

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## 2 hostages killed in US airstrike in Libya

Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia — Two Serbian Embassy staffers held hostage since November died in Friday's U.S. airstrikes on an Islamic State camp in western Libya that killed dozens, Serbian officials said Saturday.

Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said there was no doubt that Sladjana Stankovic, a communications officer, and Jovica Stepic, a driver, were killed in the American bombing. They were snatched in November after their diplomatic convoy, including the ambassador, came under fire near Sabratha, Libya.

"Apparently, the Americans were not aware that foreign citizens were being kept there," Vucic told reporters.

American F-15E fighter-bombers on Friday struck an Islamic State training camp in rural Libya near the Tunisian border, killing dozens, probably including an Islamic State operative considered responsible for deadly attacks in Tunisia last year, U.S. and local officials said.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said Serbia had known where the hostages were and had been working to get them back.

"I believe we had been close

to the solution for them to be freed. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the attack against ISIS in Libya, the two of them lost their lives," Dacic said. "We will seek official explanation from both Libya and the United States about the available facts and the selection of targets."

He said, according to the information received by the Serbian security services, a criminal group believed to be linked to Islamic State group had demanded ransom for the hostages, who they were holding at the site that was bombed.

A Libyan armed group calling itself the Special Deterrent Forces announced on Facebook

that the two bodies had been delivered to Tripoli's Matiga Airport. The group posted pictures showing two green coffins inside a hearse, and another of one of the coffins sitting on a tarmac next to a small plane.

The Special Deterrent Forces are loyal to the militia-backed government that now controls Tripoli. The group's posting did not indicate when the bodies would be flown to Serbia.

Since the 2011 overthrow of longtime Libya autocrat Moammar Gadhafi, the sprawling North African nation has fractured into warring camps backed by a loose array of militias, former rebels and tribes.

## Libya is a new front in Islamic State fight

Associated Press

BENGAZI, Libya — Libya is rapidly turning into a new front in the fight against the Islamic State group, which is heavily recruiting militants from abroad and trying to exploit years of chaos to expand its foothold in the oil-rich North African nation.

Washington and its European allies are seeking to end the interminable divisions among Libyan factions to form a unity government that the West can support in fighting the jihadis. U.S. airstrikes on Friday against an Islamic State training camp, which killed more than 40 suspected militants including a prominent Tunisian leader, were a sign the U.S. is ready to move robustly even before a unity government is agreed on.

From their stronghold in the city of Sirte, the militants have lashed out in recent months with suicide bombings against police. They have attacked Libya's vital oilfields and export facilities,

setting back efforts to rebuild its money-making industry.

The Islamic State group has so far been unable to take over large parts of Libya as it did in Syria and Iraq. Rival militias drove its fighters out of one city, Darna, and a U.S. airstrike in December killed the leader of the affiliate.

Forging a unified Libyan government to fight the jihadis is a monumental task in what has effectively been a failed state since the 2011 ouster and death of dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

There are two governments: One, based in the capital, Tripoli, is dominated by Islamists and backed by a coalition of militias known as Libya Dawn. The other is internationally recognized and based in the eastern city of Tobruk. It is backed by other militias and fragments of the military led by Gen. Khalifa Hifter.

In a sign of how convoluted the civil war has become, some militias backing the Tripoli

government have been fighting the Islamic State group, while others have allied with the jihadis.

If the U.S. and Europe can't get the militias to agree, efforts to fight the Islamic State group won't succeed even if they manage to get the politicians in Tripoli and Tobruk on the same page, said Libyan political analyst Anas El Gomati.

Several Islamic State training camps are outside Sabratha, and the jihadis appear to have been planning a move to take over the city itself.

Late last year, Islamic State jihadis made a show of strength in Sabratha, defying local authorities by parading openly in vehicles and waving black flags.

Another big fear is that the jihadis could capture Libya's oil facilities. They have carried out attacks recently that have set back the industry, which has been struggling to rebuild since Gadhafi's fall.

During his rule, Libya produced 1.6 million barrels per day. That plunged as low as 200,000 in 2014 and had slowly been building back up to about 430,000 last year. But since an Islamic State attack on oil storage tanks in January, production has dropped again to about 350,000 barrels a day.

