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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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China mulls revisions to maritime law

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — China is considering maritime law changes that could clash with U.S. Navy views on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and other international waters.

Revisions to China's 1984 Maritime and Traffic Safety Law would require foreign ships to request permission to enter "China's waters," according to Global Times, an English-language daily newspaper tied to the Chinese Communist Party.

The draft also requires submarines and other submersible boats to surface, to fly a flag and to report to Chinese authorities, the newspaper reported.

The revisions to the law, announced Tuesday, are still in their formative stages and wouldn't take effect until 2020, Global Times reported.

The U.S. does not recognize any nation's right to be notified in advance if a ship is transiting through territorial waters under what international law terms "innocent passage." The Navy conducts freedom-of-navigation missions throughout the world to uphold the principle.

"Freedom of navigation is absolute, and whether it be commercial shipping or our U.S. Navy, we will practice in international waters and transit international waters as appropriate," Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told reporters in Tokyo on Feb. 4 after meeting with Japan's defense minister.

Under innocent passage, ships perform

Proposed changes would require foreign ships to request permission to enter "China's waters" and would require subs and other submersible boats to surface, to fly a flag and to report to Chinese authorities.

no military operations nor survey activities, among other prohibited actions.

Submersible ships are already required to surface and to fly a flag in territorial seas under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which China has ratified and the U.S. follows as customary law. The UNCLOS passage on submersible boats says nothing about prior notification, though other passages grant nations limited rights to regulate safety within territorial waters.

However, the greatest source of conflict if Beijing moves ahead with its law as drafted likely lies in how it defines "China's waters."

China maintains an ambiguous claim to about 90 percent of the South China Sea through markings on a map known as the nine-dash line. The line was ruled noncompliant with UNCLOS by an international tribunal in July, but China has ignored that ruling.

In December, a Chinese ship captured a U.S. unmanned underwater vehicle within view of the USNS Bowditch while in international waters about 50 miles from the Philippines.

China didn't return the drone for several days, when the destroyer USS Mustin collected it during a transfer at sea.

China has constructed several artificial islands in the South China Sea on top of reefs that other nations claim. It has topped the islands with military-capable runways, radar and weapons systems.

Artificial islands generate no territorial sea rights under UNCLOS. Nevertheless, China has attempted to warn away Navy ships and others that approach the islands.

While in Tokyo, Mattis accused China of "shredding the trust" of its neighbors with its island-building and attempts at regulating nearby waters.

"We don't settle [territory] by taking military means and occupying land that is subject to question, to say the least about who actually owns it, or [when it's] in international waters," he said.

Mattis and several U.S. officials before him have urged China to abide by the maritime legal framework in place, which reconciles disputes through international arbitration.

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Carrier USS Carl Vinson deploys to South China Sea

USA Today

JAKARTA, Indonesia — The U.S. deployed the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson to patrol the increasingly contentious South China Sea on Saturday despite Beijing's warnings not to challenge its sovereignty in the resource-rich sea.

In a statement, the Navy described the launch as the beginning of "routine operations" in the South China Sea. China claims most of the sea as its own, despite overlapping territorial and juris-

dictional claims from the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei.

On Wednesday, China Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang denounced advance news of the deployment at a news conference.

"China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and their adjacent waters," he said. "China respects and upholds the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, which countries enjoy under international law,

but firmly opposes any country's attempt to undermine China's sovereignty and security in the name of the freedom of navigation and overflight"

He added that China urged the U.S. to "refrain from challenging China's sovereignty and security" in the sea.

Some 30 percent of global maritime trade passes through the South China Sea each year, worth \$5.3 trillion, according to a 2015 Department of Defense report. The waters are also key fishing resources and are rich in

oil and natural gas reserves.

In July, an international tribunal at The Hague issued a sweeping condemnation of China's claims and conduct in the disputed waters. China said it did not recognize the ruling, which it described as "null and void."

Since 2013, China has been creating artificial islands on all seven of the islets and reefs it claims in the Spratly Islands chain, equipping many with military-grade airfields and weapons systems.

EUCOM wraps up war games testing combat readiness

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

MUNICH — U.S. European Command concluded a series of classified war games last week as part of an effort to boost its combat readiness, the military said Friday.

Austere Challenge 2017, which included computer-assisted scenarios that tested EUCOM's ability to marshal forces in a combat scenario, brought together troops and units from across Europe. The war games commenced in October and culminated this month as part of one of the most complex command exercises for EUCOM since the end of the Cold War. EUCOM declined to site the exact date the drills ended.

"Your efforts are critical to ensuring we have a trained and postured joint team ready to respond at the speed of conflict," EUCOM Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti, said in a statement. "Exercises like this validate our ability to rapidly respond together with decisive and overwhelming success in Europe, or to enable other combatant commands."

The military provided few details about the nature of the exercise. Much of it is classified and relates to how EUCOM would command forces should a conflict break out.

The exercise tested EUCOM's ability to provide "overwhelming and decisive results in a variety of exercise situations. This exercise ensures our warfighters practice, and hone, their abilities to respond to any crisis situation," Maj. Gen. Mark Loeben, EUCOM's director of exercises and assessments, said in a news release.

