

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## US troops return fire at fighters in Syria

BY CHAD GARLAND

*Stars and Stripes*

American troops returned fire after being shot at by militiamen and civilians in northeastern Syria on Wednesday, the U.S. military said, in a fight that the Assad regime said left one civilian dead.

One civilian was also wounded after Syrians loyal to President Bashar Assad tried to block a convoy of several American vehicles at an army checkpoint near the town of Qamishli, state media and observers reported.

"After Coalition troops issued a series of warnings and de-escalation attempts, the patrol came under small arms fire from unknown individuals," said Col. Myles B. Caggins III, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition that is aiding local Kurdish and Arab forces battling Islamic State.

The Americans defended themselves, Caggins said in a statement posted online. The statement did not say whether anyone was killed or injured, but a later statement said one American was slightly wounded and has returned to duty.

"The situation was de-escalated and is under investigation," Caggins said. "The

Coalition patrol returned to base."

The U.S. patrol was "besieged" by a crowd of both civilians and armed militiamen who "fired in the air," the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported, citing local sources. The Observatory maintains a network of activists on the ground.

After the U.S. forces fired "smoke bombs," they opened fire, the Observatory said, but it was unclear whether the person killed was a civilian or militia member.

U.S. jets ripped through the air above the villages after the incident, the Observatory reported. Photos and videos circulated on social media show an F-15 fighter jet firing a flare over the area.

The man killed was a civilian from Khirbet Ammu village, Syria's state-run SANA news agency said. Four American vehicles were damaged, it said, and five more were sent as reinforcements.

A cellphone video from the scene shows American troops standing outside several Oshkosh M-ATVs on a rural road and beside a concrete building. The video was posted to Twitter by Syrian Kurdish journalist Kamiran Sadoun, who said regime supporters attacked first.

A second video, posted to Twitter by journalist Mohammed Hassan, shows the same area, where Hassan says one U.S. vehicle was "destroyed." Syrian and Russian forces and "a lot of civilians" gathered, and the Syrian checkpoint was emptied, he reported. Hasan later tweeted photos of an F-15 fighter jet firing a flare over the area.

A Russian convoy arrived on the scene, apparently to defuse tensions, the Observatory reported. Moscow backs Assad in Syria's civil war, now in its ninth year.

A top American diplomat has warned of increased complexity in northeastern Syria, where U.S. troops are deployed and have had "minor dustups" with Russian patrols. The Americans occupy austere outposts in the provinces of Hassekeh, where Wednesday's incident took place, and Deir al-Zour, where Turkey has also entered the fray.

U.S. troops withdrew from northern Syria in October, ahead of a Turkish incursion to fight Kurdish forces that Ankara views as terrorists. Turkey backs rebel forces in the country but also conducts joint patrols with Russia.

## Sanders edges past Buttigieg in NH primary

*Associated Press*

MANCHESTER, N.H. — Bernie Sanders won New Hampshire's presidential primary, edging moderate rival Pete Buttigieg and scoring the first clear victory in the Democratic Party's chaotic 2020 nomination fight.

In his Tuesday night win, the 78-year-old Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist, beat back a strong challenge from the 38-year-old former mayor of South Bend, Ind. The dueling Democrats represent different generations, see divergent paths to the nomination and embrace conflicting

visions of America's future.

As Sanders and Buttigieg celebrated, Amy Klobuchar scored an unexpected third-place finish that gives her a road out of New Hampshire as the primary season moves on to the string of state-by-state contests that lie ahead.

Elizabeth Warren and Joe Biden posted disappointing fourth and fifth place finishes, respectively, and were on track to finish with zero delegates from the state.

The New Hampshire vote gives new clarity to a Democratic contest shaping up to be a battle between two men separated by four decades

in age and clashing political ideologies. Sanders is a leading progressive voice, having spent decades demanding substantial government intervention in health care and other sectors of the economy. Buttigieg has pressed for more incremental change, preferring to give Americans the option of retaining their private health insurance while appealing to Republicans and independents who may be dissatisfied with President Donald Trump.

After a chaotic beginning to primary voting last week in Iowa, Democrats hoped New Hampshire would help give shape to their urgent quest to

pick someone to take on Trump in November. At least three candidates dropped out in the wake of weak finishes Tuesday night: moderate Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet, former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick and political newcomer Andrew Yang, who attracted a small but loyal following over the past year.

Sanders and Buttigieg were on track to win the same number of New Hampshire delegates with most of the vote tallied, with Klobuchar a few behind. Warren, Biden and the rest of the field were shut out, failing to reach the 15% threshold needed for delegates.