The Islamic State group expanded into Libya in late 2014, seizing Darna, then Sirte. But the same chaos that opened the door for the militant group in Libya has also been a hindrance for the group's expansion.

Three Libyans who said they had joined the Islamic State group told the AP that they see most of the new recruits as lacking skills and as opportunists, looking to gain property and money confiscated from Islamic State opponents in Sirte.

The recruiter complained that most newcomers lack "useful skills" and "obedience." "They are simply not as qualified as the ones in Syria and Iraq."

## Pro-Russia Serbs decry agreement with NATO

Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia — Hundreds of pro-Russia Serb nationalists have held a protest against the government's deal that forges closer ties with NATO.

The protesters on Saturday in downtown Belgrade chanted slogans against the Western military alliance, Serbia's leaders and carried portraits of Russian President Vladimir Putin while waving Russian flags.

Serbia has historic ties with Slavic ally Russia but was never part of the Soviet bloc and wants to join the European Union.

The right-wing nationalists want Serbia never to be part of NATO, which bombed the country in 1999 over its former regime's bloody crackdown against Kosovo Albanian separatists.

The Kremlin and its media outlets in the Balkan country have launched an anti-Western campaign, including denouncing a recent government agreement with NATO to allow its troops patrolling Kosovo unhindered passage through Serbia.

# Iraq military: Sunnis clash with Islamic State militants in Fallujah

The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — Sunni tribesmen have attacked Islamic State militants in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, the Iraqi military and local officials said Friday, overrunning and burning one of their headquarters as resentment against the group grows.

Sporadic violence was continuing Friday afternoon in the city's southern district of Nazzal after the initial clashes a day earlier, officials said. Fallujah's mayor in exile, Eissa al-Eissawi, warned that there would be "mass slaughter" unless the tribesmen received support.

Ill will against Islamic State in Fallujah has been growing in recent months as food and medicine have become scarce. A military siege of the city by government forces has prevented supplies from entering, while the Islamic State has not allowed civilians to leave.

"The people are so frustrated because of the siege," said Rageh Barakat, a member of Anbar provincial council's security committee. "The situation is dire, there is no food and they know the [Islamic State] is hoarding it. They've had

enough."

There were varying reports of how the clashes erupted; with mobile phone networks cut in the city, communication is difficult.

Barakat, who said that for the past four months he's been contacting groups in the city who are against the Islamic State's rule, said clashes began in the northern Jolan neighborhood Thursday. Militants from Islamic State's "hisbah" — who enforce the group's moral code on the street — "humiliated" two elderly men when they complained about a lack of food supplies, he said.

"Then [Sunni tribesmen] burned the headquarters," he said, adding that four militants were killed.

Al-Eissawi, the mayor, also said the hisbah headquarters was overrun and burned, saying the death toll among the militants was 10 people. Neither al-Eissawi nor Barakat had a figure for deaths of Sunni tribesmen. Clashes spread to Nazzal neighborhood Friday, they both said.

"There is a volcano of resentment boiling inside Fallujah,"

the Iraqi military said in a statement detailing the clashes. Civilians are waiting for the security forces to enter to "carry out a revolution," it said.

The uprising was led by the Jeresat tribe, with the Halabsa and Mohamda tribes joining in support, the military said.

Barakat said that those on the ground were not being led by traditional tribal leaders.

"It's not the tribes fighting," he said. "It's the young people rising up."

He said that when they first began to contact tribesmen four months ago, there were only a small number of dissenters willing to organize, but that number has burgeoned as the humanitarian situation in the city has grown worse.

The support of Iraq's Sunni population in the fight against Islamic State is seen as key. Al-Eissawi urged the government to take action to build on the momentum inside the city, which could "fall very quickly," he said.

"If those groups inside aren't supported, Daesh will have huge revenge," he said. "There will be the biggest bloodshed ever."

## Company's 1996 suit over stealth technology revived

Bloomberg

After 20 years, a St. Louis company may finally get its chance to try to prove that the Pentagon used its technology to make stealth combat aircraft stealthy without paying for it.

An appeals court on Friday revived a patent-infringement suit that Zoltek Corp. first filed in March 1996. The court said a judge erred in ruling the patent invalid, and ordered a hearing on whether the F-22 fighter and the B-2 bomber used a Zoltek invention.