Since Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine, EUCOM has sought to adapt to what it sees as a new security environment. Part of that has focused on rebuilding command-and-control capabilities that atrophied during the post-Cold War era.

Austere Challenge 2017 involved 5,000 U.S. troops in Germany, Italy, Britain and the U.S.

Iraqi forces launch operation to take western half of Mosul

Associated Press

HAMAM AL-ALIL, Iraq — U.S.-backed Iraqi forces launched a large-scale military operation on Sunday to dislodge Islamic State militants from the western half of Mosul, the latest phase in a 4-month-old offensive to retake Iraq's second-largest city.

The battle for western Mosul promises to be the most daunting yet, as the half of the city west of the Tigris River has older, narrower streets and is still home to hundreds of thousands of civilians, who have been told to shelter in place.

Iraq declared eastern Mosul "fully liberated" last month, but the Islamic State group has continued to launch attacks there. Hours after the latest operation was announced, suicide bombers struck troops and pro-government Sunni militiamen in eastern Mosul.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the start of the operation on state TV, saying government forces were moving to "liberate the people of Mosul from Daesh oppression and terrorism forever," using the Arabic acronym for Islamic State group. He called on security forces to deal with civilians properly and to respect human rights.

Plumes of smoke were seen rising into the sky early Sunday morning as U.S.-led coalition jets struck militant positions southwest

of Mosul and militarized Iraqi police fired artillery toward the city. Heavily armed police units were getting ready to move north with their armored vehicles from a base just southwest of the city.

"This is zero hour and we are going to end this war, God willing," said Mahmoud Mansour, a police officer, as he prepared to move out.

The immediate objective was to take the villages on the southern outskirts of Mosul airport, a police spokesman said. The officer spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief reporters.

Police units quickly moved into the village of Athba, about 3 miles southwest of the airport, encountering only light resistance, according to an Associated Press reporter traveling with them. Separately, the army's 9th Division moved into the village of Bakhira, also southwest of the city, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense said.

The United Nations, meanwhile, warned that hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped inside their houses "are at extreme risk," with dwindling fuel and food supplies and scarce drinking water and electricity.

"The situation is distressing. People, right now, are in trouble," Lise Grande, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, said in a statement. "We are hearing reports of parents struggling to feed their children and to heat their homes."

Report: Russia suspected in fake news report targeting German troops

Stars and Stripes

German soldiers operating in Lithuania were targeted in a "fake news" attack that accused the troops of raping an underage Lithuanian girl, according to German media reports.

NATO diplomats told the news magazine Der Spiegel that the reports likely were carried out by Russia as part of a campaign to undermine the presence of NATO forces in the Baltics.

Germany is leading a multinational battalion in Lithuania as part of NATO's effort to increase its presence in the region. Other allies are to lead battalions in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania.

According to German news reports, emails accusing German troops were sent to various Lithuanian media outlets on Tuesday.

"To our knowledge, Lithuanian police investigations came to the conclusion that there were neither a victim nor possible witnesses

nor any perpetrators," a representative for the German Defense Ministry told public broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

The accusation was reported by some local news outlets before being refuted by Lithuanian authorities.

The German Defense Ministry said the email address accusing the soldiers no longer exists. Authorities continue to investigate and are attempting to track the IP address, according to the reports.

The incident came as concerns grow about the role of misinformation campaigns aimed at eroding public trust in institutions such as NATO.

The U.S. and others in the West have accused Russia of being a main culprit in such information war campaigns, which the Kremlin has repeatedly denied.

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Poll shows 4 nations in NATO picked Russia to defend them

Bloomberg

For the citizens of four NATO countries asked which military power they'd want fighting on their side if attacked, the answer was simple — Russia.

That was among the findings of a multination Gallup poll published just ahead of Friday's annual gathering of the transatlantic security community in Germany that appeared to map out shifts in the post-Cold War security alliances that have come under renewed strain and scrutiny since Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency.

By far, the largest number of countries polled by WIN/Gallup International chose the U.S. for their go-to defense partner, suggesting it remains the world's only military power with truly global reach and alliances.

At the same time, however, China and Russia picked each other, Ukraine and Iraq split down the middle, and those four members of U.S.-led NATO — Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia and Turkey — opted for Russia.

As Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis tours Europe delivering a message of tough love to

NATO allies — increase spending or see the U.S. “moderate” its support — the poll shows the world's gradual political reorganization around different security poles, according to Kancho Stoychev, vice president of WIN/Gallup International.

“It isn't surprising that Russians and Chinese chose each other, but it is new,” said Stoychev. “It shows us something very important — that U.S. policy over the last 20 years has driven Russia into the arms of China, which is quite strange because Russia is fundamentally a part of Europe.”

At the same time, some of the results in European NATO countries showed how their fundamental security choices were moving beyond NATO, he said. Bulgaria and Greece, for example, see their biggest security threat coming from Turkey. Although Turkey is also a NATO member and so, theoretically, an ally, its invasion and occupation of Northern Cyprus in 1974 showed that those countries cannot rely on NATO to protect them, so they look to Russia.

