that they're cold," he added.

That would include Wade, who grew up in Chicago and played in Milwaukee at Marquette, making him somewhat of an expert on frozen tundras.

"It's cold, but Milwaukee is COLD,"

he said. "I think Milwaukee is colder than Chicago. Seriously, when I was in Milwaukee, there was a couple of days I thought about not playing basketball ever again. I didn't want to walk to class it was so cold. I was like, I don't know if this life is for me. But this is cold, but it ain't got nothing on Milwaukee cold."

Still, Wade said, he would play outdoors as a kid because he loved the game, just as kids were doing outside a community center where James, Curry and Commissioner Adam Silver appeared at an NBA Cares clinic, one of the 100 the league conducted Friday around the city's five brrr-oughs.

Silver had said earlier this week the weather was always the biggest All-Star concern for the league.

"I'm very happy so far that while it's a little colder than I would have liked, most importantly we don't have a lot of snow, and the latest I've heard is that the airports are clear and people are able to get around easy in the city," he said after the event.

The game will be a vintage New York show, featuring performances by the Rockettes and some Broadway musical actors. Anthony is battling a knee injury that could end his season after the All-Star break, but he's continued playing to take part in a weekend he says New Yorkers will never forget.

"This is one of the cities that I think most guys look forward to coming to," added Portland's LaMarcus Aldridge. "It's a fun city. There's always a lot going on. It's the fashion capital. I think guys love coming here."

World team tops US in Rising Stars challenge

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Andrew Wiggins scored 22 points, Rudy Gobert added 18 points, 12 rebounds and three blocked shots, and the World team beat the U.S. 121-112 on Friday night in the Rising Stars Challenge at All-Star weekend.

Wiggins, the No. 1 pick from Canada who plays for the Minnesota Timberwolves, was chosen as the game's MVP.

Brooklyn's Bojan Bogdanovic of Croatia, playing on his home court, and Chicago's Nikola Mirotic from Montenegro each added 16 points for the World.

Orlando's Victor Oladipo and Zach LaVine of Minnesota each scored 22 points for the U.S. team in the game between rookies and second-year players.

It was another new format for the opening game of All-Star weekend, which originated as a contest between teams of rookies, later turned into rookies against second-year players, and this year changed to the world against U.S. players.

It looked like all the other versions, with lots of 1-on-1 play and little defense beyond Gobert, the French center who impressively stuffed Nets center Mason Plumlee late in the game with the World protecting a narrow lead.

Davis, Hart highlights of celebrity game

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Little League phenom Mo'ne Davis was so impressive on a basketball court she momentarily silenced trash-talking "Wedding Ringer" star Kevin Hart.

Playing in the All-Star Celebrity Game against opponents more than twice her age, the 13-year-old drove past Hart, the game's MVP for the fourth time, with a spectacular spin move for an easy layup in the first quarter Friday night.

"That was pretty cool," Davis said. "I work on it, but usually don't do it. It was the right time to do it."

Hart, who like Davis is from Philadelphia, said, "No excuses," as he returned to the huddle shortly after her basket.

Madison Square Garden was abuzz with stars from the NBA, WNBA and Hollywood two nights before the NBA All-Star Game is played Sunday. But much of the attention was on the teenager, who got one of the loudest ovations from the crowd when she was introduced before the game.

Davis, a pitcher, shot to fame as the first girl to win a Little League World Series game. Only in eighth grade, Davis already plays basketball for the high school varsity team.

"It was a lot of fun, a lot of people never saw me play basketball," she said. "To play in the celebrity All-Star game was pretty cool."

The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year finished the All-Star Game with four points, helping the West team beat the East 59-51. Hart had 15 points.

"She was really impressive out there," said WNBA star Skylar Diggins. "She definitely held her own."

Davis was a little star struck, too. She made sure to take a photo with Diggins after the game before she left.

The West team was coached by ESPN personality Mike Golic and Spike Lee, who was wearing a blue hat with orange trim in honor of his beloved New York Knicks. Lee directed a commercial that starred Davis. Carmelo Anthony along with ESPN personality Mike Greenberg coached the East team.