# Trump gives limited approval for Taliban deal

*The Washington Post*

American and Taliban negotiators were meeting Wednesday in Doha, Qatar, following a conditional decision from President Donald Trump to sign a peace deal with the militants, according to officials.

One U.S. official and an Afghan official briefed on the matter Wednesday said that Trump gave his conditional approval to sign a peace deal with the Taliban if the insurgents can demonstrate their commitment to reducing violence in Afghanistan.

"Trump has endorsed the deal and said it must be signed," the Afghan official said, explaining that when Secretary

of State Mike Pompeo called Afghan leaders Tuesday, he said the peace talks "deadlock" had been broken.

For months, U.S. negotiators have demanded a reduction in violence from the Taliban before formal talks can resume. Taliban negotiators presented a violence reduction proposal in January that would have ceased attacks in cities and highways. But it was unclear how long it would last and if it would apply to the Afghan military as well as U.S. military personnel.

After weeks of back and forth, American and Taliban negotiators have reached an agreement on how exactly vio-

lence will be reduced and for how long, according to the Afghan official. He did not provide further details, however. People knowledgeable about the negotiations said that the reduction would probably be seven to 10 days.

The State Department, in a statement, said that "U.S. talks with the Taliban in Doha continue around the specifics of a reduction in violence."

Pompeo told Afghan leaders in phone calls Tuesday that "notable progress" had been made in the peace talks. Afghan government officials have previously said a ceasefire is a precondition to talks with the Taliban, but both Af-

ghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah expressed optimism about a potential "reduction in violence," after their separate calls with Pompeo.

Both leaders, however, indicated in statements on Twitter that no final agreement had been reached.

One person knowledgeable about the negotiations cautioned that it remains unclear what the status of any signed U.S.-Taliban agreement would be if violence resumed after the agreed reduction period, or if promised talks between the militants and the Afghan government did not succeed or even begin.

## SIGAR: Measuring progress is difficult

BY STEVE BEYNON  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, told Congress on Tuesday that measuring progress on America's longest war is virtually impossible with even the most basic facts trapped behind an ever-expanding umbrella of secrecy.

"Every time we find something that looks like it's going negative, it gets classified ... Most of the [methods] of measuring success are now classified," he said in testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee.

Sopko said that it is impossible to gauge whether Afghanistan's government could keep order in its country if the U.S. military pulled out because the capabilities of Afghanistan's army and police force are unknown.

"One question we would like to ask the Afghans is how many people [they] control and how

much territory, and that's now not relevant, apparently ... It's all secret, classified," he told the Senate panel. "\$64 billion has gone to training and assisting the Afghan military, and I can't tell you or the American people [how capable they are]. That's in part because we allow the Afghan government to classify what I can tell you and tell the taxpayer. How many Afghan soldiers do we have? We're still trying to figure out how many we're paying for. How many Afghan police are there, really? We don't know."

The ineffectiveness and pervasive corruption in Afghanistan's army and police have long been a top concern for U.S. military leaders. Sopko has been a bullhorn on Capitol Hill, raising the alarm of incompetence and bureaucratic failures from the U.S. and Afghanistan governments for the past 18 years of war, which has killed roughly 2,400 American troops, including two Green Berets who died last week in combat.

## Military reduces efforts against Sahel extremists

*Associated Press*

JOHANNESBURG — The U.S. military has switched from trying to degrade Islamic extremist groups in West Africa's sprawling Sahel region to merely trying to contain them as their deadly threat increases, a new U.S. government report says.

The quarterly report by the inspectors general for the Pentagon, State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development released this week is the first to be unclassified as interest surges in the military's activities in Africa.

Top concerns in Africa include the fast-growing threat from multiple extremist groups in the Sahel region just south of the Sahara Desert and the enduring threat by the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab in Somalia, which killed three Americans in an attack against U.S. forces in Kenya last month.

Consistent pressure on extremist groups is needed to weaken them, the report says, citing Defense Secretary Mark

Esper, who has compared it to "mowing the lawn." That need, along with the often slow development of local partners' militaries, "could require ongoing commitment of U.S. military resources," the report adds.

The report also says that U.S. Africa Command has expressed concerns to the Pentagon's inspector general that some resources will be moved from Somalia to Libya, where a conflict between rival governments has drawn the attention of powers like Russia and Turkey.

Extremist groups linked to Islamic State and al-Qaida in West Africa "are neither degraded nor contained," the new report warns, citing AFRICOM.