Similarly, in Western Europe,

some NATO members are increasingly looking to other Europeans for security, according to Stoychev. Although 30 percent of Belgians chose the U.S. in the survey, more chose European partners — 25 percent France and 12 percent the United Kingdom — while almost as many Swedes chose the U.K. (29 percent) as the U.S. (31 percent).

While political and economic realities mean it will take years for most NATO allies to meet the 2 percent of gross domestic product target Mattis is demanding, “the Europeans are scared to death” by the possibility that NATO might crumble when Russia has become increasingly assertive, said James Davis, dean of the school of economics and science at Switzerland's St. Gallen University, speaking in the margins of the annual Munich Security Conference.

WIN/Gallup International polled about 1,000 people in each of 66 countries around the world between October and December 2016. The survey's margin of error was plus or minus 3.5 to 5 percent.

Serviceman at Lajes faces serious charges

Associated Press

LISBON, Portugal — Portuguese prosecutors have brought charges of attempted murder, rape, abduction and assault against an American serviceman stationed at the Lajes Field U.S. Air Force base in Portugal's mid-Atlantic Azores Islands.

The Azores Prosecutors' Office said the 28-year-old man committed the crimes against a 26-year-old married woman and is being held in custody.

Investigating magistrate Joao Carreira said in a statement posted on the Azores Prosecutors' Office website late Wednesday that the serviceman knew the reputed victim.

The statement said she escaped from him and swam into the sea before a passerby helped her.

The suspected events occurred last November, and charges were brought after a police investigation.

The U.S. embassy in the Portuguese capital Lisbon said it was aware of the case but could not immediately respond to questions.

Ex-soldier suspected in slaying backs terrorist group

Associated Press

DENVER — A former U.S. soldier accused of shooting and killing a transit guard in downtown Denver last month says he is a supporter of the Islamic State group, but investigators say they have not found evidence the terrorist group had anything to do with the killing.

In a telephone interview Thursday from Denver's jail, Joshua Cummings told The Associated Press he pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State group after spending three days behind bars fasting.

He said he did so to purge himself of an oath he took to uphold the U.S. Constitution when he joined the Army in 1996.

Speaking calmly and addressing a reporter as “ma'am,” the Islamic convert from Pampa, Texas, declined to discuss the crime and whether his support for the Is-

lamic State group led him, as police allege, to walk behind Scott Von Lancken while he was speaking to two women about 11 p.m. on Jan. 31 and put a gun to his neck.

One of the women told investigators Cummings said something like, “Do what you are told,” just before he opened fire and ran away, police have said.

Cummings was found a short time later, hiding on the terrace of an apartment building with a handgun, authorities said.

Police have uncovered no evidence to suggest Cummings either was directed by the Islamic State group to carry out the killing or may have been inspired by the group, Denver Police Commander Barb Archer said Friday.

She said Cummings, 37, has declined to talk with detectives and that investigators have not determined a motive for the

killing of Von Lancken, a former police officer who was working as a contract security guard for the Denver area's Regional Transportation District.

Cummings served in the Army more than a decade ago but never saw combat.

Investigators interviewed him in December after members of a Denver-area mosque reported concerns about him to federal authorities.

The FBI has declined comment on what, if any, action agents took after Cummings was interviewed or about any involvement they may have in the shooting investigation.

Cummings was living in a suburban Denver motel in the weeks before the shooting.

He previously stayed there about a month before briefly returning to Texas.

4 N. Korean men sought in death of leader's kin

Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Investigators are looking for four North Korean men who flew out of Malaysia the same day Kim Jong Nam, the North Korean ruler's outcast half brother, apparently was poisoned at an airport in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian police said Sunday.

Since Kim's death last week, authorities have been trying to piece together details of what appeared to be an assassination. Malaysian police so far have arrested four people carrying IDs from North Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Malaysian Deputy National Police Chief Noor Rashid Ibrahim said four other North Korean suspects were on the run. He said the men had arrived in Malaysia on different days beginning Jan. 31, and that they all flown out of the country Feb. 13, when Kim died.

"I am not going to disclose where they are," he told a room packed with journalists, adding that Interpol was helping with the investigation.

Noor Rashid showed photographs of the four men, who were traveling on regular — not diplomatic — passports and are ages 33, 34, 55 and 57.

US push to calm allies falls short

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

MUNICH — A U.S. effort to reassure allies here about America's commitment to Europe fell short of quelling fears that the new Trump administration represents a radical shift in how Washington will approach the continent, amid worries that American security guarantees are now a chip on the bargaining table.

At the Munich Security Conference, Vice President Mike Pence and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis offered the standard lines about U.S. solidarity with NATO allies, commitment to collective defense and "shared values" that underpin the trans-Atlantic relationship.

Yet the U.S. delegation couldn't escape President Donald Trump's shifting stances on NATO, threats about the need for members to pay up and a new warning from Mattis that the U.S. could "moderate" its support for allies should members not pick up the pace of their defense spending.

"We should hope for the best but prepare for the worst," German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel said in Munich.

There is a general consensus in Europe that allies should dedicate more resources to defense, but there are mixed views on how much and how fast. Disagreements in the year ahead could tear at NATO's political unity and thrust allies into confrontation with Trump, who on the campaign trail tied security guarantees to allies paying more.