The game also included actors Anthony Anderson, Common, Nick Cannon, Sarah Silverman, Ansel Elgort, Chadwick Boseman, Jesse Williams and Michael Rapaport, who grew up in New York City. Williams, who stars on Grey's Anatomy, injured his knee with 5 minutes left in the game and was helped off the court and back to the locker room.

Bollywood star Abhishek Bachchan also played as did singer Win Butler of Arcade Fire.

NBA Hall of Famer and New York native Chris Mullin played as did former New York Knicks' star Allan Houston. Current WNBA players Diggins, Tina Charles and Shoni Schimmel represented the league. Schimmel, who was the MVP of the WNBA All-Star game this past year, tricked Silverman — who was on the other team, to give her the ball under the basket which the Atlanta Dream star converted for a layup.

She led all scorers with 17 points.

"This was awesome," Schimmel said. "Really had a great time playing here in this."

Memphis Grizzlies owner Robert Pera also played, showing off his basketball skills. A few years back he tried to challenge Michael Jordan to a 1-on-1 game for charity that never developed.

Pera and Diggins finished with 13 points each to lead the West.

This was the first time that the celebrity game was played at an NBA arena.

James new NBAPA VP

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — LeBron James is about to play a new power position — vice president.

The Cavaliers star was unanimously elected first vice president of the National Basketball Players Association, giving the game's top player a leadership role within a union set to square off in the future with the league's owners over revenue.

James was elected during the union's annual meeting at a hotel near Times Square. A person familiar with James' election said Clippers All-Star guard Chris Paul, the union's president, had urged the four-time MVP to accept a prominent role within the union.

Union executive director Michele Roberts could hardly wait to announce James' addition.

"We have a new vice president who was elected unanimously. His name is LeBron James," she said, saying it slowly for emphasis. "I can not tell you how delighted I am because it simply confirms that our union is supported by players all across the spectrum. LeBron's addition to our executive committee is evidence of that. This is a great day for our union."



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Blackhawks rally past Devils

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Marian Hossa is smiling again. The swagger is back. While the Chicago Blackhawks are searching for successful line combinations, Hossa is rolling.

The veteran winger scored his seventh goal in four games, and the Blackhawks rallied for a 3-1 victory over the New Jersey Devils on Friday night.

"When you've got more confidence, the puck is with you," Hossa said. "You try to do a little more. At the same time, you try to keep things simple, and just put a puck at the net."

Hossa also had an assist on Jonathan Toews' tiebreaking goal in the third as the Blackhawks rebounded from a pair of losses at the start of an eight-game homestand. Kris Versteeg tacked on an empty-net score, and Corey Crawford made 25 saves.

Peter Harrold scored in the first for New Jersey, which has dropped three in a row. Cory Schneider had 32 stops.

Chicago got off to another slow start and looked all out of sorts before Hossa took over. The Blackhawks also struggled for much of Wednesday night's game against Vancouver, but Hossa scored two of Chicago's three goals in the third period as the Blackhawks put together a big rally to salvage a point in a 5-4 overtime loss to the Canucks.

It was more of the same for Hossa in the third against New Jersey. With Michael Ryder in the penalty box for interference, the 36-year-old Hossa beat Schneider with a well-placed shot into the right side for the tying score just 1:27 into the period.

"It came so softly that it just literally fell as I went to go get it," Schneider said. "It's a tough one for me. I would have loved to have had that one. It was a bit of a funky goal and the way I felt, the way I was playing, it was one I felt I should have and could have had."

It was Hossa's 17th goal for the season.

Before his current tear, he had two goals in his previous 15 games.

"On fire," Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville said. "He's got it going. He's got that touch."

Hossa then got loose for a rush to the net that was turned away by Schneider, but Toews was there to push in the rebound at 4:10. It was Toews' first goal since Jan. 30 at Anaheim, stopping a six-game drought.

New Jersey had a chance to tie it again when Patrick Sharp was sent off for hooking, but Chicago killed off the ensuing power play.

Blue Jackets 4, Flyers 3 (OT): Artem Anisimov scored 2:17 into overtime to lift host Columbus to a come-from-behind win.

The Blue Jackets had been winless when trailing after two periods (0-20-0) and the Flyers had not lost in regulation when ahead going into the third period (13-0-2).

Flyers goalie Ray Emery stopped James Wisniewski's one-timer, but Anisimov jumped on the short rebound and shifted the puck to his forehand to beat Emery.

