

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US carrier deploys; China decries 'relevant countries'

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

China has denounced "relevant countries" for threatening sovereignty and security in the South China Sea, following the deployment of the USS Carl Vinson carrier battle group on a routine patrol in the sea's international waters.

"China always respects the freedom of navigation and overflight that countries enjoy in the South China Sea under international law," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Tuesday in a press conference transcript posted to the ministry's website. "But we oppose relevant countries threatening and undermining the sovereignty and security of coastal states under the pretext of such freedom. We hope that relevant countries can do more for regional peace and stability."

The Navy regularly patrols the South China Sea, where more than \$1.2 trillion in U.S. trade transits annually. China maintains a disputed claim to about 90 percent of the sea through markings on a map known as the nine-dash line.

The line was ruled noncompliant with international maritime law by an international tribunal in July, but China has ignored that ruling.

The Vinson carrier group began operations in the South China Sea on Saturday, according to a Navy statement. It has deployed amid media speculation that one of its ships may conduct a freedom-of-navigation operation under a program the U.S. uses to challenge practices that do not conform to international law.

The U.S. restarted its freedom-of-navigation operations in 2015 in the South China Sea after more than three years of conducting only routine operations. In the meantime, China

has constructed more than 3,000 acres of artificial islands atop submerged reefs claimed by other nations, according to the Pentagon. China has nearly finished building almost two dozen structures that appear designed to house long-range surface-to-air missiles, U.S. officials told Reuters on Tuesday.

The artificial islands also include radar, self-propelled artillery and facilities for military aircraft and ships.

The U.S. has conducted freedom-of-navigation operations near some of the islands under "innocent passage," in which ships perform no military operations or survey activities.

The Association of South East Asian Nations, which includes multiple countries involved in boat-ramming and other low-level conflicts with China over South China Sea territory, discussed Beijing's growing power at a press conference in the Philippines on Tuesday.

"The ASEAN members have been unanimous in their expression of concern about what they see as a militarization of the region," Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay said, according to Reuters.

However, Yasay expressed confidence that an ASEAN-China code of conduct for the South China Sea could be signed by June.

A code of conduct has been discussed for several years but never finalized, with South China Sea claimant nations often blaming nonclaimants for striking side deals with Beijing to undermine an agreement.

Geng did not directly address the potential code of conduct but hinted at cooperation from Beijing on Tuesday.

"Thanks to the concerted efforts by China and ASEAN countries, the situation in the South China Sea is easing up toward stability and moving in a positive direction," he said.

Robots could take some military jobs

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The wave of automation that swept away tens of thousands of American manufacturing and office jobs during the past two decades is now washing over the armed forces, putting both rear-echelon and front-line positions in jeopardy.

"Just as in the civilian economy, automation will likely have a big impact on military organizations in logistics and manufacturing," said Michael Horowitz, a University of Pennsylvania professor and one of the globe's foremost experts on weaponized robots.

"The U.S. military is very likely to pursue forms of automation that reduce 'back-office' costs over time, as well as remove soldiers from noncombat deployments where they might face risk from adversaries on fluid battlefields, such as in transportation," he said.

Driver-less vehicles poised to take taxi, train and truck driver jobs in the civilian sector also could nab many combat-support slots in the Army.

Warehouse robots that scoot goods to delivery vans could run the same chores inside Air Force ordnance and supply units.

New machines that can scan, collate and analyze hundreds of thousands of pages of legal documents in a day might outperform Navy legal researchers.

Nurses, physicians and corpsmen could face competition from computers designed to diagnose diseases and assist in the operating room.

Frogmen might no longer need to rip out sea mines by hand — robots could do that.

"Robots will continue to re-

place the dirty, dull and dangerous jobs, and this will affect typically more uneducated and unskilled workers," said Henrik Christensen, director of the Institute for Contextual Robotics at the University of California, San Diego. "You need to look at the mundane things. Logistics tasks will not be solved by people driving around in trucks. Instead, you will have fewer drivers. The lead driver in a convoy might be human, but every truck following behind will not be. The jobs that are the most boring will be the ones that get replaced because they're the easiest to automate."

As for warships, Horowitz said because of economic and personnel reasons, they're increasingly designed to "reduce the number of sailors required for operations."

The highly automated guided-missile destroyer Zumwalt that arrived in San Diego in December carries 147 sailors — half the crew that runs similar warships — and deploys up to three drone MQ-8 Fire Scout helicopters to find targets, map terrain and sniff out bad weather.

The Office of Naval Research and the Pentagon's Strategic Capabilities Office continue to experiment with what futurists call a "ghost fleet" of unmanned but networked surface and underwater boats — and their flying drone cousins overhead.

Tomorrow's sailors could begin to encounter what scores of bookkeepers, cashiers, telephone operators and automotive assembly line workers already faced in the past two decades as increasingly fast and cheap software and automated machinery replaced some of their tasks in factories and offices.

Pentagon: US troops under fire in Mosul

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. troops embedded with Iraqi forces have been engaged in combat as they move closer to the front lines in the battle for Mosul, the spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve said Wednesday.

“When someone is shooting at you that is combat. Yes. That has happened,” Air Force Col. John Dorrian, the Baghdad-based spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, told reporters at the Pentagon.