Meanwhile, Pence also failed to address Trump's views on the European Union, which is under strain from within and was derided by Trump in recent months.

Trump's praise of Britain's vote to leave the EU has stoked fears he could be active in the support of various populist movements in Europe that seek to weaken the bloc.

"If he did that, it would amount to a kind of nonmilitary declaration of war. It would mean conflict between Europe and the United States,"

conference Chairman Wolfgang Ischinger told German media on the sidelines of the annual conference.

While Pence sought to calm Europe's jitters, saying the U.S. will hold Russia to account, Trump's rhetoric, unpredictable style and a sense of disorder surrounding his opening month in office has allies on edge.

"There is some anxiety in this room, in case you missed it," said Jane Harman, director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, who moderated a panel inside the assembly hall at the Bayerischer Hof hotel.

Pence was "comforting ... but a lot of people want to know from President Trump what his positions are," Harman said.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., scolded Trump for not taking a tougher stance on Russia and failing to make clear Moscow's role in the U.S. presidential election.

"My biggest concern with President Trump is he has never looked the camera in the eye and said ... 'I am the leader of the free world, and they will pay a price for playing a role in our elections,'" he said.

Graham said he expects lawmakers to introduce more sanctions on Moscow. That would be a test for Trump, who has said he wants closer relations with Russia.

"2017 is going to be a year of kicking Russia in the ass in Congress," Graham said.

Moscow, however, took a softer line on the U.S. than in recent years in Munich, where Russia's top diplomat typically offered tough words on Washington.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov left open the door to political and military cooperation in a sign that the Kremlin remains hopeful it could collaborate with the Trump administration.

"We are open for that in as much as the U.S. is open for that, as well," Lavrov said.

US-backed Syrian fighters close in on Raqqa

Associated Press

BEIRUT — U.S.-backed fighters captured a village in northern Syria on Saturday from members of the Islamic State group, bringing them closer to cutting a road linking two major Islamic State-held cities in the country and closing in on the extremists' de facto capital.

The push came as Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim warned that if the predominantly Kurdish force eventually entered the city of Raqqa, it will have negative effects on the relations between An-

kara and Washington.

The Kurdish-led Syria Democratic Forces has been on the offensive toward the city of Raqqa since November. Still, once they approach the city, the battle is expected to be bloody and long because the extremists have set up fortifications and have thousands of battle-hardened fighters.

Iraqi forces have been trying to capture Mosul since October, and the extremists still hold the western half of the city.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the SDF said Saturday that the predominantly Kurdish force

captured the village of Jawees.

The Observatory said SDF fighters are getting close to cutting the road that the extremists use to travel between Raqqa and the eastern city of Deir el-Zour.

SDF fighters now control most of the villages and towns north of Raqqa and are gaining ground in eastern areas. The loss of Raqqa would be a major blow to the extremists because it was one of the first cities they fully controlled before declaring a caliphate in June 2014 in large parts of Syria and Iraq.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman hits half-court shot, gets proposal

NY ALBANY — It was quite a night for a New York state college basketball fan who made a half-court shot to win a \$500 gift card, and then received a marriage proposal seconds later.

Erin Tobin, 30, took part in a Dunkin' Donuts promotion during Thursday night's game at the Times Union Center in Albany. The Siena graduate banked in her half-court, one-handed heave.

After celebrating, Tobin turned around to see the team mascot's giant coffee cup costume being removed to reveal her boyfriend, Steve Duckett, 31, on his knee and holding an engagement ring. A very surprised Tobin said "yes" as the crowd cheered.

Pats fan gets tattoo in cheeky tribute

MA BOSTON — Several people came into Boston Barber & Tattoo Co. on the day of the New England Patriots' Super Bowl victory parade seeking team tattoos, but one request was a little cheekier than the others.

A man, wearing a No. 12 Tom Brady jersey wanted a likeness of the star quarterback on his backside.

Shop employee Emily Arsenault told boston.com that the unidentified man told them he had decided the night before that he wanted a Brady tattoo on his left butt cheek.

11-foot python slithers into student's vehicle

FL DAVIE — A South Florida college student said he was startled when he saw a large snake crawl under

his roommate's car.

Ross Price and his roommate, James Hand, students at Nova Southeastern University, called an exterminator Feb. 1, but were told it was too late to send someone. So they called the Davie Police Department.

The Sun Sentinel reported Officer Tony Bernardo and two other officers pulled out an 11-foot-long reticulated python from the Toyota Camry's engine compartment.

The snake was turned over to a company licensed to care for exotic animals.

Sheriff: Child drove family van on highway

MO REPUBLIC — Investigators said criminal charges are expected after a 10-year-old girl drove her family's minivan about a mile down U.S. Highway 60 in Green County.

The Springfield News-Leader reported multiple people called authorities about a child driving a vehicle from a gas station to the Alpine Village trailer park.

The local sheriff's office said deputies located the van and contacted a man who was arrested for several outstanding warrants. The man's relationship to the child wasn't detailed.