The new U.S. military strategy has changed from trying to degrade, or reduce the effectiveness, of those extremist groups in the Sahel to trying to keep them from growing their membership and spreading into new areas, AFRICOM told the Pentagon inspector general in the quarter ending Dec. 31.



## 2 troops are arrested on Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE  
AND AYA ICHIHASHI  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — An Army sergeant first class and a Marine corporal were picked up by Japanese police over the weekend in separate alcohol-related offenses.

A resident of the Miyagi section of Chatan town summoned police at 3:38 a.m. Sunday after hearing a commotion and catching sight of Sgt. 1st Class Jonathon Levi Sweeney, 30, carrying away the resident's kayak, Okinawa Police deputy chief Hirotohi Iha said Wednesday. The kayak was kept by the front door.

It was unclear Wednesday where Sweeney is stationed.

Police found him on the street with the kayak and arrested him, Iha said.

"The suspect said he does not remember stealing the kayak," Iha said.

Sweeney's blood alcohol content after his arrest measured 0.12%, four times Japan's legal limit for driving, Iha said.

Police on Monday referred a theft charge against Sweeney to the Naha District Public Prosecutors Office, Iha said. He was released that day.

In an unrelated incident, Marine Cpl. Wilfredo De Jesus Romero, 20, assigned to Camp Hansen, was arrested in Kin town at 1:50 a.m. Saturday after allegedly trespassing on the roof of an off-base home, police said Wednesday.

The owner of the two-story home heard noises coming from the roof, looked and found Romero, an Ishikawa Police deputy chief said. Some government officials in Japan customarily speak on condition of anonymity.

Romero told police he wanted to "see the night view," the spokesman said. His blood alcohol content after his arrest measured 0.12%.

Police released Romero on Sunday and referred a trespassing charge against him to prosecutors, the police spokesman said.

# Trump wants DOD to review conduct of witness Vindman

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump suggested Tuesday that the Pentagon should review the conduct of a former White House national security aide who played a central role in the Democrats' impeachment case and potentially consider disciplinary action against him.

Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, who, until last week, was detailed by the Pentagon to the White House, testified before the House impeachment panel that Trump inappropriately pushed Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter.

Vindman was ousted from his job on the White House Nation-

al Security Council on Friday, just two days after the Senate acquitted Trump on abuse of power and obstruction of justice charges. He is to be reassigned by the Pentagon. His twin brother, Lt. Col. Yevgeny Vindman, who worked as an ethics lawyer at the NSC, was also ousted from his job and was re-assigned to the Army General Counsel's Office.

Trump has already been sharply criticized for pushing out Alexander Vindman and others who crossed him in the impeachment hearings.

Asked whether he wanted to see Vindman face discipline, Trump said that military officials "can handle him any way they want," but also suggested that he expected commanders

to review the decorated, 20-year officer's conduct.

"That's going to be up to the military," Trump said. "We'll have to see. They are certainly, I imagine, going to take a look at that."

Robert O'Brien, national security adviser, said later Tuesday that Alexander Vindman was not asked to leave his White House job in retaliation for his testimony in the Democrats' impeachment case.

"There's absolutely no retaliation with respect to the Vindmans as far as impeachment goes," O'Brien said at an event hosted by the Atlantic Council. "But the president is entitled to a staff that he has confidence in and that he believes will execute his policy."

## Air Force flies 2 B-52s, MC-130J tanker along Taiwan Strait after Chinese drills

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS  
*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Air Force flew two B-52 bombers and an MC-130J Commando II tanker along the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday morning after Chinese naval and air forces flew over the island twice this week, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense said.

The aircraft flew north to south along the airspace over the Taiwan Strait and were "closely monitored," the defense ministry said in a statement Wednesday.

Air Force officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

The 110-mile-wide strait separates mainland China from Taiwan, which Beijing regards as its own. The U.S. considers Taiwan's status unsettled, but adheres to the "One China" policy, acknowledging that Beijing considers Taiwan part of China.

However, the Taiwan Relations Act provides a framework for the U.S. to aid the self-governing island's defense.

The flyover comes after China held back-to-back air drills near Taiwan this week.

On Sunday, China held a "combat-readiness patrol," sending bombers, jet fighters and early warning aircraft flying through the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait, a Chinese Defense Ministry statement said Sunday. Several destroyers and frigates were also involved in the exercise.

"The Chinese military's combat-ready patrol is completely legitimate and is the necessary action taken to address the current security situation across the Taiwan Strait and safeguard China's sovereignty," the Chinese Defense Ministry statement said.