U.S. troops have come under

fire and returned fire multiple times, he said, though the emphasis is still on having Iraqi forces retake western Mosul and not “fight the enemy for our partners.”

He said 450 conventional forces and an undisclosed number of U.S. special operators are embedded with Iraqi Security Forces and Iraq’s elite Counter Terrorism Service, respectively. The U.S. forces are embedded with troops as advisers, which includes calling in airstrikes.

Iraqi and U.S. forces liberated the eastern half of Mosul in late January and are now be-

ginning their offensive to take the western portion of the city.

Dorrian said U.S. forces “have come under fire at different times, they have returned fire at different times in and around Mosul.”

U.S. forces have been moving closer to the front lines in recent weeks, instead of remaining at command headquarters, and have the authority to assist smaller units of Iraqi forces near the fighting.

Earlier this week in Baghdad, Army Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend told reporters traveling in Iraq with Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis that U.S.

troops are operating more closely with Iraqi forces.

“We adjusted our posture during the east Mosul fight and embedded advisers a bit further down into [Iraqi ground units],” Townsend said, according to Fox News.

Based on the most recent figures available, 31 U.S. servicemembers have been wounded in the fight against the Islamic State group. However, that includes more than just the recent Mosul offensive, and the Pentagon did not release details on those incidents.

McMaster needs confirmation from Senate to keep 3 stars

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — National security advisers don’t need the consent of the Senate, but the decision by President Donald Trump to tap Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster for the assignment brings up an unusual question of military rank. Why? Without the Senate confirmation, McMaster would effectively be demoted as the result of the new responsibilities, since three-star generals generally have their rank tied to a particular function.

A National Security Council spokesman confirmed to Roll Call that McMaster is expected to face a Senate confirmation vote to maintain his three stars as a result of his new job, with the process already getting underway.

When Colin Powell served as national security adviser late in the Reagan administration, he went through the Senate in order to be elevated to lieutenant general for the job, as his permanent rank was major general. It proved a fairly perfunctory exercise given Powell’s record and credentials.

One might expect the same for McMaster, with Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain, R-Ariz., having praised the pick.

“General McMaster does not require Senate confirmation to serve as national security adviser,” a Senate Armed Services Committee aide said. “However, if it is the president’s desire that Gen. McMaster serve as national security adviser while in

his current grade of lieutenant general, the law requires that Gen. McMaster would have to be reappointed by the president and reconfirmed by the Senate in that grade for his new position.”

White House press secretary Sean Spicer, who had confirmed that McMaster would remain on active duty as Powell had done, said that Trump selected McMaster for the position after getting overwhelmingly favorable recommendations for him.

“So many people had spoken to him — (Defense Secretary) James Mattis, Tom Cotton, other senators — really praised Gen. McMaster’s command of the issues, his management, his style, his understanding of the geopolitical landscape, and I think that’s why you saw such amazing widespread bipartisan praise for him, and why he will be such an asset to the national security team,” Spicer said.

Cotton had multiple conversations with the White House about the possibility of McMaster becoming national security adviser, an aide to the Arkansas Republican senator said Monday.

Cotton’s loyalty to McMaster showed up in 2007, when the senator actually went so far as to send in his resignation papers to the Army. According to his office, one of the reasons was because McMaster had been passed over for elevation to a one-star general. Cotton ultimately stayed on active duty until transferring to the Army Reserve in 2010.

Eating Thai jungle food at Cobra Gold

Stars and Stripes

Servicemembers expanded their palates during jungle-survival training as part of the multinational Cobra Gold exercise underway in Thailand.

Experts from the Royal Thai Marines’ Reconnaissance Battalion taught Marines and airmen how to safely consume some of the Thai jungle’s most dangerous animals — venomous snakes, scorpions and tarantulas. Servicemembers also learned which herbs, roots and plants contain water or can be safely eaten, how to fashion crude hunting weapons and how to prepare wild fowl for dinner.

“When you are out there by yourself, you cannot worry about your emotions,” said Chief Petty Officer 1st Class Pairoj Prasansai, a Thai Reconnaissance Marine, according to an American Forces Network report. “When your life is on the line, you simply have to do what you have to do to survive. You have to value your life.”

Cobra Gold is an annual military exercise in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, with approximately 8,000 personnel from 29 countries participating in or observing the 11-day exercise, which ends later this week.

Millions could be targeted for deportation under new rules

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Millions of people living in the United States illegally could be targeted for deportation — including people simply arrested for traffic violations — under a sweeping rewrite of immigration enforcement policies announced Tuesday by the Trump administration.

Any immigrant who is in the country illegally and is charged with or convicted of any offense, or even suspected of a crime, will now be an enforcement priority, according to Homeland Security Department memos signed by Secretary John Kelly. That could include people arrested for minor offenses — or simply having crossed the border illegally.

The Trump administration memos replace narrower guid-

ance focusing on immigrants who have been convicted of serious crimes, are considered threats to national security or are recent border crossers.

Under the Obama administration guidance, immigrants whose only violation was being in the country illegally were generally left alone. Those immigrants fall into two categories: those who crossed the border without permission and those who overstayed their visas.

Crossing the border illegally is a criminal offense, and the new memos make clear that those who have done so are included in the broad list of enforcement priorities.