The U.S. government is invoking the military and state secrets privilege on the advanced aircraft and their classified technology, contending it must keep information

about them from being disclosed to protect national security.

Zoltek owns a patent applied for in 1984 and issued in 1988 — the same year the bomber was publicly displayed for the first time — for a method to make carbon-fiber sheet products more resistant to electricity. It contends the process was used in the sensitive coating that helps make the F-22 and B-2 hard to detect on enemy radar.

The case has bounced between the U.S. Court of Federal Claims in Washington and an appeals court that shares the same building. Among the patent rulings was one that determined Lockheed Martin, which built the F-22, wouldn't be pulled into the case because it's the government's responsibility to pay for any use of a pat-

ented invention by contractors.

In 2014, the Federal Claims Court judge invalidated the Zoltek patent, saying scientists knew temperatures used in making carbon fibers would affect how resistant they would become. The appeals court reversed that decision, citing a 1987 letter from an engineer at Northrop Grumman Corp., which built the B-2, who said he'd never seen a material of the type developed by a company bought by Zoltek.

The case will be returned to the trial judge, who has to determine if the patent was infringed. That's when the government's assertion of the state secrets privilege may prove the ultimate roadblock for Zoltek.

# Earnhardt relying on 'Amelia'

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Her name is Amelia, and boy, can she fly.

She'll be forever treasured by Dale Earnhardt Jr., even though he wants nothing more than to give her away Sunday.

Amelia Earhart is the nickname of the sleek and superfast Chevrolet that Earnhardt drove to three wins last season. The car never finished lower than third in five races, and Earnhardt couldn't find a reason to keep her out of the upcoming Daytona 500.

The decision was easy. Instead of building a new car specifically for the "The Great American Race" — what most teams do every offseason — Earnhardt opted to give Amelia another shot at getting to victory lane. She delivered Thursday night when Earnhardt won a 150-mile qualifying race to up her record to four wins in six starts over the last 13 months.

"The car really does everything I ask it to do," Earnhardt said after his win. "When you have a car that you know can do the things that this car can do, you're willing to take those gambles and risks to pull out and pass. It's just a fun car to drive. Really special car."

When Rick Hendrick leaned into the window after Earnhardt's latest victory, the driver urged his team owner to keep track of Amelia and consider putting her on display in his museum.

For now, he's just fine if he says goodbye to her Sunday. Daytona International Speedway displays the winning car for a

year, and teams gladly exchange them for the trophy. Earnhardt, a two-time 500 winner, decided chassis No. 88-872 needed a name when crew chief Greg Ives declined to retire the car.

"The fact that we're going to keep running it, I said, 'We gotta name it,' and we were thinking of a woman who has accomplished something that was an awesome person that was something we could be proud of," Earnhardt said. "Amelia Earhart was the first thing that came to my mind. She must have been the most daring. She sort of fits that mold of the courage and determination that you need as a race car driver. She must have had that and more to be able to do the things she did in her lifetime."

So it's the car that gives Earnhardt the confidence to make the moves he did Thursday night while winning for the 17th time at Daytona. The victory came on the 15th anniversary of his father's death. Although he daydreamed about winning to honor his father, he really just didn't want to embarrass himself with a poor showing.

There was no chance of that happening as he dominated by leading 43 of the 60 laps Saturday and passing Denny Hamlin, winner of last week's exhibition race, with ease to claim the victory.

Earnhardt dismissed that any special power got him past Hamlin with six laps remaining. Hamlin, who seemingly has one of the few cars that can contend with Amelia, said the pass didn't surprise him at all.

"I've seen those moves a lot because I

watch him a lot. You always are watching guys that are really successful at this kind of racing," Hamlin said. "I kind of knew what was going on, but when he's coming at such a fast pace from behind, you have to anticipate. It's almost like a free kick in soccer. It's like, 'OK, I committed to the right side and (he) kicked to the left.'"

So Earnhardt's intent and desire for Sunday are absolutely clear, and through one week of Speedweeks, it's developing as a Hendrick Motorsports vs. Joe Gibbs Racing showdown, with a possible challenge from Team Penske.

Defending Daytona 500 winner Joey Logano, along with teammates Brad Keselowski and Ryan Blaney, all appear able to keep up. It remains to be seen if they can actually organize enough to become serious threats.