On Monday, China held joint naval and air drills in the waters off the southeastern coast of Taiwan, including air-to-

ground assault and fire support exercises, a Defense Ministry statement Tuesday said.

Chinese fighter jets during the Monday exercise crossed the "middle line" of the Taiwan Strait, edging closer to Taiwan than mainland China, a report by China's state-run newspaper Global Times said Tuesday.

Chinese military expert Song Zhongping told Global Times that the demonstrations "are not only warnings to Taiwan secessionists, but also demonstrations of [People's Liberation Army] capabilities to solve the Taiwan question by force."

Song added that the Chinese drills aimed to sharpen skills "useful in potential battles against Taiwan's military force," the Global Times said.

The drills come a month after Tsai Ing-wen was reelected Taiwan's president on the promise of preserving the island's sovereignty, after Chinese leader Xi Jinping described unification as "inevitable."

# China reports drop in new virus cases

Associated Press

BEIJING — China on Wednesday reported another drop in the number of new cases of a viral infection and 97 more deaths, pushing the total dead past 1,100 as postal services worldwide said delivery was being affected by the cancellation of many flights to China.

The National Health Commission said 2,015 new cases had been reported over the last 24 hours, declining for a second day. The total number of cases in mainland China reached 44,653, although many experts

say a large number of others infected have gone uncounted.

The additional deaths raised the mainland toll to 1,113. Two people have died elsewhere, one in Hong Kong and one in the Philippines.

In the port city of Tianjin, just southeast of Beijing, a cluster of cases has been traced to a department store in Baodi district. One-third of Tianjin's 104 confirmed cases are in Baodi, the Xinhua state news agency reported.

A salesperson working in the store's small home appliance section became the first individual in the cluster to be diag-

nosed on Jan. 31, Xinhua said. The store was already closed at that point, then disinfected on Feb. 1. Nevertheless, several more diagnoses soon followed.

The next to have their infections confirmed were also salespeople at the store. They had not visited Wuhan recently and, with the exception of one married couple, the patients worked in different sections of the store and did not know one another, according to Xinhua.

Japan's Health Ministry said that 39 new cases have been confirmed on a cruise ship quarantined at Yokohama, bringing the total to 174 on the

Diamond Princess.

And in Singapore, the bank DBS on Wednesday cleared a downtown office and told some 300 employees to work from home after one of its staff was infected with the virus.

"We are also currently conducting detailed contact tracing with all employees and other parties that the infected person may have come into contact with," DBS said.

The U.S. Postal Service said that it was "experiencing significant difficulties" in dispatching letters, parcels and express mail to China, including Hong Kong and Macau.

## Trial team quits Stone case over sentencing dispute

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The four lawyers who prosecuted Roger Stone quit the case after the Justice Department overruled them and said it would take the extraordinary step of lowering the amount of prison time it would seek for President Donald Trump's longtime ally and confidant.

The departures on Tuesday raised immediate questions over whether Trump, who earlier in the day had blasted the original sentencing recommendation as "very horrible and unfair," had at least indirectly exerted his will on a Justice Department that he often views as an arm of the White House.

The department insisted the decision to

undo the sentencing recommendation was made Monday night — before Trump's tweet — and prosecutors had not spoken to the White House about it. Even so, the departures of the entire trial team broke open a simmering dispute over the punishment of a Trump ally whose case has long captured the Republican president's attention.

The four attorneys — Aaron Zelinsky and Adam Jed, who were early members of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia team, Michael Marando and Jonathan Kravis — comprised the entire Justice Department trial team that won convictions against Stone last fall. Each had signed onto a Monday sentencing memo that rec-

ommended between seven and nine years in prison for Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress, witness tampering and obstructing the House investigation into whether the Trump campaign coordinated with Russia to tip the 2016 election. None lent their names to a Tuesday memo that called the original recommendation excessive.

The departures leave in limbo the resolution of a case that was one of the signature prosecutions of Mueller's team and that cut to the heart of his mission — to determine whether the Trump team had access to nonpublic information about Democratic emails hacked by Russian operatives and provided to WikiLeaks.

## Actor Jussie Smollett faces 6 new charges in Chicago

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Actor Jussie Smollett was indicted Tuesday for a second time on charges of lying to police about a racist and anti-gay attack he allegedly staged on himself in downtown Chicago, renewing a divisive criminal case that drew worldwide attention last year.

The indictment came from a special prosecutor who was appointed after Cook County prosecutors dropped the same charges last March.