The new enforcement documents are the latest efforts by President Donald Trump to follow through on campaign promises to strictly enforce im-

migration laws.

Trump's earlier immigration orders, which temporarily banned all refugees as well as foreigners from seven Muslim-majority countries, have faced widespread criticism and legal action. A federal appeals court has upheld a temporary halt.

The memos do not change U.S. immigration laws, but take a far harder line toward enforcement.

The administration also plans to expand immigration jail capacity. Currently Homeland Security has money and space to jail 34,000 immigrants at a time. It's unclear how much an increase would cost, but Congress would have to approve any new spending.

The American Civil Liberties Union said it would challenge the directives.

GOP gets earful at town halls

Associated Press

BLACKSTONE, Va. — Republican U.S. Rep. David Brat, who rode voter anger to a historic political upset nearly three years ago, was on the receiving end of constituent angst about the Trump administration as he held a town hall in Virginia.

Protesters and supporters crowded a restaurant conference room in Blackstone where Brat fielded questions for about an hour Tuesday. He was loudly heckled and booed when he defended President Donald Trump and his policies on health care and immigration, with the occasional cheer from supporters of his positions on gun rights and fewer regulations.

"People are very nervous and anxious after the Trump win. So my goal tonight is to help allay some of those anxieties," said Brat, who defeated then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a 2014 GOP primary.

Brat's town hall was among several protests lobbed at GOP members of Congress returning home this week on break to their districts around the country.

Rep. Marsha Blackburn returned to her Tennessee district and was greeted by similarly tough questions and protests at a town hall about 30 miles from Nashville.

"I have always said, you may not agree with me, but you're always going to know where I stand," Blackburn told the protesters outside Fairview City Hall afterward.

A month into Trump's presidency, protests continue over his immigration policies, Cabinet selections and the GOP's push to repeal the Affordable Care Act, without all the specifics on how to replace it.

Even the most powerful member of the U.S. Senate faced jeers from nearly 1,000 as he arrived Tuesday to address a group of local business leaders. In Lawrenceburg, Ky., they chanted as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell entered the American Legion Post 34 Fairgrounds in a black limousine.

Thousands flee floodwaters in Calif.

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Rising floodwaters sent at least 14,000 residents fleeing inundated homes in San Jose, Calif., and forced the shutdown of a major freeway Wednesday.

Authorities reopened two lanes of U.S. 101 south of San Francisco after it was closed because of the flooding.

The California Highway Patrol had closed all lanes in both directions earlier Wednesday when water spilled into a low point on the freeway. There was no estimate when the key commuter artery would fully reopen.

Authorities went door-to-door overnight ordering thousands to seek higher ground as creeks and reservoirs overtopped their banks and sent chest-deep water into neighborhoods.

The region got a brief break from persistent downpours, but flood warnings were in place

through Saturday because waterways were overtaxed.

At least 225 residents were taken to dry land Tuesday and rinsed with soap and water to prevent them from being sickened by floodwaters that had traveled through engine fuel, garbage, debris and over sewer lines, said Fire Captain Mitch Matlow. No major injuries were reported.

Meanwhile several other communities downstream from a Northern California reservoir gushing water for the first time in 20 years braced for flash floods and evacuations. The surge released from Don Pedro Dam into the Tuolumne River in the foothills east of Modesto was expected to reach overtopped levees later in the day.

The water released from Don Pedro is expected to reach its peak along a stretch near Vernalis that's already at danger stage, said Tim Daly, a spokesman for the San Joaquin

County Office of Emergency Services. The water isn't expected to spill over the levees but rather increase pressure on them, causing possible breaks in any weak places.

The Anderson Dam in Santa Clara County reached capacity over the weekend, and after heavy rain it began overflowing into the Coyote Creek.

The rains were the latest produced by a series of storms generated by so-called atmospheric rivers that dump massive quantities of Pacific Ocean water on California after carrying it aloft from as far away as Hawaii.

In the Sierra Nevada range, one of the main routes to Lake Tahoe was in danger of collapsing after a roadway shoulder gave way following heavy storms, leaving a gaping hole on part of Highway 50, Caltrans engineer Jarrett Woodruff said.

Malaysia: Suspects coated hands with poison

Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — The two women suspected of fatally poisoning a scion of North Korea's ruling family were trained to coat their hands with toxic chemicals, then wipe them on his face, police in Malaysia said Wednesday, announcing they were seeking a North Korean diplomat in connection with the attack.

The North Korean Embassy ridiculed the police account of Kim Jong Nam's death, demanding the immediate release of the two "innocent women" and saying there was no way they could have poisoned him. It alleged the women daubed liquid on Kim "for a joke."

If the toxins had been on their hands "then how is it possible that these female suspects could still be alive?" demanded a statement from North Korea's embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Police say the women — one of them Indonesian, the other Vietnamese — washed their hands soon after poisoning Kim, the long-estranged half brother of the North Korean ruler.

Earlier Wednesday, Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar told reporters that authorities are searching for two new North Korean suspects — the second secretary of North Korea's embassy in Kuala Lumpur and an employee of North Korea's state-owned airline Air Koryo.

"We hope that the [North] Korean embassy will cooperate with us, allow us to interview them and interview them quickly," he said. "If not, we will compel them to come to us."

