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Navy is urged to slow littoral ship timeline

Bloomberg

Two top senators on defense issues say U.S. Navy leaders should consider delaying deployment of the new littoral combat ship and tone down their effusive rhetoric about the vessel until it successfully completes more testing.

With six ships of a planned 40 delivered but “practically no LCS mission capabilities proven” for mine clearance, surface warfare and submarine-hunting, “we urge you to reevaluate the deployment strategy,” Sens. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Jack Reed, the panel’s top Democrat, wrote in a letter dated Feb. 5.

As part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to the Pacific,” the Navy has sent one littoral combat ship to Singapore with plans to have a total of two

there by December and four by 2018.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter and his predecessor, Chuck Hagel, both questioned the ship’s ability to survive in combat. They cut the numbers to be purchased.

In the letter to Navy Secretary Ray Mabus and Adm. John Richardson, chief of naval operations, McCain and Reed also said they were “concerned that Navy leaders are overstating the current state of the program and the challenging path to achieving the promised capability.”

The senators contrasted comments made by Mabus in January about the ship with a more critical assessment from the Pentagon’s chief weapons tester that disclosed questions about the LCS’s combat effectiveness and reliability.

There’s no timeline for declar-

ing the littoral combat ship combat-ready for mine-clearing, the senators wrote. In addition, they said, “we are still years away from an LCS anti-submarine warfare” initial capability.

Asked about the letter, Navy spokeswoman Rear Adm. Dawn Cutler said in an email, “We will continue to refine how we maintain, operate and deploy LCS based on what we learn in operational tests, maintenance and deployments.”

In December, Carter directed the Navy to cut to 40 ships from 52 a planned mix of original LCS vessels and upgraded models that would be better-armed. Twenty-six vessels are now under contract in a \$23 billion program.

In its annual report on major weapons, the Pentagon testing office disclosed that a littoral combat ship had difficulty in tests at sea defending against

swarming vessels, like those used by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and that both versions of the ship have extensive reliability problems.

Given those conclusions, the lawmakers cautioned Navy leaders to give a more realistic assessment.

In his Jan. 14 speech to the Surface Navy Association, a Navy industry support group, Mabus said “a group of small surface ships like the LCS is still capable of putting the enemy fleet at the bottom of the ocean.”

McCain and Reed said they doubted that. While the ship’s surface warfare system has been declared as having an initial capability, they said it’s two years late, has “significant unresolved deficiencies” and still lacks long-range missiles to take out enemies at extended ranges.

Feds find problems with Coast Guard’s cutters

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Government officials on Wednesday told a congressional subcommittee that the Coast Guard needs better oversight of its testing and contracting policies after a federal review and subsequent reporting found numerous operational deficiencies in the Coast Guard’s largest and most technologically advanced ships.

National security cutters, built by Huntington Ingalls Industries at their Pascagoula, Miss., shipyard, are the workhorses of the Coast Guard fleet. The \$640 million vessels conduct a variety of operations, including homeland security, environmental protection, law enforcement, marine safety and national defense missions.

Ingalls has delivered five cutters, and it has three more under construction. All eight are expected to be fully operational by 2020. Ingalls hopes to secure the contract for a ninth cutter, which was funded in the 2015 omnibus spending bill.

While Navy tests on one of the cutters in April 2014 found the ship to be operationally effective and suitable, the review also found 10 major deficiencies that affected the performance of crucial systems on the ship.

The tests took place roughly two years later than originally planned and after seven of the cutters were already under contract, according to a January report by the Government Accountability Office.

While the Navy found that none of the deficiencies was severe enough to keep the ship

from accomplishing its mission, some of the problems are ongoing and have hampered its ability to conduct certain operations. For instance, “the Coast Guard has not yet demonstrated that the [cutter] can achieve a hard and soft kill against a subsonic cruise missile as required,” said written testimony Wednesday from Michele Mackin, director of acquisition and sourcing management at the GAO.

The GAO report outlined the problems and called on the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard, to clarify its performance requirements for the cutters and the time frames for testing the ships.

The situation didn’t sit well with Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., who is chairman of the House Transportation Commit-

tee’s Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee.

“The American public deserves assets that perform as intended and expected,” Hunter said.