The new charges were sure to reignite many of the tensions that surrounded Smollett a year ago. When his claims first emerged, he drew a groundswell of support from fans and celebrities and gave an emotional television interview about the attack.

The case came to reflect the polarized state of political discourse in America. Many Democrats initially called it a shocking instance of Trump-era racism and hate, while Republicans depicted it as yet

another example of liberals rushing to judgment and disparaging the president's supporters as bigots.

Special prosecutor Dan Webb said in a statement that Smollett faces six felony counts of disorderly conduct, charges that stem from four separate false reports that he gave to police in which he contended he was a victim of a hate crime "knowing that he was not the victim of a crime."

The statement immediately raised questions about county

prosecutors' decision to drop the charges and made it clear that those prosecutors had not adequately explained to special prosecutors why they did so. But Webb stressed that he had reached no conclusions about whether anyone involved in the case had engaged in any wrongdoing.

Smollett, who is black and gay, was originally charged with disorderly conduct in February 2019 for allegedly staging the attack and lying about it to investigators.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Schools addresses Nazi flag seen in window

**MD** FREDERICK — Officials for a public school in Maryland are investigating after a Nazi flag was pictured hanging in a classroom window.

Witnesses saw the flag while attending a basketball game at Governor Thomas Johnson High School in Frederick and photos of it quickly spread online, news outlets reported.

The Nazi flag was used in a World War II history class and left hanging in the window, visible to the outside, Frederick County Public Schools superintendent Theresa R. Alban said in a statement obtained by news outlets.

Alban said officials will “take appropriate action” to figure out what led up to the flag being hung there.

## Man wins big lottery prize for a second time

**NC** MORGANTON — Lottery luck has smiled on a North Carolina man for the second time in seven years.

Donald Hildebran won \$250,000 after buying four 20X The Cash scratch-off tickets at a convenience store in Morganton, the North Carolina Education Lottery said in a news release.

It wasn’t the first time Hildebran has hit it big in the lottery. In 2013, he won \$200,000 in the Extreme Cash game.

Hildebran, a retiree from Connelly Springs, told lottery officials he spent some of his first prize on a beach trip and plans to do the same with his new prize.

“I’m going fishing,” he told lottery officials. “I’m going to the beach!”

## Woman accused of stalking former boss

**FL** WEST PALM BEACH — A 45-year-old Florida woman is accused of stalking and harassing her former boss in an effort to get her job back, police said.

Brygida Trzaska was arrested on charges of harassing phone calls and stalking, West Palm Beach police said.

After being fired in February 2019 following a dispute over vacation time and sick leave, Trzaska made multiple phone calls to her former boss, sent emails and even waited outside the victim’s home for a chance to speak to her, the Palm Beach Post reported.

Police said the victim received several emails from Trzaska between February and June, wanting to address the termination.

Investigators found that Trzaska called the victim 339 times between Dec. 14 and Jan. 28.

## Massive firework shot breaks world record

**CO** STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — A massive firework launched over a Colorado ski resort town has set a record for the world’s largest aerial firework.

The 2,800-pound shell flew 2,200 feet above the Steamboat Springs Winter Carnival before it burst, turning the sky bright red and drawing gasps from the crowd, The Steamboat Pilot & Today reported.

Tim Borden, of Steamboat Springs, headed the team that developed the firework over seven years. Borden first attempted to set the world record last year, but failed when the shell exploded inside the mortar, the newspaper reported.

## Neighbors try to stop mauling by pack of dogs

**FL** SPRING HILL — Neighbors used sticks, pieces of a gutter and a lawn chair in an attempt to stop a pack of dogs from mauling a Florida woman, who was critically injured in the attack that lasted at least five minutes, authorities said.

The attack only stopped when firefighters arrived at the home in Spring Hill and used their equipment to disperse the dogs, the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office said in a news release.

The woman, who wasn’t identified, was in critical condition at a hospital.

The woman was in her backyard with her small dog when four or five dogs in a neighboring house saw them through a sliding glass door that wasn’t properly closed, authorities said. The neighbor’s dogs escaped from the house and attacked them.

## Rancher pleads guilty to poisoning 6 bald eagles

**ND** BISMARCK — A South Dakota rancher has pleaded guilty to federal charges in the deaths of six protected bald eagles who were poisoned by some misapplied pesticide on his property.

David Meyer, 58, supervised the misapplication of 39,000 pounds of the pesticide Rozol on 5,400 acres of land on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Corson County, according to prosecutors.