Police say the substance used remains unknown, but it was potent enough to kill Kim before he could make it to the hospital.

Khalid said the women knew they were handling poisonous materials and "were warned to take precautions." Surveillance footage showed both keeping their hands away from their bodies after the attack, he said, then going to restrooms to wash. Such details are unclear in video footage that has been released to media.

He said the women had practiced the attack at two Kuala Lumpur malls.

"We strongly believe it is a planned thing and that they have been trained," he told reporters.

Khalid couldn't confirm whether North Korea's government was behind Kim's death but added, "What is clear is that those involved are North Koreans."

He also said a heavily armed special police force was deployed to the morgue holding Kim Jong Nam's body this week as a precaution because police have detected attempts to break into the morgue. He declined to give details.

Local media reported that a South Korean cameraman was detained briefly outside the morgue after he was found without any identification documents or passport. He was released after a colleague confirmed his identity.

Police have already arrested four people in connection with the attack: a Malaysian, a North Korean and the two women. The Malaysian was to be freed Wednesday on bail, Khalid said.

Rollback of transgender bathroom rules planned

The Washington Post

The Trump administration plans to roll back protections for transgender students, reversing federal guidance that required the nation's public schools to allow children to use the bathrooms and locker rooms that matched their gender identities.

In a letter to the nation's schools, administration officials plan to say they are withdrawing guidance issued by the Obama administration that found that denying transgender students the right to use the bathroom of their choice violates federal prohibitions against sex discrimination, according to a draft of the letter obtained by The Washington Post.

"This interpretation has given rise to significant litigation," states the two-page draft, which indicates that the Education and Justice departments plan to issue it jointly.

The draft says administrators, parents and students have "struggled to understand and

apply the statements of policy" in the Obama-era guidance.

As a result, the departments "have decided to withdraw and rescind the above-referenced guidance documents in order to further consider the legal issues involved." The letter makes clear that schools must protect all students and that the withdrawal of the guidance "does not diminish the protections from bullying and harassment that are available to all students. Schools must ensure that transgender students, like all students, are able to learn in a safe environment."

A final version of the letter was slated to be issued Wednesday, according to a Republican operative with knowledge of the conversations within the Trump administration on the issue. The administration is expected to release the letter despite objections from Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who did not want to rescind the guidance, the operative said. Officials with the Education and Justice departments did

not immediately respond to requests for comment late Tuesday night.

The reversal would represent a significant setback for the gay rights movement, which made enormous gains under President Barack Obama.

It suggests that President Donald Trump, who had signaled during the campaign and in the early days of his presidency that he supports gay and transgender rights, will hew closer to the GOP party line.

"I think that all you have to do is look at what the president's view has been for a long time, that this is not something that the federal government should be involved in; this is a states' rights issue," White House spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters at a daily media briefing Tuesday afternoon, saying that the Education and Justice departments would issue fresh guidance soon.

The decision would not have an immediate impact on the nation's public school students because a federal judge had al-

ready put a hold on the Obama-era directive.

But it would instantly affect several legal cases, including that of Gavin Grimm, a transgender Virginia teen who sued his school board for barring him from using the boys' bathroom. The U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments in Grimm's case next month.

A lower court ruled in favor of Grimm based on the Obama administration's position on transgender student bathroom use. The change would at least partially undermine Grimm's case.

Gay rights groups, which expected the Trump administration to change course from the earlier transgender guidance, condemned the move pre-emptively.

Opponents say the accommodations violate student privacy and traditional values.

Many legal experts say that federal law protects transgender students no matter what agency guidance says.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman visits husband's grave, dies after crash

PA POTTSTOWN — A Pennsylvania woman visiting her husband's grave died after she had an asthma attack that caused her to crash her car in the cemetery.

The Berks County coroner said Nancy Heist, 68, died about four hours after the crash Saturday evening at the Highland Memorial Park Cemetery in Pottstown.

Her husband, Walter, had died Feb. 10 after 42 years of marriage.

The Colebrookdale woman had the asthma attack while driving about 6 p.m., and that caused her to lose control of her car, which glanced off a tree, then hit another head on.

The coroner said Heist was trapped in the car for hours before being rescued. She was taken to Reading Hospital, where she died of respiratory failure.

Police: Man uses chain saw to enter boss' home

NY LYONS FALLS — State police said a man used a chain saw to cut through a door at his boss' upstate New York home, causing severe injuries to the employer's hand.

Troopers said Kyle Poore, 29, of Lyons Falls, used a running chain saw late Sunday night to cut through a bedroom door at his employer's Lewis County home.

Police said Poore caused severe cuts and tendon damage to his boss' hand, then fled the scene on foot before troopers arrived.

A state police K-9 tracked Poore through nearby fields and a wooded area before he was caught.

Police haven't said what led to the incident. Poore is jailed

on assault and other charges.

Mom mails garbage in care package to son

PA NEW WILMINGTON — A Pennsylvania college student got a reminder to take out the trash when his mother sent him some garbage in a care package.

Connor Cox, 18, told WHTM-TV that his mother sent two boxes to him at Westminster College in New Wilmington last month. One box contained food and other goodies. The other contained garbage.