Kyle Busch gave JGR a victory Thursday in the second qualifier, which also included teammates Matt Kenseth and Carl Edwards. The three raced nose-to-tail for a bit, but Kenseth wrecked in a last-lap crash that cost him his front-row starting spot. He'll start from the rear of the field and try to align with his Toyota teammates.

Hamlin was alone in his qualifying race and lacked the help needed to beat Earnhardt — and Amelia.

"I mean, I could have chopped (Earnhardt) a little bit more, but I saw in my mirror it would have been close and it's just not — this isn't the time to cut it close," Hamlin said. "Sunday is probably the time to do it."

# Sauter wins first truck race

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Johnny Sauter won the crash-filled Truck Series season opener at Daytona International Speedway on Friday night, giving Chevrolet its first series victory at the famed track.

Sauter was out front on the final lap when the caution flag dropped following a harrowing wreck that sent Christopher Bell's truck flipping through the air. Bell's No. 4 Toyota flipped nearly 10 times before coming to a stop. Bell got out and walked to a waiting ambulance, a welcome sight at a track where there have been a number of scary wrecks in recent years.

Kyle Busch Motorsports said Bell was released from a hospital early Saturday after a precautionary evaluation.

Sauter, meanwhile, headed to Victory Lane to celebrate his second series win at Daytona and first since 2013.

"This is a big one," said Sauter, whose dad, Jim, died last fall. "This is extra special for me. This is my first win without my dad being around. I miss him a lot. He won here in the ARCA Series back in 1978, so for me to get my second win, this is pretty special."

Sauter also all but locked up a spot in the Chase in the Truck Series, a change for 2016.

"I'm so pumped to get Chevrolet to Victory Lane here," he said. "This was an opportunity of a lifetime."

Ryan Truex finished second, followed by Parker Kligerman, Brandon Brown and Tyler Young.

The 100-lap race had two huge melees in the final 10 laps, the first one causing a red flag that lasted nearly 30 minutes.

The second one ended the race and had all eyes on Bell, whose truck was heavily damaged in a wreck that has become common in the final laps at Daytona. Austin Dillon and Kyle Larson walked away from similar crashes in the Xfinity Series. Kyle Busch wasn't so fortunate last year, breaking his right leg and left foot in a hard crash into a concrete wall.

Daytona officials responded by installing more than 8,500 feet of "soft walls" around the track.

Austin Theriault, who broke his back last year after crashing into a concrete wall, thanked NASCAR and Daytona for its commitment to SAFER barriers following the first crash Friday.

Timothy Peters nudged Cameron Haley from behind, turning Haley sideways and starting a huge debacle that collected half the field. The crash happened in Turn 3 with eight laps to go and stopped the race for 28 minutes.

Theriault, pole-sitter Grant Enfinger, Matt Crafton, John Wes Townley, Rico Abreu, Cole Custer and Ben Kennedy were among the 18 trucks involved. Most of them ended up in the garage good.

Only 17 trucks were on the lead lap with a restart with two to go.

Peters blamed others around him for getting the melee started.

"It ain't all my fault," Peters told his team over the radio.

# Manfred: Free agent supply exceeds demand

Associated Press

BONITA SPRINGS, Fla. — The large number of free agents still looking for jobs with spring training under way is due to supply and demand, according to baseball commissioner Rob Manfred.

Tony Clark, executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, said in early February he was disappointed so many players still were searching for teams.

"It was a big free-agent class this year," Manfred said Friday at his first spring-training media availability. "One of the things that the PA has always wanted is a market-based system. It's been a long time since I took Economic 101, but my recollection is that when you have a lot of supply in relation to relatively fixed demand, the market's going to operate differently than one might expect. So it's not a surprise to me, given the size of the class."

Among the several dozen players still seeking jobs are pitcher Yovani Gallardo, shortstop Ian Desmond and outfielder Dexter Fowler, who all turned down \$15.8 million qualifying offers from their former teams in November. Because the qualifying offers were made, a team signing them to a major league contract before June 9 would lose a top selection in this year's amateur draft. "I do expect that

during the next round there will be conversations about the topic of draft-pick compensation," Manfred said, looking ahead to collective bargaining. "Draft-choice compensation has been an aspect of the Basic Agreement that is generally pro management, and it's been in there a very, very long time."