Vehicle stands upright against tree after crash

NY ISLIP TERRACE — Emergency crews arriving at the scene of a vehicle crash on New York's Long Island came upon something they had never seen before: a car standing upright against a tree.

Authorities told WCBS-TV that the 18-year-old Central Islip woman driving the car was traveling on the Southern State Parkway when she crashed near an exit in Islip

Terrace. The car went into the woods and came to rest standing vertically on its front end while leaning against a tree.

Firefighters stabilized the teetering vehicle by securing it to the tree with chains and strapping, then used a ladder to rescue the injured woman from the car.

Police wrangle pigs, other animals at home

OH MANSFIELD — Police had to become urban cowboys to wrangle pigs and other animals from a home in the city of Mansfield.

The Mansfield News Journal reported that officers were making a well-being check Friday on children in the home in response to a tip. Officer Sarah Mosier Napier said they found "deplorable" conditions, with a variety of animals.

With help from the Humane Society of Richland County, authorities removed two pot-bellied pigs, five snakes, a dog and a lizard. Police said mice scampered across the floors.

Authorities placed children ages 1, 3 and 17 with relatives and charged three adults at the home with child endangering.

University student dies in fall from window

AR FAYETTEVILLE — Police said a University of Arkansas student died when he fell from a fourth-floor apartment window while trying to jump to a balcony.

Police said Brian Gray Colton, 26, of Fayetteville, died after falling at The Cardinal at West Center on the edge of the UA campus.

Sgt. Craig Stout said it appears Colton was trying to jump to a balcony adjacent to the window when he fell shortly before 3 a.m. Friday.

Man, 59, accused of abusing father's corpse

OR PORTLAND — A 59-year-old man was charged with abuse of a corpse after the body of his 87-year-old father, who died more than a year ago, was found inside the father's Aurora home.

Edward Fitchett is being held on \$280,000 bail in Marion County jail. He is also charged with theft and criminal mistreatment.

He was arrested after Marion County sheriff's detectives found the body of Henry Conley Fitchett inside the home. Prosecutors say he died more than a year ago and the son is accused of moving his corpse sometime in December 2015.

Edward Fitchett's wife, Rose, told the Oregonian/OregonLive that her father-in-law's body was found inside a freezer.

Officer shoots man brandishing pellet gun

ME PORTLAND — Authorities say a Portland police officer fatally shot a man who was brandishing what turned out to be a pellet gun that looked like a rifle.

Police received reports of a man walking through the parking lot of the Union Station Plaza strip mall screaming and pointing a gun at cars. The weapon was described as a shotgun, rifle or BB gun.

The man, Chance David Baker, 22, of Portland, was shot outside a sandwich shop where he still was brandishing the weapon. He died at a local hospital.

The officer involved in the shooting has been placed on routine administrative leave while the incident is investigated.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Cubs' Bryant unfazed by attention

Associated Press

MESA, Ariz. — Jason Heyward is amazed at how Kris Bryant handles the attention that comes with being the NL Rookie of the Year two years ago and the commanding MVP choice and World Series champion just a year later.

The swarms of adoring Cubs fans. Constant autograph signing. Selfies galore with the North Side die-hards.

"Everybody wants his autograph, everybody wants a picture, and those are good things, but it's a lot to take on," Heyward said.

Yet Bryant appears so at ease with the fanfare, seemingly able to block it all out the moment he steps on the diamond to begin his workday.

Heyward himself experienced the hype of being in a Rookie of the Year race while playing for Atlanta seven years ago, when he finished runner-up to San Francisco catcher Buster Posey. Sometimes, Heyward reminds Bryant that he doesn't have to oblige every autograph seeker or pose for every photo "because he does so much for a lot of people on and off the field."

"As far as the way he goes about his business, the baseball part, it's fun to watch and you appreciate it," Heyward said Saturday, when the Cubs' first full-squad workout was canceled because of rare heavy rain in the desert. "You see certain players, certain people get a certain kind of attention in life, in sports, entertainment, baseball,

whatever. He, being on the Chicago Cubs, coming up the first spring training he had big league camp wise, then coming back and having another big spring, obviously going on to win the MVP, that's a lot of attention. And he won Rookie of the Year. I understand what it's like to go through one of those years where people are talking about you as a rookie."

Bryant tired after a short offseason? Yeah, right.

"I guess I'm the wrong guy to ask, I'm still pretty young. I'm just going to run with that. I have youth on my side," the 25-year-old third baseman said with a grin. "We did have a short offseason, but we wouldn't have it any other way."

Bryant played almost everywhere on the field last season as the Cubs captured their first World Series title since 1908, and he loved it.

Sure, he might play third base more regularly this year and that's fine with him, but he also wouldn't mind bouncing around again if that is best for the Cubs and helps them build off what they accomplished in 2016 to end the franchise's drought at long last.

"I like moving around. It's fun for me, it keeps it fresh. I'm ready for it. I've got all my gloves here," said Bryant, who played 107 games at third, 69 in the outfield, nine at first base, one at shortstop and one as designated hitter during interleague.

He hit .292 with 39 home runs and 102 RBIs, 35 doubles and an NL-leading 121

hits last season, earning 29 of a possible 30 first-place votes in the MVP race a year after sweeping as Rookie of the Year.