When he called to ask whether that was a mistake, Cox's mother, Connie, told him, "No, that's the trash you were supposed to take out" during a recent visit home. Cox said he laughed hysterically at the prank, then tweeted a photo of the package.

Cox has three sisters and says he has a special relationship with his mother. He says, "She knows what to say at the exact time she should say it."

Speeding stop becomes attempted murder case

OH FREMONT — The Ohio State Highway Patrol said an Illinois driver was stopped for speeding on the Ohio Turnpike and then charged with attempted murder after a trooper noticed signs of violence.

Troopers said the 57-year-old Peoria woman and a passenger were taken to a hospital with undisclosed injuries after the traffic stop Saturday morning in Sandusky County.

The patrol said the arrest of Susan Howard, 57, stemmed from an earlier, unspecified "incident" further south near London, Ohio, roughly a 2½-hour drive from where the traffic stop occurred.

Troopers didn't provide details about the attempted murder allegation but said the case remains under investigation.

Fried chicken festival flap ruffles feathers

NC RALEIGH — A bill to make a Fayetteville festival that hasn't been held yet North Carolina's official fried chicken festival is ruffling feathers in Rose Hill, which has held a jubilee to honor the deep-fried bird for five decades.

Bill McMillan suggested the Fayetteville event and didn't know about the Rose Hill festival. He told the News & Observer, of Raleigh, he didn't mean any harm and wants to talk to the Rose Hill organizers over a plate of fried chicken.

Rose Hill claims the world's largest working frying pan; it can cook 365 chickens at once.

Poultry Jubilee Committee Chairwoman Lynn James says the festival started in the 1960s, attracts 9,000 people and rivals Christmas in the town of about 1,700 folks.

Woman dragged by car, hit by taxicab dies

MA BOSTON — A Boston woman died after she was dragged by a car and hit by a taxi.

Boston Police said Cusandra Webb, 29, of Dorchester, died Sunday night at Boston Medical Center.

Police said the incident started early Sunday with an argument that involved Webb and the woman she had been traveling with, Brianna Smith, 26, of Boston.

Police said Smith was drunk and driving, and when Webb tried to get into the car, Smith dragged her for about a block. Police said the taxi driver could not avoid Webb and ran over her.

Smith was charged with assault and battery and operating under the influence of alcohol.

Police: Man called 911 before killing brother

NC WILKESBORO — Authorities said a man who called 911 and told them he was going to kill his brother went through with the threat before officers could arrive.

The Wilkes County Sheriff's Office told media outlets that Bryan Hendren, 59, told the 911 operator at 4 a.m. Saturday that his older brother Benny was coming to his home and he planned to shoot him. Deputies arrived in about 10 minutes, and say the victim was dead in the driveway from a shotgun wound and Hendren was sitting on his porch.

Investigators said the brothers had an ongoing dispute over land they had inherited.

Hendren was in the Wilkes County jail on a \$250,000 bond.

Erratically driven truck boxed in by other drivers

NE LOUISVILLE — Authorities said some people and their vehicles boxed in an erratically driven pickup truck and forced it to stop until deputies could arrive.

The Cass County Sheriff's Office said in a news release Monday that several people called 911 about 8:50 a.m. Saturday after seeing the pickup run through a ditch while exiting Louisville State Recreation Area and entering Nebraska Highway 50 while towing a trailer.

The sheriff's office said some people then boxed in the pickup and trailer and forced it to stop near Manley. Deputies soon arrived and arrested the pickup driver on suspicion of several crimes.

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NASCAR hopes for boost with changes

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — NASCAR has a new sponsor, a new format and welcomes back its most popular driver, all providing optimism for a series eager to halt a steady decline in attendance, ratings and sponsorship.

Money is down across the board and everyone is doing more with less to try to save a buck.

The on-track product for the stock car series officially reports for work Friday at Daytona International Speedway, which hosts Sunday's season-opening Daytona 500. It will kick off a season of hold-your-breath, we-really-hope-this-works efforts by NASCAR, the networks, tracks, teams and drivers to turn things around.

This season begins with Monster Energy roaring into its debut year as title sponsor amid promised marketing to millennials and the opportunity to lure new eyeballs to a sport with an aging audience. Part of the new razzle-dazzle approach is a wholesale redesign of the definition of a NASCAR race.

Remember how NASCAR just ran in circles for 500 miles nearly every Sunday for hours on end? Well, this year it's about "enhanced competition" in segments broken up over three periods. Think of it like innings in baseball or quarters in football or basketball. More accurately, the quick first two

segments are now the appetizer to the longer main event. In the meantime, you get to go grab a beer as the television networks promise to use the breaks between segments to dump all the commercials.

Even better, you won't have to wait for Nationwide's beloved "Water Cooler Dale" commercial to see NASCAR's most popular driver. Dale Earnhardt Jr. is cleared for competition after missing the second half of last season with a concussion. Earnhardt's sidelining absolutely cut into the audience, and had to send shivers down NASCAR's spine over its dwindling cast of superstars.

Jeff Gordon is in the TV booth now, Tony Stewart is retired. They had seven championships between them and NASCAR is counting on Earnhardt to bring his fan base back to the track with him. How important is Earnhardt? Chicagoland Speedway, site of the Sept. 17 opening playoff race, has promised a full refund to anyone who buys a single-day ticket to that event between now and the Daytona 500 if Earnhardt wins for a third time.