While Manfred was management's lead day-to-day negotiator in the last three agreements, that role will now be taken by Dan Halem, MLB's chief legal officer. An agreement was reached in 2006 during the World Series and in 2011 in November, both times ahead of the expiration of the previous deal.

"Without getting into specifics, I think it is safe to say we're going to try to follow the calendar that has been successful for us the last three times around," Manfred said.

On other topics:

**Designated hitter:** "I am a status-quo guy with respect to the DH," he said. "League differentiation matters to us, and the DH is the principal thing that separates the two leagues. I think I would be reluctant to give up that differentiator."

"Second thing is evidenced by the fact that you get asked about this almost everywhere you go. The DH debate makes people talk about the game."

**Expanded September rosters:** While active rosters expand from 25 to 40 each

Sept. 1, teams in a game often have an unequal number of players. The union does not want players who otherwise would have been called up to lose out on service time and experience.

"September rosters are an issue," Manfred said. "They will be an issue in this round of bargaining. They were in the last round. We had extensive discussions about it. It is unusual to play the vast majority of games with one number of players and then play maybe the most important games of the season with a different number. It's something we will discuss with players' association and get to something the clubs are more comfortable with."

**Pace of play:** MLB instituted clocks last year to count down between-innings breaks: 2 minutes, 25 seconds for most games and 2:45 for those on national TV.

"The inning break clock will be shortened — exactly how much I'm not prepared to say," Manfred said. "There will be a focus on the number and length of visits to the mound."

**Takeout slides:** "I also do expect there will be change with respect to plays at second base," he said. "Conceptually, I think everyone is in agreement that it would be good to have a rule that focuses the player on making a slide where he could actually slide to the bag or stay on the base."



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# Lillard, Blazers stun Warriors

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Damian Lillard came through with the best game of his career against his hometown team.

Lillard scored a career-high 51 points, and had seven assists, six steals and no turnovers to lead the Portland Trail Blazers to a stunningly dominant 137-105 win over the defending champion Golden State Warriors on Friday night.

"It's a great feeling," said Lillard, who is from Oakland, California. "Especially against the best team in the league. I haven't scored 50 since ninth grade."

Golden State coach Steve Kerr paid Lillard the ultimate compliment for today's point guard.

"He was phenomenal," Kerr said. "He looked like Steph Curry out there."

Curry, last season's MVP, led the Warriors with 31 points and five assists. Draymond Green added 14 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists, but also had nine turnovers as Golden State snapped its 11-game winning streak and saw its quest for the best regular season record in NBA history hit a serious speed bump.

"This is the NBA, so there's going to be nights where the other team gets hot," Kerr said. "I'm OK with the other team making shots. What I'm not OK with is losing our poise in the third quarter."

The 137 points were the most by a Golden State opponent this season, and the 32-point margin of defeat the Warriors' most lopsided loss.

"We weren't as focused as we should be," said the Warriors' Klay Thompson, who had 23 points.

Said Curry: "We just lost our composure when it comes to how we controlled our possessions. That usually doesn't happen."

Last in the eye-popping offensive performance by Lillard and the Blazers was a stifling defensive effort throughout the

game, but especially in the third quarter when they forced Golden State into 13 of its 20 turnovers.

"I couldn't be more happy with our effort defensively," Lillard said. "I think that's what allowed us to get out and play at a fast pace and move the ball the way we did tonight."

Portland had 28 assists on 52 field goals against only 13 turnovers as the Blazers played a more up-tempo game than fans are used to seeing.

Meanwhile the Warriors must regroup as they try to better the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls, who hold the record for wins in a season with 72.

Lillard became the first player in NBA history to have at least 50 points, seven assists and six steals since the steal became an official statistic in 1973-74, according to information provided by the Trail Blazers from the Elias Sports Bureau.

"Dame had it going early and had it going late," Blazers coach Terry Stotts said. "At the end it was just ridiculous."

Lillard was also the first player since Reggie Miller in 1992 to have 50 points and seven assists without any turnovers. He tied a franchise record and set a Warriors' opposition record with nine three-pointers.