William Glenn, a spokesman for Huntington Ingalls, declined to comment on the GAO report, saying it referred to ships already delivered to the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard plans to correct all the problems. It already has fixed four of the 10 major deficiencies involving equipment failures and expects to fix four more, according to the GAO report. The report found the Coast Guard will have to pay \$202 million for design changes and equipment upgrades to correct problems that weren’t identified in the Navy tests in 2014.

VA exec's punishment tossed out

BY HEATH DRUZIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An appeals board has handed the Department of Veterans Affairs a third straight reversal in a high-profile executive malfeasance case, this time voiding the dismissal of the embattled director of the Albany-Stratton VA Medical Center in New York.

But VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson is vowing not to reinstate the director, saying the Veterans Choice Act that Congress passed in 2014 gives him authority to discipline staff.

"I am disappointed that the MSPB (Merit Systems Protection Board) judge in this case did not afford my judgment the deference the Choice Act envisioned, but I will nevertheless continue to hold VA senior executives to the highest standards of conduct regardless of the risk of having my decisions overturned," Gibson said in a statement after the decision to

reverse the dismissal of Albany-Stratton Director Linda Weiss.

VA officials have withstood criticism from lawmakers, who have harangued them for not punishing executives accused of wrongdoing. Now department leadership faces an appeals board that is routinely voiding disciplinary actions.

"This is yet another MSPB ruling that defies common sense," said Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "It will likely force VA to create a do-nothing job for an employee it has no confidence in."

At times, judges have struggled with Veterans Choice Act rules that force them to adjudicate VA appeals within 21 days.

William Spencer, spokesman for the Merit Systems Protection Board, would not comment Monday on the Weiss ruling nor the board's disagreement with the VA over the department's authority to discipline executives.

The week before the Weiss

decision, two other VA executives had high-profile disciplinary positions overturned. Diana Rubens and Kimberly Graves, the respective directors of the Philadelphia and St. Paul, Minn., VA regional offices, were found to be involved in a scheme to move themselves to new positions with lesser responsibilities at their higher salaries while also receiving about \$400,000 in relocation compensation.

The VA had recommended Rubens and Graves be demoted, and separate judges found both were guilty of wrongdoing. Yet the MSPB overturned their punishments, finding the VA was inconsistent in its punishments.

The MSPB's decisions also appear to be emboldening Miller to expand the scope of his criticism beyond the VA, calling for reform of the entire federal employee disciplinary system.

"The MSPB coddles and protects misbehaving employees rather than facilitating fair and efficient discipline," he said.

US limits Cobra Gold presence

Stars and Stripes

A scaled-down version of one of the world's largest multinational military events kicks off Tuesday in Thailand.

The U.S. limited its involvement in Cobra Gold last year in response to the Thai military seizing control in 2014 and seems to be doing the same.

This year, 3,288 U.S. service members — down from 3,600 in 2015 and 4,300 in 2014 — will be involved in the exercise.

Ground, air and sea forces will take part in drills that bring more than two dozen nations together to address "regional global security challenges and promote international cooperation and stability" in the Asia-Pacific region, a Pacific Command statement said.

Islamic State fighters take land in Libya

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — As Islamic State forces lose ground in Iraq and Syria, fighters loyal to the group have seized territory in oil-rich Libya, levying taxes at gunpoint and creating sanctuaries to launch possible attacks in North Africa and Europe, U.S. officials say.

The Pentagon has sent special operations teams to gather intelligence and launched at least one airstrike. But the White House so far has resisted calls from some senior aides to escalate the U.S. military role in another Muslim country to counter the potential threat.

Spy satellites and reconnaissance drones have shown the militants building fortifications around Sirte, on the central Mediterranean coast, the officials said.

A U.S. intelligence estimate last week concluded that the Islamic State group has attracted

more than 5,000 fighters in Libya, making it the extremist group's largest and most potent affiliate outside Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State group threatens to gain a "stranglehold" in Libya and potential "access to billions of dollars of oil revenue," Secretary of State John Kerry warned, one of several alarms the administration has raised in recent days.

Libya has had no functioning central government since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing campaign helped a popular uprising oust ruler Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

"In the absence of a true government, [militant groups] have grown unchecked," said a U.S. defense official, who was not authorized to speak publicly. "It's like Syria all over again."