Brandon Dubinsky had a goal and an assist, Cam Atkinson scored, and Jared Boll found the net for the first time in 64 games for the Blue Jackets. Curtis McElhinney had 22 saves.

Wayne Simmonds had two goals and an assist and Sean Couturier also scored for the Flyers, who had a seven-game points streak (5-0-2) end. Emery finished with 29 saves.

Sharks 4, Coyotes 2: Joe Pavelski scored three goals, Antti Niemi stopped 32 shots and visiting San Jose ended a three-game losing streak.

San Jose tightened up after falling into a 2-0 hole in the first period. Pavelski scored twice in the second to reach the 30-goal mark for the third time in his career. He added an empty-net goal for his fourth career hat trick.

Barclay Goodrow also scored to help

Sharks coach Todd McLellan reach 300 wins in 515 career games. Anaheim's Bruce Boudreau is the only coach in NHL history to reach the milestone faster, 496 games.

Mark Arcobello had a goal in his Arizona debut to become the second player in NHL history with a point with four teams in the same season, joining Dennis O'Brien in 1977-78. Martin Erat also scored for the Coyotes.

Stars 2, Panthers 0: Kari Lehtonen shut out visiting Florida, making 37 saves. But Dallas lost three players to injuries.

Lehtonen made the Stars' two first-period goals hold up for their third straight win. The Panthers have lost on consecutive nights.

Jamie Benn scored Dallas' third short-handed goal in two games; the Stars lead the NHL with nine short-handed goals.

Jason Spezza scored for the 2-0 lead.

Tyler Seguin, Dallas' leader with 29 goals and 59 points, was helped off the ice after being checked in the lower leg by defenseman Dmitry Kulikov in the third period. Patrick Eaves followed Seguin to the locker room 51 seconds later after teammate John Klingberg's wrist shot hit Eaves in the head.

A third Stars forward, Ales Hemsky, left in the first period with a lower body injury.

Canucks 5, Bruins 2: Shawn Matthias scored the first hat trick of his career with two goals in the opening period and one in the third for host Vancouver.

Radim Vrbata and Jannik Hansen, into an empty net, had the other goals for Vancouver, while Zack Kassian added two assists. Ryan Miller made 21 saves to get the win in his 600th NHL game.

Patrice Bergeron and Chris Kelly replied for Boston, which got 20 saves from Tuukka Rask.

Matthias had scored two goals in a game six times before Friday.

Ligety wins gold medal in men's GS

The Associated Press

BEAVER CREEK, Colo. — Ted Ligety's mood in the starting gate? Tranquil, of all things.

This was his hill, after all. Didn't matter if he trailed his main rival. Make a clean run, a Ted Ligety-esque run, and just see what transpires, he reminded himself.

So Ligety did — a remarkable, mistake-free final run that slid the American right into the record books. Ligety stormed back from a first-run deficit Friday to become the only man to win three straight giant slalom titles at the world championships.

Behind Marcel Hirscher of Austria by 0.24 seconds after the morning run, Ligety found speed down the course where others couldn't and finished in a time of 2 minutes, 34.16 seconds. Hirscher was second, 0.45 seconds behind, and Alexis Pinturault of France earned the bronze.

"To be able to come through and pull it off is awesome," said the 30-year-old Ligety, who's from Park City, Utah.

Like there was ever a doubt, even as Ligety trailed. Well, maybe a little.

See, Hirscher won three straight World Cup GS races entering this competition. And while this is Ligety's course, a place where he's won five World Cup GS races, including last December, Hirscher seemed well-positioned to spring the upset.

Or so it appeared anyway. But races like this are why Ligety's fellow skiers often refer to him as "Mr. GS." He's cool under pressure.

"Ted was, today, in his own league," said Germany's Felix Neureuther, who finished fourth, 1.10 seconds behind Ligety. "He's amazing."

With this win, Ligety, the Olympic GS champ from Sochi, cements his name among the legends of the sport. The only other men to win three straight world titles in any discipline are Sweden's Ingemar Stenmark (slalom, 1978, '80, '82) and Norway's Kjetil Andre Aamodt (combined, '97, '99, 2001).

Impressed to be among such esteemed company?