**Spurs 119, Lakers 113:** Tony Parker scored 25 points in San Antonio's victory over host Los Angeles in the final matchup between Kobe Bryant and longtime Western Conference foe Tim Duncan.

Bryant is retiring at season's end with the Lakers way out of the playoff picture at 11-45. Bryant and Duncan have each led their clubs to five NBA titles and have at least one league MVP award to their credit — in addition to MVP of the Finals and All-Star game MVP.

Bryant had 25 points in 29 minutes, and Duncan finished with 12 points and 13 rebounds to help San Antonio complete a four-game season sweep.

**Pacers 101, Thunder 98:** Monta Ellis scored 27 points to help Indiana beat host Oklahoma City.

**Nets 109, Knicks 98:** Brook Lopez scored 33 points and visiting Brooklyn beat New York to hand the Knicks their seventh straight loss.

**Bulls 116, Raptors 106:** Doug McDermott had a career-high 30 points and host Chicago beat Toronto to snap a five-game losing streak.

**Rockets 116, Suns 100:** James Harden had 27 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists in Houston's win over host Phoenix.

**Heat 115, Hawks 111:** Luol Deng scored 30 points and Josh McRoberts had 19 — season highs for each player — and Miami, playing without All-Stars Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, beat host Atlanta.

**Magic 110, Mavericks 104 (OT):** Victor Oladipo had 17 points and a career-high 14 rebounds and hit the three-pointer that put Orlando ahead for good in overtime against visiting Dallas.

**Wizards 98, Pistons 86:** John Wall scored 22 points and Bradley Beal had 17 to help host Washington beat Detroit.

**Hornets 98, Bucks 95:** Kemba Walker scored 25 points and Cody Zeller added a season-high 23 in visiting Charlotte's victory over Milwaukee.

**Grizzlies 109, Timberwolves 104:** Mike Conley had 25 points and seven assists, Vince Carter added a season-high 15 points and host Memphis beat Minnesota.

**Kings 116, Nuggets 110:** DeMarcus Cousins had 37 points, 20 rebounds and four blocks in host Sacramento's victory over Denver.

**Pelicans 121, 76ers 114:** Anthony Davis scored 18 of his 34 points in the first quarter in New Orleans' victory over visiting Philadelphia.

**Jazz 111, Celtics 93:** Derrick Favors had 23 points and 10 rebounds to help Utah beat host Boston.

# Durant regaining MVP form

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Kevin Durant had finally reached the pinnacle.

After years of chasing LeBron James, the Thunder forward finally was named league MVP two seasons ago. His emotional acceptance speech was as memorable as his play, and soon, endorsement deals piled up like points for the four-time scoring champion.

Everything was moving in the right direction heading into last season. Superstar point guard Russell Westbrook, who had missed much of Durant's MVP run due to injury, was healthy again, making the Thunder one of the favorites to win it all. Then it happened.

Durant, the most reliable of ironmen, broke a bone in his right foot. It required three procedures, and a player who had missed 16 regular-season games in his first seven seasons missed 55. The Thunder didn't make the playoffs, Golden State won the NBA title and Stephen Curry replaced him as MVP.

Through it all, Durant kept reminding himself who he had been, and who he planned to become once again.

"I just told myself every day that, 'I'm the best player in the world,'" Durant told The Associated Press. "I'm the best player in the world.' I wrote that on my wall. I wrote that on my mirror in the bathroom, just because it's easy to say that when you're on top of the world, but it's kind of hard to say it when everybody's dogging you."

Durant listened to his doubters and made it a goal to shut them down.

"I was able to change the perception that was out there of me of, 'I won't come back from this, this is going to be devastating, career threatening,'" he said. "I just used all of that. I think that type of pride is good for the game of basketball — just wanting to prove yourself after you fall down and wanting to stand back up even taller and stronger than I did before."

Durant has some opportunities this month to make an even stronger claim to being the best. Oklahoma City hosts James' Cleveland Cavaliers on Sunday and Curry's Warriors next Saturday.

It wasn't clear immediately whether he'd be ready to make any kind of claim, but after limited minutes in the pre-season, Durant announced his full return in the second game of the season. He dropped 43 points in 54 minutes during a double-overtime win at Orlando.

He missed six games in November with a left hamstring injury, but bounced back again. He shared the Western Conference Player of the Month award with Westbrook in December, then won it in outright in January.