The Islamic State group "has a bad habit of growing in places that are ungoverned," Tina Kaidanow, the State Department's counterterrorism coordinator,

said last week at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

The group's rise comes as foreign fighters from Tunisia and elsewhere in Africa have moved to Sirte and other strongholds in Libya, rather than to the war zones in Syria and Iraq.

The Pentagon wants to ensure that Libya doesn't "get on a glide slope" where the Islamic State group "gathers a piece of territory from which it's able to tyrannize people and plot operations elsewhere," Defense Secretary Ash Carter told reporters Thursday at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.

British and American special operations teams and intelligence services have focused on identifying Islamic State leaders, assessing their networks and strongholds and reaching out to local militias willing to fight them, officials said.

UK army to test ability to deploy

Stars and Stripes

The British army will test its ability to deploy forces on a massive scale during an exercise in Jordan this month.

The exercise, Shamal Storm, will simulate a division-size deployment of about 30,000 forces. Sources cited by The Telegraph framed the exercise as a response to recent American criticism that the British were unprepared for a major deployment.

More than 1,600 British troops will practice "theater-entry tactics" in hostile territory, rehearsing in a stretch of southwestern desert in Jordan, the paper reported. The logistical challenge of moving hundreds of vehicles into the country from the port of Aqaba is a focus of the exercise.

Broncos 'D' wraps up Super Bowl win

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — A reborn Orange Crush might have sent Peyton Manning into retirement with a Super ending to his career.

Von Miller and the impenetrable Denver defense harassed Panthers quarterback Cam Newton all game Sunday, and the Broncos made enough big plays for a 24-10 victory, Manning's NFL-record 200th of his career and perhaps his last before retirement.

He wasn't the star of Super Bowl 50 — game MVP Miller seemingly was everywhere on every Carolina play — but Manning really hasn't been the headliner in this injury-shortened season.

"This game was much like this season has been, testing our toughness, our resiliency, our unselfishness," he said. "It's only fitting that it turned out that way."

Emulating his Broncos boss, John Elway, the 39-year-old Manning can ride off with the Lombardi Trophy after leading Denver to its third NFL title, first since 1999 — when Elway was the quarterback.

"I'll take some time to reflect," Manning said when asked if this is the end. "I got a couple priorities first. I'm going to go kiss my wife and my kids. ... I'm going to drink a lot of Budweiser tonight."

Denver's suffocating defense kept Newton jittery all day. Despite wearing gold shoes before the golden Super Bowl, Newton couldn't finish off a dynamic season in which he was the league's MVP. Miller twice stripped him, once for a touchdown, the second time setting up a clinching TD. Denver's top-ranked de-

fense, the one that ran roughshod over Tom Brady in the AFC championship, simply wouldn't let Newton get comfortable.

"There was a certain point where it was like guys on the sideline were saying, 'Cam is very stressed,'" Broncos cornerback Bradley Roby said. "For two weeks straight that's all we heard was Cam this, Cam that, dab this, dab that. They were dabbing in their team photos. It was very disrespectful. We wanted to come out and prove that we're the best."

Newton was sacked six times — receiver Ted Ginn Jr. went down once on an aborted trick play — and if Miller wasn't torturing him, DeMarcus Ware was. Ware had two of the seven sacks, equaling the most by one team in the Super Bowl.

Carolina led the league with 500 points but was held to its fewest of the year, and Denver set an ignominious mark with 194 yards gained, the fewest for a Super Bowl winner.

So what: The Broncos (15-4) are champions and Manning is the first quarterback to win Super Bowls with two franchises, Indianapolis in 2007 was the other. Gary Kubiak is the first to win a Super Bowl as player and coach for the same team.

Manning finished 13 for 23 for 141 yards against a strong Carolina (17-2) defense that just couldn't match Miller and company.

"I feel very, very grateful," Manning said. ... "Obviously, it's very special to cap it off with a Super Bowl championship."

Denver's defense stole Carolina's act. The Panthers led the league with 39 takeaways and were a plus-20 in turnovers. On the Super Bowl stage, though,

Assistant Coach of the Year Wade Phillips got his first ring because his unit was impenetrable.

It was a far cry from two years ago, when the Broncos were routed by Seattle 43-8.