More than a dozen workers told investigators in 2016 that they were supposed to put the poison into prairie dog holes but got sloppy and put it near the holes.

Six bald eagles died after ingesting the poison, according to the federal Environmental

Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

## K9 finds 220 pounds of pot in 2 traffic stops

**MO** COLUMBIA — The Missouri State Highway Patrol asked “Who’s a good boy?” in a tweet after one of its dogs sniffed out about 220 pounds of marijuana during two Interstate 70 traffic stops.

The Columbia Daily Tribune reported that Rony’s expert nose landed a Georgia man and two people from Virginia behind bars after they were caught with the drugs while traveling through Cooper County in central Missouri.

## 3 charged with theft from youth program

**TN** MADISONVILLE — Three people have been charged with stealing \$30,000 from a youth clay target shooting program in Tennessee, authorities said.

Tennessee Bureau of Investigation agents began investigating theft of money from the 4-H Scholastic Clay Target Program in Monroe County in December 2015, the state police agency said in a news release.

During the investigation, agents found that Mary Ellen Sellin, Timothy Scott Sellin, and Tony Aram Millsaps stole about \$30,000 from the program over several years, the TBI said.

Mary Ellen Sellin handled funds for the organization, while Timothy Sellin and Millsaps served as coaches for the program, the TBI said.

All three turned themselves in to authorities on the theft charges this week.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

# MLB trying to remove stain of scandal

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Baseball returns to the field this week when pitchers, catchers and cheaters report to spring training.

Fans await the annual sunny scenes of favorites stretching on bright green grass in Florida and Arizona.

This year the players bring along dark clouds of scandal — the 2017 World Series champion Houston Astros have been tainted by their sign-stealing scam and the 2018 champion Boston Red Sox have been accused of similar subversion.

Teams hope once workouts start, the stain will fade.

“I think those story lines will weave in and out, but that spring training is that juncture for individual fan bases to be optimistic about what the season ahead holds and it shifts back to that,” Toronto Blue Jays President Mark Shapiro said. “There’s a natural kind of rhythm to spring training that diverts to the positive stories.”

But first, confessions?

Some regard baseball’s blemish from sign stealing as vivid as the acne on the backs of ste-

roids-swelled sluggers of the 1990s and early 2000s.

None of the current members of the Astros have publicly expressed contrition for breaking prohibitions against using a video camera to swipe signs from opposing catchers in 2017 and 2018. Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said spring training might be the appropriate time for a group mea culpa because fessing up individually during the offseason “could be sort of a treacherous road to go down.”

Former Astros pitcher Mike Fiers, now with Oakland, sparked the scandal in November when he went public in an interview with *The Athletic*. He took down 10% of major league managers and became for some an MVP — Most Virtuous Player.

Houston manager AJ Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow were suspended for the season by Major League Baseball on Jan. 13, and the pair were fired by the Astros later that day. Manfred’s conclusions led to the departures of Boston manager Alex Cora, the Astros’ bench coach in 2017, and new

New York Mets manager Carlos Beltran, Houston’s senior player during the title run.

A third of the teams changed managers, including the Mets twice. Milwaukee’s Craig Counsell, hired in May 2015, already is the National League’s senior skipper. New faces include Dusty Baker (Astros), Joe Girardi (Phillies), Gabe Kapler (Giants), Joe Maddon (Angels), Mike Matheny (Royals), Luis Rojas (Mets), David Ross (Cubs), Derek Shelton (Pirates) and Jayce Tingler (Padres), with the Red Sox yet to announce Cora’s successor.

Baker, at 70 the oldest big league manager, is tasked with keeping the Astros on track to become the first team to win 100 or more games in four straight seasons. He also will try to steady a core branded as villains by players and fans in other cities.

“You got to go forward and make sure that it doesn’t happen again,” Baker said. “It certainly is not going to happen on my watch here, and I don’t foresee it happening ever again because this has been an embarrassment for a lot of people.”

Cora’s punishment was delayed by Manfred pending MLB’s investigation into the Red Sox, which could conclude this week. Boston’s turmoil extended to the trade market, with a deal that would send former MVP Mookie Betts and former Cy Young Award winner David Price to the Los Angeles Dodgers as part of a three-team trade involving Minnesota. The delay in the deal being finalized prompted criticism from the players’ association, still smarting over the grievance loss of Chicago Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant, who unsuccessfully claimed the team violated the labor contract by delaying his big league debut until the day his free-agent eligibility would be delayed a year.