"I'm not somebody who worries about the statistics when I'm doing it," said Ligety, who won the 2011 world GS title in Germany and again two years ago in Austria, which was part of his three gold-medal performance. "It's cool to be able to achieve what I've achieved and be able to reflect back on those things later."

It took the ninth race into these championships, but the Americans finally captured that elusive first gold medal. The U.S. team had a good chance at another medal on Saturday when Olympic slalom champion Mikaela Shiffrin competed in her signature event. Meanwhile, the Austrians bumped their medal total to nine, five more than the U.S.

Pretty much everyone figured some combination of Ligety, Hirscher and Pinturault would be on the podium. They usually are. That's the way it was at Beaver Creek in December, when Ligety won, Pinturault was second and Hirscher third.

"I think all the guys tried to push real hard today because after the first run it was really tight," said Pinturault, who's been sick this week. "But finally it was still Marcel, Ted and me."

The fifth racer out of the gate in the final run, Ligety didn't make a single miscue on terrain that suits his style of skiing so well. He pumped his fists again and again after finishing his run, knowing his time was going to be difficult to beat.

Pinturault couldn't match it. Neither could Neureuther or Italy's Roberto Nani.

Several teams on NCAA tourney bubble

The Associated Press

As an automatic-qualifying conference, the Mountain West is guaranteed to have one team get into the NCAA tournament. The conference appears to be in decent shape to add another for the second straight season.

Getting a third or fourth into the bracket will likely depend on what happens the final month of the season in a conference where the teams seem to beat up each other every week.

"A lot of times, when you have a number of quality teams, they tend to beat each other up along the way," said Scott Barnes, athletic director at Utah State and the chair of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee. "The Mountain West is a strong conference."

San Diego State entered the season with high expectations after reaching the Sweet 16 a year ago, but dropped out of The Associated Press Top 25 in late December. The Aztecs (19-6) lead the Mountain West at 9-3, a half-game ahead of Boise State, and have a decent NCAA résumé.

The Broncos (18-6) gave their NCAA tournament chances a boost with a win over the Aztecs and another over Air Force last week to stretch their winning streak to eight games. They could have a good shot if they don't fall apart late in the season.

Wyoming (19-6) was ranked earlier this season, but took a hit when star player Larry Nance Jr. came down with mononucleosis. The Cowboys lost their first two games without him, and getting him back and healthy will likely determine Wyoming's NCAA fate.

Colorado State (21-4) has a good record and a strong RPI, but was swept by Wyoming for the first time since 2009 and has a loss to New Mexico. The Rams look good now, but their chances will depend on what happens from here.

A few more teams that are rising and falling on the NCAA tournament bubble:

On the rise

Georgia: A road win over Texas A&M was a big boost. Having a top-25 RPI and top-25 strength of schedule should put the Bulldogs (16-7) in good position for the bracket, barring a late-season collapse.

Oregon: The Ducks (18-7) have had a nice surge after a shaky stretch early in the Pac-12 season, their only loss the past seven games to Arizona. That was a blow-out, but the Ducks have won four straight since Saturday's bubble-team showdown with UCLA will be huge.

Texas: The Longhorns (16-8) have a losing record in the Big 12 (5-6) and recently went through a four-game losing streak. Still, Texas has won its past two games, over Kansas State and TCU, and a résumé

that has no real glaring losses. With the strength of the Big 12, the Longhorns could find a way into the bracket if they play well down the stretch.

Falling fast

Virginia Commonwealth: The Rams are No. 20 in the latest AP poll and would seem like a lock to be in the field of 68 if the bracket were picked today. Problem is, VCU will be without point guard Briante Weber for the rest of the season due to a knee injury. The Rams (18-6) have lost three of four games since he was injured, though the last two were also without leading scorer Treveon Graham due to an ankle sprain. VCU just needs to steady the ship at this point.

Miami: Once in good position for an NCAA invite, the Hurricanes (15-9) have stumbled over the last two weeks, losing three of their past four games. Miami has played a tough schedule, but hasn't been so great against teams it was supposed to beat.

Michigan: The Wolverines' losing streak stretched to four games with an overtime setback Thursday against Illinois, another team trying to get off the bubble. Michigan (13-12) also has a now-famous loss to New Jersey Institute of Technology, which the selection committee isn't likely to forget.