"It feels great," said Miller, who had six tackles, 2½ sacks, two hurries, the two forced fumbles and a pass defended. "Peyton and DeMarcus and coach Phillips and all the guys that have been deserving their whole, whole career. I did this for them. I put my neck on the line for those guys."

Manning opened the game with an 18-yard completion to Owen Daniels, later hit Andre Caldwell for 22, and C.J. Anderson had a 13-yard run before Brandon McManus kicked a 34-yard field goal.

Carolina's Ron Rivera, the Coach of the Year, soon after lost a challenge on a pass to Jericho Cotchery, and it was a key decision. Two plays later, Miller burst through and didn't even go for the sack. He reached directly for the ball, stripping it from Newton. It rolled to the goal line, where Malik Jackson pounced on it for a 10-0 lead.

Miller dabbed in the end zone in front of legions of orange-clad Broncos fans after Denver's first defensive touchdown in a Super Bowl.

The only time Newton produced came on a 73-yard drive to make it 10-7. Jonathan Stewart, back from hurting his right foot earlier, dived in from the 1.

Sloppiness — and strong defense — marked the rest of the game.

The first half ended 13-7 after McManus made a 33-yarder that followed the lon-

gest punt return in Super Bowl history. Brad Nortman's kick from his 12 was barely deflected, and the ball fluttered to Jordan Norwood. One Panther bumped Norwood, who didn't call for a fair catch. Escorted by a bevy of blockers, he appeared headed for a touchdown until defensive end Mario Addison chased him down at the Carolina 14, a 61-yard jaunt.

Denver also forced the first fumble of the season by All-Pro fullback Mike Tolbert.

But the Broncos also had a giveaway when Manning was picked by DE Kony Ealy on a zone blitz deep in Panthers territory.

Carolina's Graham Gano hit the right upright on a 44-yard field goal attempt to open the second half. Then his counterpart, McManus, made his 10th in as many postseason tries for a 16-7 margin. The kicker was rescuing Denver's inept short-yardage offense, just as he did in a play-off win over Pittsburgh when he made five field goals.

Gano made a 39-yarder with 10:21 remaining. At 16-10, the 50th Super Bowl came down to Denver's defense finishing it off.

Who else but Miller stripped Newton and T.J. Ward recovered at the Carolina 4. Anderson scored from the 2 following a third-down holding call on All-Pro cornerback Josh Norman. A 2-point conversion was simply window dressing.

"We dropped balls," said Newton, slouched in a chair with little interest in explaining the outcome. "We turned the ball over. We gave up sacks. We threw errant passes. That's it."

Nightmare end to Panthers' dream season

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — A dejected Cam Newton sat slouching behind the podium on Sunday night, wearing a black Panthers hoodie and a frown.

The league's top player this season didn't feel much like answering questions, doing so mostly in delayed one- and two-word answers. Some questions he just let pass without answering at all — except for one which said it all.

"They made more plays than us and that's what it comes down to," Newton said before walking out of a brief three-minute interview following Carolina's 24-10 Super Bowl loss to Denver. "We had our opportunities and it was nothing special that they did. We dropped balls. We turned the ball over. We gave up sacks. We threw errant passes. That's it."

Newton's dream season ended with a nightmare performance.

The Broncos took Newton out of his game — completely.

"Hey, when things don't go his way, we see the body language — it's obvious," Broncos safety T.J. Ward said of Newton. "That's what we wanted to do. That was our intent to come in this game and get the body language going. We didn't want the happy, fun-spirited 'dabbing' Cam. No we want the sulking, upset, talking to my linemen, my running backs, 'I don't know what's going on' Cam Newton — and that's what we got."

Fresh off earning his first MVP award Saturday night, the Panthers' fifth-year quarterback was stymied by an aggressive Broncos defense in his first Super Bowl appearance on Sunday.

The 6-foot-5, 245-pound quarterback who scored 45 touchdowns during the regular season — and five more in the playoffs — failed to produce a TD running or throwing for the first time this season and the Panthers lost in Super Bowl 50. Carolina's only score came on a 1-yard run by Jonathan Stewart.

Newton didn't get a chance to give any balls away to kids on the front row of Levi's Stadium.

"This is one those things that is going to hurt," Rivera said of Newton. "It's going to hurt everybody for a while and hopefully after a few days we will get over it."