But be prepared, Dale is different! He's married, head-over-heels in love and you can double-click his Instagram account if you like photos of a man who has finally, in his 18th season, settled into his skin and found a peace that he is sharing with the entire world.

"Getting married has been incredible. I wish I would have figured this all out sooner," he said. "I'm frustrated with myself that I took so long to grow up because I have an amazing wife and she's changed my life. She's really helped me as a person to become better on all fronts — personally, and all my friendships with people and how I react to people and treat people. And, obviously, in my professional life, she's helped me as a driver."

He wants a family, wants to be himself and wants to be in that race car.

"I got real close to not being able to compete and it being someone else's decision whether I competed or not," Earnhardt said of the long medical process to restore his health. "I don't know when I'm going to stop racing, but I want to be able to make that choice and not have it made for me."

NASCAR, though, must prepare for life after Junior, because Jimmie Johnson — who just won his record-tying seventh championship then had Snoop Dogg play at his party — and champions Matt Kenseth, Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch aren't getting any younger.

NASCAR hopes it's off to a good start with Daniel Suarez, the only non-American in the Monster Energy Cup Series who has become a sensation in his native Mexico. Only he didn't get a promotion for be-

coming the first foreign-born series champion with an Xfinity Series title last November. No, the 25-year-old Suarez was promoted when Carl Edwards abruptly walked away.

That's right, the guy who came 10 laps away from winning his first championship last November gave up his seat at Joe Gibbs Racing. The 37-year-old Edwards gave no clear explanation on what he plans to do now, but his refusal to use the word "retire" seemingly left open a return in some form.

But none of this matters unless the racing is good, the characters come out and somebody provides drama. There was some Thursday, the day the garage opened to Cup teams, as the nasty fight between Danica Patrick's old sponsor and her race team. Stewart-Haas Racing has sued Nature's Bakery for \$31 million for dumping the final two years of its three-year contract. Nature's Bakery said Thursday it will fight and won't allow the team to "bully us."

NASCAR, meanwhile, introduced a new penalty structure and the rules for the upcoming season — on Thursday. That's right, the details surrounding the 36 championship races were locked down the day before the buildup officially begins to NASCAR's version of the "Super Bowl."

So we wait to see what this season brings, while NASCAR holds its breath.

Bowyer seeking revival with Stewart-Haas

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Clint Bowyer hasn't won a race since 2012, hasn't made the playoffs in three years and is coming off an embarrassingly bad season.

The worst of his career. It was so bad the one-time championship contender was a backmarker in nearly every event.

But there was never reason to panic for Bowyer, who was long-slotted to replace three-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart when Stewart retired at the end of last year. It meant a happy ending for Bowyer. He'd get to move to Stewart-Haas Racing,

his one-year banishment to HScott Motorsports — where he was stashed for a year to wait for Stewart's finale — finally over. Bowyer would get his reprieve.

He gets to ride in a brand new shiny Ford Fusion, one adorned with Stewart's beloved No. 14 on the side, for the Daytona 500 this week.

It's fair to ask Bowyer if he still knows his way to Victory Lane.

"Wouldn't it be awesome if it was the Daytona 500? he said. "So I can stop answering that damn question?"

Bowyer is one of the skilled plate racers in NASCAR and typically rises to the

challenge of a tight pack and split-second decision making. He's a two-time winner at Talladega and has three top-five finishes at Daytona. It makes Daytona International Speedway probably the best place for him to debut with a team because he's so comfortable at the track.

"I love Daytona. I know a lot of people don't say that, but I like it. Maybe I'm a lunatic?" he said.

Bowyer will be with his third different manufacturer in three years — he drove a Toyota for Michael Waltrip Racing, then a Chevrolet last season — and now he is in a Ford as SHR makes a long-planned switch.

Rockets acquire Williams

Associated Press

The Los Angeles Lakers have swung their first deal of the Magic Johnson Era, agreeing to send Lou Williams to the Houston Rockets for Corey Brewer and a future draft pick.

Brewer's agent Wallace Prather confirmed the terms of the trade, which were first reported Tuesday by Yahoo Sports. Neither team immediately revealed the trade publicly.

"Thanx for the love L.A., I've enjoyed my stay," Williams wrote on Twitter.

Williams led the Lakers in scoring at 18.6 points per game, playing off the bench. Brewer was averaging 4.2 points for Houston.

The trade came hours after the Lakers announced the firing of general manager Mitch Kupchak and put Johnson in charge of basketball operations — part of a massive front office shake-up.

And while the draft pick will help the Lakers' future, the Rockets just got deeper.

Williams has scored more points off the bench than anyone else in the NBA this season — and Eric Gordon, the newly crowned three-point shootout champion at All-Star weekend — is No. 2 on that list.

Reserves have three games of 35 points or more in the NBA this season, all by Williams, all in a dazzling seven-day span in early December. He had 40 points against Memphis, 38 against Utah and 35 against Phoenix.

Brewer is also under contract for next season, at about \$7.6 million.

"Thanks to everyone in the Houston Rockets organization for my time here," Brewer wrote in a statement released on Twitter. "A special thanks to all the great fans of the Rockets for making this city a special place to live and play."