For the season, Durant ranks third in the league with 27.8 points per game. He's also posting 7.9 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game while shooting .508 from the field. He said it's meaningful to be playing at such a high level.

Durant was especially good in the final 16 games heading into the All-Star break, and it went beyond points. He averaged 30 points, 8.4 rebounds and 4.8 assists while shooting 49 percent from the field as the Thunder went 14-2.

"I put in the work," he said. "We talk about individual success a lot, and we kind of deem that as being selfish when you think about yourself like that. But I looked at it as the total opposite. I felt like I needed to think about myself a little bit more. I needed to worry about my health, and my game, my mindset."

# Islanders begin long road trip with win

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — A lucky carom on an early goal by a fourth-line center and a bounce-back effort by Jaroslav Halak in goal were all the New York Islanders needed to get a much-needed win over the New Jersey Devils.

Casey Cizikas scored on a rebound off his leg early and a struggling Halak had 27 saves to lead the Islanders to a 1-0 victory over New Jersey on Friday night in the opener of a season-long, seven-game trip.

The Islanders are in third place in the Metropolitan Division, four points ahead of the fifth-place Devils with two games in hand.

"To win this game gives us a little bit of room," said Halak, who was 1-4 in his last five games. "But any night from now on is going to be like this. We just need to keep playing well and keep picking up points."

Halak was outstanding and had a little help from the post while getting his third shutout. Reid Boucher's 1-on-1 chance in the first period hit iron, but Halak also made great saves in close against Sergey Kalinin, Kyle Palmieri and Lee Stempniak, the last one a pad save early in the third period when the Devils' forward had a seemingly open net.

"Halak came up huge for us tonight," Cizikas said. "He had the big save I think on Stempniak in the third period. He basically kept us in the game. He made some huge saves when we needed him to and I

thought we played a good game tonight."

The win was the Islanders' third in four games (3-0-1) with the Devils this season, and New York really shut things down in the third period, limiting the Devils to seven shots.

Cory Schneider made 23 saves and the Devils lost their second straight.

Defenseman Adam Larsson and center Jacob Josefson had the last two in the closing 2 minutes, when New Jersey killed off a penalty to Adam Henrique.

"Obviously after the last start I wasn't feeling great, but you just have to forget about it," said Halak, who gave up six goals in 40 minutes at Carolina last Saturday night. "There is nothing you can do about the past. The game in Carolina wasn't the greatest by me or anybody. But it happens in hockey and it's how you react the next game, how you rebound."

Coming off an overtime loss to the Capitals on Thursday night, the Islanders needed less than 2 minutes take the lead.

Defenseman Nick Leddy, who had a goal and nine assists in his previous 10 games, took a shot from the left circle on a counterattack. The puck rebounded in front between the circles, banked off Cizikas' pants and fluttered into the net for his sixth goal.

"It went off my pant leg," Cizikas said. "I didn't try to kick it or anything like that. I was just trying to go hard to the nets and Leds made a really good play by just throwing it on net and trying to create a rebound. I was lucky enough for it to go

off me and in."

New York had a chance to break the game open in the final 5 minutes of the second period when Devils forward Jordin Tootoo drew a 5-minute major and a game misconduct for cross-checking defenseman Johnny Boychuk behind the Islanders net.

Boychuk returned for the third period. **Hurricanes 5, Sharks 2:** Jeff Skinner scored twice in the third period and host Carolina beat San Jose.

Chris Terry and Joakim Nordstrom also scored, and Jordan Staal added an empty-netter for Carolina. The Hurricanes bounced back from a 4-2 loss at Ottawa on Thursday night and haven't lost consecutive games in regulation in more than two months.

**Sabres 4, Blue Jackets 0:** Jamie McGinn scored twice and Robin Lehner stopped 38 shots for his third career shutout to lead visiting Buffalo over Columbus.

Sam Reinhart and David Legwand also scored to help Buffalo win for the third time in four games (3-0-1).

**Flames 5, Canucks 2:** TJ Brodie stayed hot with three assists and host Calgary beat Vancouver to snap a three-game losing streak.

Two of Brodie's assists came in the second period while Calgary scored three straight goals to take a 4-2 lead. The 25-year-old defenseman has 11 points in his last eight games, all assists.