Newton has failed to score a TD eight times in his career, but none since Oct. 26, 2014. He didn't get much help from his offensive line which allowed a Super Bowl record-tying seven sacks, or his wide receivers, who dropped big passes at key times.

Newton spent much of the game under heavy duress as the Panthers were unable to handle the pressure of Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware on the edges. Miller had 2½ sacks, including two strip-sacks against overmatched right tackle Mike Remmers that led to Denver's two TDs.

"I don't think we played well around him," tight end Greg Olsen. "It was us not getting open, not catching balls that were tight but we have to come down with, we need to do a better job in the run game. This can't turn into the what-happened-to-Cam-Newton show."

Denver's first touchdown came when Miller blew past Remmers and ripped the ball out of Newton's grasp. Malik Jackson recovered the ball in the end zone for a touchdown to put the Panthers in an early 10-0 hole they could never dig out of.

Later, Miller beat Remmers for another strip sack and the Broncos put the game away with a touchdown and

two-point conversion.

"I knew he was going to be really quick," Remmers said. "I knew he was going to be a tremendous athlete and it was going to be a big challenge."

Newton never looked comfortable in the pocket, side-arming throws, overthrowing wide receivers and generally running for his life.

Eventually frustration began to set in. With Carolina trailing by six late in the fourth quarter, Miller broke through again and knocked the ball from Newton's hands. With the ball rolling on the turf, Newton opted not to dive in the pile and the Broncos recovered at the Panthers 4 to set up C.J. Anderson's clinching TD run.

With less than three minutes remaining, Newton was knocked down in the end zone and screamed at an official looking for a late hit but didn't get one.

The question surrounding the Panthers all year long was whether their wide receivers would be good enough for Newton after Kelvin Benjamin went down with a season-ending knee injury in training camp.

Carolina still managed to finish No. 1 in the league in scoring this season, putting up 500 points in the regular season and 80 more in the postseason.

But a key drop by Jericho Cotchery early came two plays before Newton's first fumble. Ted Ginn Jr. also had a ball go through his hands and into the awaiting arms of Ward for an interception that denied Carolina a scoring opportunity.

The Broncos neutralized Olsen and the Panthers lost Philly Brown to a concussion in the second half, rendering their offense useless.

Newton managed one moment of hope, saying "We will be back."



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Paul helps halt Heat's rally

Associated Press

MIAMI — Chris Paul had the worst possible start to his shooting day.

His finish, however, was perfect.

Paul's consecutive three-pointers in the final minutes were daggers to a Miami comeback, and his game-high 22 points helped the Los Angeles Clippers hang on to beat the Heat 100-93 on Sunday.

"I kept shooting it," Paul said, "because sooner or later it had to go in."

J.J. Redick scored 14 points, Wesley Johnson had 10 and DeAndre Jordan and Cole Aldrich grabbed 11 rebounds each for the Clippers, who won despite a 1-for-15 start from the field and swept the two-game season series with Miami.

"That was a team win because nobody really had it going," Clippers coach Doc Rivers said. "But our defense really had it going all game."

Chris Bosh, Dwyane Wade and Goran Dragic all scored 17 points for Miami. Luol Deng added 15 points for the Heat, and Hassan Whiteside finished with 10 points and 10 rebounds off the bench.

"They did to us what we've been doing the last few games, just grinding an opponent," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "That's what they did to us, then made the bigger plays down the stretch."

Paul was 0-for-7 in the opening period, the worst one-quarter shooting performance of his NBA career, and was 0-for-9 before he finally got a shot to fall. But his three-pointers in the fourth snuffed out a Miami rally, and his lob that set up Jordan for a dunk was the clincher for the Clippers — who, after that horrid start, shot 55 percent the rest of the way.

Redick made a layup on the game's first possession and the Clippers proceeded to misfire on their next 14 shots, but recovered to win for the 11th time in their

Knicks fire Fisher; Rambis named interim coach

NEW YORK — Derek Fisher was fired as New York Knicks coach Monday, with his team having lost five straight and nine of 10 to fall well back in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

Associate head coach Kurt Rambis was promoted to interim head coach. He went 56-145 in two seasons as Minnesota's coach.