Players who switched teams included pitcher Gerrit Cole (\$324 million from the Yankees), third baseman Anthony Rendon (\$245 million from the Angels), right-hander Zack Wheeler (\$118 million from the Phillies), third baseman Josh Donaldson (\$92 million from the Twins) and left-hander Madison Bumgarner (\$85 million from the Diamondbacks).

## Two Ohio State football players charged with rape

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Two Ohio State University football players were booked into jail early Wednesday on charges of rape and kidnapping, police said.

Police charged defensive players Amir Riep and Jahsen Wint, both 21, late Tuesday, *The Columbus Dispatch* reported. They are scheduled to be arraigned Thursday morning.

The woman told police she was hanging out with Riep at an apartment he shares with Wint on Feb. 4 when they began to engage in consensual sex, according to an affidavit. The woman stopped and told Riep she didn’t want to continue. Wint then entered the room

and asked if he could join.

Wint then allegedly grabbed the woman by her neck and raped her, she said in the affidavit. Riep held the woman down with his body while Wint forced oral sex. The woman pushed Wint away, according to the affidavit, but he again forced her to have oral sex.

After several minutes, they stopped and Riep told the woman that she needed to say what happened was “consensual on a video recording while laughing at her,” according to the affidavit. Riep then told the woman she needed to shower before driving her back to her home.

“We are aware that two of our students have been arrested and criminally charged,” Ohio

State spokesman Ben Johnson said in a statement to the Associated Press. “They have been suspended from all activities involving the football program. We will share more information when available.”

Riep is a 6-foot-1, 185-pound cornerback entering his senior season for Ohio State’s top-5 football program, while Wint is a 6-foot, 198-pound redshirt senior safety, according to court documents and the university’s athletics website.

**Spartans hire Tucker:** Mel Tucker has agreed to lead Michigan State’s football program, according to two people familiar with the decision.

The people spoke Wednesday morning to *The Associated Press* on condition of anonym-

ity because the hiring had not been announced. One person said the school’s governing board scheduled a meeting later in the day to approve the hire.

Tucker succeeds Mark Dantonio, the school’s all-time winningest coach, who retired less than two weeks ago.

Colorado hired Tucker in December 2018, and gave him a shot to run a program after he was Georgia defensive coordinator. He was given a five-year, \$14.75 million contract to lead the Buffaloes and they were 5-7 last season.

Tucker has ties to Michigan State because he was a graduate assistant at the school under Nick Saban in the late 1990s.



# Browns DE Garrett reinstated by NFL

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Myles Garrett is allowed to play and chase quarterbacks again after the NFL reinstated the Browns' star defensive end from his indefinite suspension for a vicious attack on Pittsburgh QB Mason Rudolph last season.

The league lifted its ban Wednesday on Garrett, who ripped off Rudolph's helmet and smashed him over the head with it during a Nov. 14 game on national television. Garrett missed Cleveland's final six games and his loss was a major

blow to the Browns, who went 2-4 without him, finished 6-10, fired coach Freddie Kitchens and saw general manager John Dorsey resign.

On Monday, Garrett met with Commissioner Roger Goodell and other league officials in the final step before he was cleared to return. He can participate in all of the Browns' offseason activities and that's a big relief as the team is undergoing another new start under coach Kevin Stefanski.

Garrett is cleared to return to all activities with the Browns.

"We welcome Myles back

to our organization with open arms," Browns vice president of football operations and GM Andrew Berry said. "We know he is grateful to be reinstated, eager to put the past behind him and continue to evolve and grow as a leader. We look forward to having his strong positive presence back as a teammate, player and person in our community."

Garrett did not release a statement, but he posted a meme on his Twitter account of a scene from the film "John Wick" with the subtitle: "But now yeah, I'M THINKING I'M

BACK!!!"

Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield offered his support, tweeting: "welcome back big fella!!!"

As the Browns were wrapping up a rare win over the Steelers in a Thursday night matchup, Garrett, the No. 1 overall draft pick in 2017, pulled down Rudolph after a pass attempt and the two wrestled on the ground. Rudolph tried to pull off Garrett's helmet but couldn't. Garrett ripped off Rudolph's helmet and swung and struck him with it, triggering a brawl between the teams.

## NHL roundup

### Panthers down Devils, snap three-game losing streak

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Florida's fourth line of Mike Matheson, Mark Pysyk and Noel Acciari each scored and accounted for eight points Tuesday as the Panthers snapped a three-game losing streak with a 5-3 defeat of the New Jersey Devils.