Now, Bryant is eager to get started as the defending champs try to make another special run and keep flying that W.

"It's going to be tough to do but we still have the majority of our guys here," Bryant said. "We're extremely confident heading into it. I guess some of the pressure's off, 108 years is now behind us. But the goal from here on out is to win the World Series and if you don't do that, I consider every season after that a failure if you don't do that."

Manager Joe Maddon just wants to make sure Bryant gets extra rest whenever he might need it — not often — or adjusts his workload when necessary to keep him in prime health for the long haul.

Other than those things, Maddon has few concerns about his All-Star slugger.

"God bless, he's done pretty good in college, he's done pretty good in the minor leagues, he's done pretty good as a rookie, he's been pretty good as a second-year guy," Maddon said. "He's so grounded and that's the only thing, see with him the method with which he thinks and the support staff that he has, I'm not concerned. My biggest concern is always health. A guy like him you want to keep him mentally and physically well and if you can do that, there's no reason that he can't continue to actually keep getting better. So I don't worry about things like that."

Betts relaxed coming off near-MVP season

Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Mookie Betts isn't about to get caught up in the hype coming off his near-MVP season.

If you mention NBA star Stephen Curry, his eyes light up and he'll chat about how much he loves Curry's game and watching his Golden State Warriors.

Talk to him about his own play, and Betts just shrugs it off as hard work.

Last year, the 24-year-old became a major league star in his second full season, batting .318 with 31 homers and 113 RBIs to finish second behind Mike Trout of the Los Angeles Angels in the AL's MVP balloting.

He's relying on his steady demeanor to guide him again this

season.

"Yeah, I did pretty well last year, so obviously there's going to be added expectations and added pressure from the outside," he said when asked if he was reminded about his stellar 2016 a lot when he was home during the offseason. "But, I know from the inside, I've just got to be able to continue to work hard and just let whatever happened happen."

The right fielder joined elite company in Red Sox history last year. He had two three-homer games, matching Hall of Famer Ted Williams as the only two Red Sox players in more than 100 years with a pair in the same season.

Betts always looks relaxed on the field, after using his quick,

smooth swing, solid defensive skills and easygoing attitude to rise through Boston's system. Red Sox catcher Blake Swihart played with him during two stops in the minors and knows how laid-back he is most of the time.

"He's been that way since I met him," said Swihart, who played with Betts in Single and Double-A. "He's got a lot of confidence in himself and he's going out there every day and he's proving it."

Coming off his first All-Star berth and Gold Glove in 2016, Betts had a simple answer for his success.

"You just know that you have to work. What got me to where I was last year? That's just hard work," he said, standing at his locker at the team's spring

training complex. "That's pretty much what I'm going to continue to do."

Manager John Farrell doesn't think last season's success will have any effect either.

"That's always going to be case by case, but in Mookie's situation, he's such an attentive person," Farrell said. "His aptitude is some of the best I've been around in the game. He's that bright, he's that advanced as far as him processing information and applying it in a moment.

"We're talking about the elite in the game, and the driven and motivated. I don't think Mookie's putting added pressure on himself where he has to hit x-number of extra base hits. It's more he has the ability to stay focused on today."

No. 3 KU rallies past No. 4 Baylor

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — No. 3 Kansas never seems to be too far behind to rally for victories.

After another comeback win against a fellow Top 10 team, the Jayhawks are probably too far ahead in the standings for anyone to keep them from claiming their 13th consecutive Big 12 title.

Landen Lucas made two free throws with 11 seconds left, and Kansas didn't allow No. 4 Baylor to get the ball to Johnathan Motley on the last possession, as the Jayhawks grabbed a stranglehold on the Big 12 race with a 67-65 victory Saturday.

"As far as a mental toughness team, I would take this team and go to the house and let it ride however it goes," Kansas coach Bill Self said.

Five days after overcoming a 14-point deficit in the final 2:43 of regulation and then winning in overtime at home against

No. 9 West Virginia, the Jayhawks only had to come back from six points down in the final 3½ minutes this time.

"We were down by more than that last game," said Frank Mason III, who led Kansas with 23 points. "We just showed toughness and leadership as far as the older guys and I think the younger guys did a great job of following."

The Jayhawks (24-3, 12-2) have a three-game lead over Baylor and West Virginia in the Big 12 standings with four games to play. With one more win, Kansas will match the UCLA teams of the 1960s and '70s by winning 13 consecutive conference championships, though Self still isn't ready to talk about that.

"Well, we put ourselves in a great position," Self said. "We're not going to take it for granted. ... Certainly with a different outcome, you're up one (game) with four to play, so I'm really proud of our guys, and

how hard they compete."

Lucas was fouled after his offensive rebound of Devonte Graham's miss.

Baylor (22-5, 9-5) had one more chance, but after being unable to get the ball inside, Manu Lecomte missed on a defended last-ditch shot.

"There was no way we could get it," said Motley, who was surrounded by Lucas and Josh Jackson.

Motley had 19 points for Baylor, which has lost four of its last six games. Lecomte had 16 and Jo Lual-Acuil 11.