Fisher was midway through his second season. The Knicks are 23-31 and went 40-96 under Fisher. Team President Phil Jackson hired his former player in June 2014 shortly after Fisher ended his playing career.

"This is a very talented team with strong character and I am confident they will succeed," Fisher said in a statement. "Obviously, I'm disappointed, but have learned an immense amount from this experience and hope to grow from it."

The Knicks went 17-65 last season but upgraded their roster during the summer with the drafting of Kristaps Porzingis and the signing of veterans Arron Afflalo and Robin Lopez.

They had the look of a playoff team most of the season but are stumbling into the All-Star break, and fans loudly booed when they fell behind by 19 points Sunday during a 101-96 loss to the Denver Nuggets.

— Associated Press

last 13 road games, most of that with Blake Griffin sidelined by injuries.

Celtics 128, Kings 119: Avery Bradley scored 25 points, Isaiah Thomas had 22 and host Boston held off Sacramento for its ninth win in 10 games.

Jared Sullinger matched his season high with 21 points and reserve Tyler Zeller had a season high 17 with seven rebounds for Boston, which committed a season high 24 turnovers but shot 56 percent.

Nuggets 101, Knicks 96: Rookie Emmanuel Mudiay scored nine of his 15 points during a decisive fourth-quarter run, and visiting Denver beat fading New York.

Former Knicks forward Danilo Gallinari and Will Barton each had 19 points to lead the Nuggets, who won for the third time in four games. But it was Mudiay, who was

just 2-for-12 through three quarters, who delivered nearly all the points during an 11-2 spurt that put the Nuggets in control after the game was tied at 86-all.

Kristaps Porzingis had 21 points and 13 rebounds for the Knicks.

Magic 96, Hawks 94: Nik Vucevic hit an 18-footer at the buzzer and host Orlando beat Atlanta.

Elfrid Payton, who set up Vucevic's winning shot with an inbounds pass, scored or assisted the Magic's final six baskets as they won for only the third time in 18 games in 2016.

Vucevic led Orlando with 22 points and nine rebounds and Evan Fournier, starting in place of the injured Tobias Harris, added 21 points. Payton had 12 points and 12 assists. Jeff Teague scored 24 for the Hawks.

Ovechkin reaches milestone in Caps victory

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Matt Niskanen scored a goal that wowed the Washington Capitals' bench, and Alex Ovechkin scored an atypical goal that put him in elite company in hockey history.

Behind a highlight-reel goal from Niskanen and Ovechkin's 30th of the season, the Capitals came back to beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2 in their traditional Super Bowl Sunday matchup. Ovechkin joined Wayne Gretzky and Mike Gartner as the only players in NHL history to score 30 or more goals in his first 11 seasons.

"It's not surprising, and he's going to probably do it another time or two before he's done," coach Barry Trotz said. "Consistency, that's a part of greatness."

Ovechkin deflected Karl Alzner's point shot with his stick in front of Flyers goaltender Steve Mason for his 30th in his 49th game of the season.

The NHL-leading Capitals will take whatever offense they can get right now as they're mired in a season-worst 0-for-17 power-play drought. Another 0-for-2 performance Sunday hurt way less because they killed off all five Philadelphia power plays.

Goaltender Braden Holtby was a big part of that as he made eight of his 33 saves on the penalty kill. Those in front of him, namely Niskanen, Alzner and forwards Brooks Laich and Mike Richards, deserved some credit, too, as a 5-on-3 penalty kill changed the momentum of the game.

"We got some good plays there, some good clears killed a lot of the time till there was only a minute or so," Holtby said. "They have a very strong power play, so we knew coming in that success on our PK was going to have to be good, and it was."

With all things even on special teams, the Capitals got two of their goals from defenseman Dmitry Orlov's fifth of the season came just 1:09 after Ovechkin scored, but it was Niskanen's dippy-do moves through traffic that got the bulk of the attention. Five minutes into the third period, Niskanen went end to end, carving through Flyers defenders Michael Del Zotto and Shayne Gostisbehere before beating Mason short side.

It was the Capitals' third straight victory and a blow to the Flyers, who are trying to remain in contention in a competitive Eastern Conference playoff race.

Islanders 8, Oilers 1: Kyle Okposo scored a hat trick after host New York opened a commanding early lead with three first-period goals as the Islanders routed last-place Edmonton.