Werth in final year of deal

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.— Bryce Harper had not yet turned 10 when Jayson Werth made his major league debut, batting ninth and getting a pair of hits.

A decade and a half later, the 37-year-old Werth and 24-year-old Harper are fellow outfielders and clubhouse neighbors at spring training with the Washington Nationals. On Monday, the duo chatted while stretching, then warmed up by playing catch at the start of the team's workout.

In many ways, the history of the Nationals can be split into two segments. There was "Before Werth," including the consecutive 100-loss seasons that gave the club the No. 1 overall draft picks that landed Stephen Strasburg and Harper. And there has been "During Werth," including the trio of NL East titles in 2012, 2014 and 2016, all of which came since he signed a \$126 million, seven-year contract that stunned the baseball world when it was announced.

"He's as significant a player as we've ever had here. To me, he not only gave us a really good two-way player with a championship pedigree, but he really showed me how a championship-caliber front office and organization works. And he showed that to the young play-

ers that he embraced throughout his tenure here," Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo said. "He brought with him a ton of intangibles that can't be analytically measured."

Werth is now entering the final season of that deal and, therefore, what could very well be his final season in Washington. He said he has not spoken to the team about extending his stay — which means that 2017 might stand as his last chance to define how his time with the Nationals is remembered.

"I say the whole thing kind of hangs on this season. Look, there's going to be baseball in D.C. long after I'm gone. People are going to play and people are going to talk about players and what have you," Werth said. "But my (Nationals) career is kind of pinned to this season. We'll see what happens."

Sure, fans are not likely to forget his bottom-of-the-ninth, game-ending homer in Game 4 of the 2012 NL Division Series against the St. Louis Cardinals, although Washington's excruciating, blown-lead loss in Game 5 diminishes the glow, naturally.

Indeed, unlike Werth's previous team — the Philadelphia Phillies, who won one World Series and reached another with him — the Nationals have yet to win a postseason series with him.

"We've definitely had some bad losses and some devastating losses. We've had some winnable games and some big opportunities," Werth said. "I want to win. I want nothing more for these guys in here, and the city, to experience what it's like for a team to win the World Series, and I still have that opportunity."

For one last season in Washington, maybe, although Werth said he could have "three, four, five good years left," even if he is nearly 4 full years older than anyone else on the 40-man roster.

Rizzo was diplomatic while discussing Werth's possible future with the Nationals, saying: "We go way back, so I would never say 'never' with 'JW.' He is one of my favorite players that I've ever been associated with. The way he takes care of himself lends him to be a guy that can play many, many more years if he chooses to. I read him as a baseball lifer."

Last season, Werth got off to a slow start after having been sidelined in 2015 with wrist problems. He was hitting .225 at the end of May before finishing the regular season at .244 with 21 homers and 69 RBIs, then batting .389 with three extra-base hits in the NLDS.

"I feel like I got a lot to prove," Werth said, "and I still feel like I got a lot in the tank."

Moreland isn't trying to fill Ortiz's void

Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Mitch Moreland knows he's likely the only new player in Boston's lineup since David Ortiz retired at the end of last season.

He's just not listening to those who say he needs to replace Big Papi's lofty production.

"I try not to hear it because there's no replacing that guy," said the 31-year-old first baseman, who signed a \$5.5-million, 1-year deal with the Red Sox during the offseason.

"I think it's going to be more

of a team effort," he said. "Obviously we picked up two big arms as well, and it's a very balanced club."

After playing his first 6½ seasons in the majors with the Texas Rangers, Moreland is with a new organization for the first time in his career. So far, he said, the move has been smooth.

"They welcomed me from Day One," he said. "Handshakes and hugs right off the bat. It's going to be a lot of fun. You can see why they had so

much success last year."

Coming off a subpar 2016 with a .233 batting average, 22 homers and 60 RBIs, Moreland tested free agency. He wanted to go to a team that had a good chance at competing for a championship — like he felt with the Rangers.

A first-time Gold Glove winner last season, Moreland knows the defending AL East champion Red Sox wanted his defensive skills at first to allow Hanley Ramirez to shift to Ortiz's vacated DH spot.

Baylor downs OU, halts 2-game skid

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Baylor coach Scott Drew preferred to focus on the positive aspects of the defense after the ninth-ranked Bears had to hold on to snap a two-game slide.

Johnathan Motley had 21 points and 16 rebounds for the Bears, but they had to hold on after blowing almost all of a 15-point lead in the second half and not making a field goal over the last 6 minutes of a 60-54 victory over Oklahoma on Tuesday night.

“If you like defense, you liked tonight’s game, because both teams defended pretty well, or the offenses were pretty bad,” Drew said. “So, let’s go with the positive — great defenses tonight. I know I’m pleased to

hold them to 32 percent (shooting). You don’t hold many Big 12 teams to 32 percent and 54 points.”

The Bears (23-5, 10-5), who had lost four of their previous six games, moved back into a tie for second place in the Big 12.

Oklahoma used a 21-8 run to get within 49-47 on Jamuni McNeace’s jumper with 9:21 left. But Manu Lecomte then hit consecutive three-pointers for the Bears, though those were more than 2 minutes apart and their last field goals.