Being behind was no problem for the Jayhawks, who for the second time this season have won consecutive games over Top 10 teams. With the conference title in reach, the next three games are against teams in the lower half of the Big 12 standings. Kansas has won 10 in a row against Baylor, though the last four were decided by six points or less.

Gonzaga still perfect with 2 games left

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Gonzaga coach Mark Few took a rare glance down the road as the top-ranked Bulldogs have only two games left in their quest for an undefeated regular season.

"Now we can see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel," Few said after Gonzaga beat Pacific 82-61 on Saturday to remain the only undefeated team in Division I. "We should have a real chance."

Few had earlier declined to speculate on his team's hopes of becoming the first team since Kentucky in the 2014-15 season to go undefeated.

"It was too early to focus on," Few said.

No longer.

Remaining for Gonzaga is a road game Thursday at San Diego and a final home game Saturday against BYU.

Few also pointed out that Gonzaga's win Saturday clinched at least a tie for the program's 20th West Coast Conference title.

"That's one of the things I take a lot of pride in," Few said. "We enjoy the journey. I'm enjoying the heck out of every

day of this ride."

Nigel Williams-Goss had 18 points and seven assists to lead Gonzaga. Johnathan Williams had 12 points and 11 rebounds, and five players scored in double figures for Gonzaga (28-0, 16-0), whose 28-game winning streak is the longest in the nation. Zach Collins blocked five shots.

No. 2 Villanova 92, Seton Hall 70: Jalen Brunson had 22 points and a career-high 10 assists and visiting Villanova clinched a tie for an unprecedented fourth straight Big East Conference regular-season title.

No. 5 Arizona 76, Washington 68: Lauri Markkanen had 26 points and 13 rebounds, Allonzo Trier added 21 points and Arizona held off host Washington.

No. 6 UCLA 102, Southern California 70: Bryce Alford scored 26 points, including 10 straight in the second half, and host UCLA beat Southern California to snap a four-game skid against its crosstown rival.

No. 7 Oregon 101, Colorado 73: Dillon Brooks scored 23 points for host Oregon.

No. 8 Louisville 94, Virginia Tech 90: Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points to lead host Louisville.

No. 9 West Virginia 83, Texas Tech 74 (2 OT): Jevon Carter scored a season-high 24 points to lead host West Virginia.

No. 10 North Carolina 65, No. 14 Virginia 41: Justin Jackson scored 20 points to help host North Carolina beat Virginia, keeping the Tar Heels alone in first in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

No. 12 Duke 99, Wake Forest 94: Luke Kennard scored 23 points and Jayson Tatum added 19 for visiting Duke.

No. 13 Kentucky 82, Georgia 77: De'Aaron Fox scored 16 points, including six free throws in the final 45 seconds, and Kentucky overcame J.J. Frazier's 36 points to beat host Georgia.

No. 15 Florida 57, Mississippi State 52: Chris Chiozza scored 14 points and KeVaughn Allen added 11 for the visiting Gators (22-5, 12-2 SEC), who extended their winning streak to eight games, the longest under second-year coach Mike White.

No. 16 Purdue 80, Michigan State 63: Caleb Swanigan had 24 points and 15 rebounds, and Isaac Haas scored 18 points for host Purdue.

Pittsburgh 80, No. 17 Florida State 66: Senior Sheldon Jeter scored a career-high 29 points for host Pittsburgh.

No. 18 Cincinnati 80, Tulsa 60: Jacob Evans III scored 13 of his 17 points while host Cincinnati took control in the first half.

No. 19 SMU 76, Houston 66: Semi Ojeleye had 18 of his 22 points in the second half for visiting SMU.

Vanderbilt 71, No. 21 South Carolina 62: Matthew Fisher-Davis scored 17 points and Riley LaChance had 14 to help host Vanderbilt beat South Carolina.

No. 22 Saint Mary's 70, BYU 57: Calvin Hermanson scored 17 points and Saint Mary's routed host BYU.

No. 25 Notre Dame 81, N.C. State 72: V.J. Beachem scored 27 points and hit a career-high seven three-pointers for Notre Dame in host North Carolina State's first game since the announcement that coach Mark Gottfried is out after the season.

Robinson III, Gordon, Porzingis win events

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Glenn Robinson III is the NBA's new dunk king, with an assist to Indiana teammate Paul George, the Pacers' mascot and a Pacers cheerleader.

Robinson leaped over all three, snagging the ball from George along the way before finishing with an emphatic, two-hand, reverse jam, giving him a perfect score — and the title — on his final dunk.

"I know I'm a jumper. Like I said, I'm a guy that stays out of the way, but when it's time to shine, that's my thing," Robinson said. "I knew all along I had some things planned and I just wanted to show the world."

Robinson edged out Phoenix's Derrick Jones Jr., who was done in by his failure to complete his difficult first dunk of two in the final round.

Jones still managed a perfect score on his second dunk, when he received a bounce-pass in the paint, put it between his legs and threw down a left-handed jam. But Robinson made sure it wasn't enough.

In the three-point contest, Houston's Eric Gordon dethroned Golden State splash brother Klay Thompson. Kristaps Porzingis of the New York Knicks won the Skills Challenge.