Thomas Greiss made 30 saves for the Islanders, who moved within three points of the Rangers for second-place in the Metropolitan Division.

Oilers rookie sensation Connor McDavid scored the lone goal for Edmonton.

Canadiens 2, Hurricanes 1: Sven Andrighetto was the only player to score in a five-round shootout, leading host Montreal past Carolina.

Ben Scrivens stopped all five Carolina shooters, including Eric Staal on the final attempt, to secure the win. Max Pacioretty scored in regulation for Montreal.

Jeff Skinner scored for Carolina.

Jok helps Iowa coast past Illinois

Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Just over three minutes into the second half, Iowa's Peter Jok stole the ball from Illinois guard Khalid Lewis and glided to the other end of the court for a two-handed dunk.

It was part of a 5-minute span after halftime in which the junior scored seven of the fifth-ranked Hawkeyes' points, pushing their lead to 15 and delivering a blow the Illini wouldn't recover from.

Jok finished with 23 points and Iowa (19-4, 10-1 Big Ten) coasted to a 77-65 victory.

Jok is playing with confidence, and doing that at both ends of the court, Hawkeyes coach Fran McCaffery said.

"I think you're seeing a much more complete player," McCaffery said. "You're watching a guy who, when he was young, made some mistakes. And he's not doing that anymore."

Jok said Iowa, whose only serious tests Sunday came in the game's opening minutes and the handful of times the Illini would later cut the lead to single digits, has grown up as a team.

"It's because of our experience," Jok said. "When teams are coming back, we don't rush anything. We know what we have to do to win."

The loss was the fifth in seven games for injury-plagued Illinois (11-13, 3-8).

"Defensively, what hurt us more than anything was their transition game and the rebounding," Illini coach John Groce said.

Iowa outrebounded the Illini 43-32. Illinois has been outrebounded in 10 of its 11 conference games.

Jarrod Uthoff added 18 points and 12 rebounds for Iowa and Adam Woodbury had 10 points and 14 rebounds.

Jalen Coleman-Lands led Illinois with 17 points, going 5-for-11 from three-point range.

Jok's dominant spell to open the second half was the difference in a game that Illinois had been finding a way to stay in.

And his confidence was visibly high.

Just under 5 minutes into the second half, he fired a low-trajectory three-point attempt that somehow touched nothing but net. Jok flashed a big grin as he jogged back on defense and the Hawkeyes were up 53-38.

When Jok wasn't scoring, he was providing.

Moments later he missed a jumper and the ball bounced away from the rim with Illinois' Malcolm Hill close behind it, scrambling for the rebound.

But Jok, laying on his back at the top of the key, found himself with the ball. Looking right, he saw Uthoff alone behind the three-point line and fed him. Uthoff buried the shot and the Hawkeyes went up 56-38.

"That play in particular I think really crushed them," Uthoff said. "It really took the air out of their sails."

Iowa pushed the lead to as many as 20 points midway through the half.

No. 12 SMU 92, South Florida 58:

At Tampa, Fla., Shake Milton scored 22 points and Nic Moore added 17 for the Mustangs, who rebounded from their second loss of the season.

SMU (20-2, 9-2 American Athletic Conference) shrugged off a three-point road loss to Houston by matching its season high with 14 three-pointers and shooting 60 percent overall.

The Mustangs never trailed, scoring the game's first 11 points. SMU hit its last six shots before halftime and then opened the second half with an 8-0 run to build their lead to 30 points.

No. 16 Oregon 76, Utah 66: Dillon Brooks had 30 points and nine assists, both career highs, to lead the host Ducks.

Chris Boucher added 15 points and Elgin Cook had 12 for Oregon (20-4, 9-2 Pac-12), which won its sixth consecutive game and 22nd straight at home, one shy of the school record.

No. 17 Miami 75, Georgia Tech 68: Sheldon McClellan scored 22 points and Ja'Quan Newton hit a huge three-pointer to lead visiting Miami to its fifth win in six games.

The Hurricanes (18-4, 7-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) were clinging to a 63-60 lead with the shot clock running down when Newton hit a shot from the corner with 1:49 remaining.

Georgia Tech (12-11, 2-8) lost another tight one. All eight of its ACC defeats have been by fewer than 10 points.