“That was huge. We know Manu is a big shot maker,” Motley said. “When we need a big shot out of him, we know Manu is going to take it and make it.”

Lecomte, who finished with 11 points, had missed practice

the previous two days after a loss to No. 3 Kansas on Saturday because of a sore ankle, as did lone senior Ish Wainright.

No. 11 Kentucky 72, Missouri 62: Bam Adebayo’s fourth double-double of the season helped the visiting Wildcats avoid a late-season upset, as the freshman scored 22 points and grabbed a career-high 15 rebounds.

Terrence Phillips led Missouri with a career-high 22 points, shooting 4-for-8 from three-point range while the rest of the Tigers shot a combined 0-for-14.

No. 13 Florida 81, South Carolina 66: KeVaughn Allen scored 26 points for the host Gators.

Devin Robinson added 14 points for Florida, which locked

up one of the top four seeds in the Southeastern Conference Tournament.

No. 14 Purdue 74, Penn St. 70 (OT): Ryan Cline scored six of his 11 points in overtime to lift the visiting Boilermakers.

Cline hit consecutive three-pointers to secure his team’s sixth straight win in a game the Boilermakers led for just 9:16.

No. 25 Wichita St. 109, Evansville 83: Shaq Morris had 18 points, Connor Frankamp and Markis McDuffie added 13 apiece for the host Shockers in their return to the Top 25.

Landry Shamet added 12 points and Darral Willis Jr. had 11 for Wichita State (26-4, 16-1 Missouri Valley), which finally elbowed its way into the poll this week for the sixth straight season.

Toews’ 5-point night leads Blackhawks over rival Wild

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The relatively slow start to the season for Jonathan Toews has been buried by his recent surge.

The captain is in prime form at the right time for the Blackhawks, reminding the Minnesota Wild that their postseason path will likely lead to Chicago.

Toews had three goals and two assists, and the Blackhawks beat the rival Wild 5-3 on Tuesday night for their second win over the Western Conference leaders in less than two weeks.

“Johnny’s done so many things for us,” Chicago coach Joel Quenneville said. “He’s an amazing player with competitiveness you’re never going to find. What a great leader and a great captain.”

Toews notched his fourth career hat trick on an empty-netter with 1:02 left to stave off a spirited rally by the Wild, who began a franchise-record eight-game homestand on Feb. 8 with a 4-3 overtime loss to the Blackhawks. Toews had a goal and two assists in that one and has 37 points in 35 career games against Minnesota.

“We always look at that team, especially with the way they’re playing, as a measuring stick right now,” said Toews, who has 20 points in his last 12 games. “Our respect level for what they can do is at an all-time high, and we know it’s going to take a heck of an effort to beat them.”

Toews’ wing men Nick Schmaltz and Richard Panik had the other goals, giving the Blackhawks 34 goals in their last eight games and four five-goal outputs in their last five games. The first line totaled nine points, which rendered the shutdown of Patrick Kane and his line moot.

“It makes it tough. That’s why they’ve won the Cup three times. It feels like when one’s not going, the other is going,” said Zach Parise, whose blind redirect of a shot by Marco Scandella brought the Wild within 3-2 after Toews beat Mikko Koivu on a faceoff to set up Schmaltz for a wrist shot that Devan Dubnyk never saw just 33 seconds into the third period.

Mikael Granlund had two

power-play goals, the second of which brought the Wild within 4-3 before Ryan Suter just missed the tying goal with an attempt that hit the crossbar. Between the goals by Parise and Granlund, though, was the tap in by Toews made possible by a slick behind-the-net spin by Schmaltz that produced a perfect pass to the edge of the crease.

“He just wasn’t getting the bounces there at the start of the year. He’s always worked so hard, so you knew at some point the tides were going to change for him,” Schmaltz said.

The game was played in front of the largest crowd of the season in Minnesota, an overflow paid attendance of 19,333.

Canadiens 3, Rangers 2 (SO): At New York, Paul Byron scored in the fifth round of the shootout to give coach Claude Julien his first win in his second stint with Montreal.

Penguins 3, Hurricanes 1: Sidney Crosby scored the go-ahead goal on a deflection in the second period, and visiting Pittsburgh beat Carolina.

Flames 6, Predators 5 (OT):

Mark Giordano scored 43 seconds into overtime, and visiting Calgary edged Nashville in a crucial game between teams holding the Western Conference’s wild cards.

Senators 2, Devils 1: Craig Anderson made 29 saves and visiting Ottawa beat New Jersey despite playing without three of its top forwards.

Kings 2, Avalanche 1: At Denver, Trevor Lewis scored the go-ahead goal with a slick move in the second period, Peter Budaj stopped 24 shots and Darryl Sutter moved into a tie for most wins as coach of Los Angeles.

Maple Leafs 5, Jets 4 (OT): Jake Gardiner scored at 2:29 of overtime to lift host Toronto over Winnipeg.

Islanders 3, Red Wings 1: Calvin de Haan was credited with a go-ahead goal that caromed off an opponent late in the second period and visiting New York beat Detroit.

Lightning 4, Oilers 1: Ondrej Palat scored twice and Nikita Kucherov had a goal and three assists to lead host Tampa Bay over Edmonton.