Both dunk finalists delighted the crowd with soaring slams over teammates and others that showcased the explosive spring in their vertical leaps.

"I thought I would go up against Derrick in the finals," Robinson said. "I've seen the things that he can do. That guy can jump."

Robinson's first dunk was one of his best. He leap-frogged one man sitting on another's shoulders, grabbed the ball from the elevated man's hands and slammed it

home. He said 2000 dunk champ Vince Carter was one of his primary influences, along with Michael Jordan, of course.

"Vince Carter did one of his best dunks first, and it kind of intimidated people. That's what I wanted to go out and do," Robinson said. "Who knows if it worked, but they missed some of their dunks and it gave me a little more room."

Afterward, he couldn't take his hands off of the trophy — a gold basketball — and made it sound as if that would remain the case through the weekend.

"I know I'm not letting go of her right there," he said. "She's following me everywhere I go. It's Mardi Gras. We're going to have a good time."

Jones jumped over four teammates including Devin Booker and Marquese Chriss in the first round. He also drew roars from the crowd when he took a pass off the side of the backboard from Booker with his right hand, put the ball between his legs to his left for a round-house jam.

The dunk that cost him was a bold one. He tried to leap a friend and the Suns' gorilla mascot, grab the ball on the way over, put it between his legs and then finish with a windmill. But he couldn't get the dunk to go down in his allotted three attempts.

DeAndre Jordan of the Los Angeles Clippers and Aaron Gordon of Orlando were unable to emerge from the first round. Jordan dunked over DJ turn tables and Gordon dunked after receiving a bounce pass from a drone that had flown over the court with the "Star Wars" theme music playing.

Eric Gordon got his win in New Orleans, where he played the previous five seasons before leaving last summer in free agency.

Gordon's score of 21 in a final-round tie-

breaker defeated Cleveland's Kyrie Irving, the 2013 winner who had 18. The pair had each finished with a score of 20 in the final round, meaning they each had to shoot 25 more balls to decide it.

"I wasn't really concentrating on how many I made," Gordon said. "It's all about just knocking down the shot. I never counted in my head or anything. I just go out there and just shoot the ball."

Thompson was stunningly eliminated in the first round, missing a final shot from the corner that could have put him through ahead of Kemba Walker.

Big men reigned supreme for a second straight year in the skills competition, with the 7-foot-3 Porzingis beating Utah's Gordon Hayward in the final round.

Those vanquished in earlier rounds included guards John Wall of Washington and Isaiah Thomas of Boston, both because they couldn't make their initial three-pointers required to close out the course before Hayward did, even though Hayward had trailed each of them dribbling down the court by a considerable margin before hitting his clinching shots.

Porzingis emerged from the big-men's division that included the Pelicans' Anthony Davis and Denver's Nikola Jokic.

"It's a good feeling that I'm able to showcase my skill with my size and show to the kids that you're capable of doing that even if you're tall and lanky like me," Porzingis said.

Porzingis and Hayward were neck-and-neck until the end of the course, but Porzingis hit his three first to end it.

The three-round, head-to-head obstacle-course competition tests dribbling, passing, agility and shooting skills.

Victorious Panthers get into playoff position

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Florida Panthers' offense keeps on firing. It's the defense, though, that has them back in the playoff picture.

Aleksander Barkov scored the go-ahead goal 15 seconds into the third period and Roberto Luongo made 33 saves as the Panthers beat the Los Angeles Kings 3-2 on Saturday night for their fourth straight win.

Jussi Jokinen and Jonathan Huberdeau also scored for the Panthers, who have won seven of eight.

Jets 3, Canadiens 1: The Winnipeg Jets spoiled Claude Julien's return to Montreal by beating the Canadiens.

Wild 5, Predators 2: Jason Zucker scored two goals and added an assist as host Minnesota beat Nashville.

Oilers 3, Blackhawks 1: Cam Talbot made 38 saves and Connor McDavid scored his 20th goal as the visiting Oilers earned their third straight win.

Sharks 4, Coyotes 1: Brent Burns scored two goals while Aaron Dell had a career-high 36 saves as San Jose beat host

Arizona for the first time this season.

Red Wings 3, Capitals 2 (SO): Henrik Zetterberg scored a tiebreaking goal on Detroit's fifth shootout attempt and Petr Mrazek then stopped Alex Ovechkin, sending the host Red Wings to the win.

Stars 4, Lightning 3 (OT): Antoine Roussel had his first career hat trick and Jamie Benn scored 3:47 into overtime as host Dallas rallied to beat Tampa Bay.

Sabres 3, Blues 2: Robin Lehner stopped 37 shots, and

Boston snapped St. Louis' six-game winning streak.

Senators 6, Maple Leafs 3: Mark Stone had a goal and four assists, Derick Brassard scored twice in the third period and visiting Ottawa recovered after blowing a two-goal lead.

Devils 3, Islanders 2: Cory Schneider made 40 saves and Travis Zajac had a short-handed goal and an assist, leading host New Jersey to the victory.

Canucks 2, Flames 1: Chris Tanev's goal 34 seconds into overtime gave host Vancouver a victory over Calgary.