Frank Vatrano and Brett Connolly also scored as the Panthers won for only the second time (2-4-1) since returning from the All-Star break. Sam Montembeault had 25 saves in his first start since Nov. 24.

Jack Hughes, Kevin Rooney and Kyle Palmieri scored for the Devils, who saw their season-high six-game (3-0-3) point streak snapped. Louis Domingue made 28 saves in getting a start for MacKenzie Blackwood, who had shutouts in his last two starts.

**Sabres 3, Red Wings 2:** Sam Reinhart jammed in a loose puck for the go-ahead goal 57 seconds into the third period in host Buffalo's win over Detroit.

Marcus Johansson had a goal and an assist and Conor Sheary also scored in a game in which the Sabres overcame two one-goal deficits. Carter Hutton stopped 27 shots, and Buffalo

won for just the third time in nine (3-5-1) games.

**Maple Leafs 3, Coyotes 2 (OT):** Kasperii Kapanen scored 3:43 into overtime and host Toronto beat Arizona.

Zach Hyman had two goals in regulation for the Maple Leafs, and Alexander Kerfoot added two assists. Jack Campbell stopped 35 shots.

**Islanders 5, Flyers 3:** Ryan Pullock scored the tiebreaking goal with 41 seconds remaining and host New York recovered after giving up a three-goal lead and beat Philadelphia.

Josh Bailey, Jordan Eberle and Leo Komarov each had a goal and an assist, and Matt Martin also scored to help the Islanders win for the fifth time in eight games (5-1-2). Mathew Barzal had three assists.

**Rangers 4, Jets 1:** Chris Kreider scored twice and visiting New York snapped Winnipeg's three-game winning streak.

Ryan Strome and Mika Zibanejad each had a goal and assist for the Rangers.

**Wild 4, Golden Knights 0:** Kevin Fiala had a goal and two assists, and host Minnesota matched its season high with three power-play scores on the way to a win over Vegas.

Joel Eriksson Ek, Jared Spurgeon and Zach Parise scored with the man advantage, giving the Wild an NHL-leading 15 power-play goals in 33 opportunities over their last 11 games.

**Stars 4, Hurricanes 1:** Jamie Benn got his sixth career hat trick — despite putting only two pucks in the net — and host Dallas beat Carolina.

Benn scored the game's first goal in the first period, added a power-play tally in the second and was awarded his third with 1:19 to play when he was pulled down on the way to shooting at an empty net.

**Avalanche 3, Senators 0:** Mikko Rantanen scored in the first period following a terrific twirl move, Philipp Grubauer stopped 34 shots for his second shutout of the season and Colorado blanked Ottawa.

Valeri Nichushkin scored a power-play goal in the third for the Avalanche, who've won five straight.

**Oilers 5, Blackhawks 3:** Leon Draisaitl had a goal and three assists, Kailer Yamamoto scored twice and host Edmonton won without captain Connor McDavid in the lineup.

Riley Sheahan and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins also scored for

the Oilers (30-20-6), who will be without McDavid for two to three weeks because of a left quadriceps injury.

**Blues-Ducks ppd.:** St. Louis defenseman Jay Bouwmeester collapsed on the bench during a break in play in the first period, prompting his team's game in Anaheim to be postponed.

Bouwmeester appeared to be awake and alert as he was being transported out of the arena to a hospital.

Teammates immediately called for medical help after Bouwmeester slumped over with 7:50 left in the first period. He appeared to be grabbing a drink of water when he began to slowly fall. Emergency medical personnel rushed to the Blues bench.

After a couple of minutes, the 36-year-old Bouwmeester was taken out on a stretcher through a tunnel next to the Blues bench and transported to a hospital.

Ducks and Blues players gathered to see what was wrong before Bouwmeester was taken away. The teams then went to their dressing rooms, and the game was called off a few minutes later tied at 1.

## NBA roundup

# Rockets, Harden end Celtics' win streak

Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden scored 42 points, Russell Westbrook had 36 and the Houston Rockets snapped Boston's seven-game win streak with a 116-105 victory over the Celtics on Tuesday night.

Houston broke it open with a 15-2 run that made it 116-98 with about two minutes left. Harden scored six points during the decisive stretch, and Danuel House had five.

Boston had two turnovers and missed numerous shots to allow the Rockets to turn the close game into a one where coach Mike D'Antoni cleared the bench for the last minute with the game well in hand.

Harden had eight rebounds and seven assists, and Westbrook finished with 10 rebounds and five assists.

"Harden was great ... and Westbrook was great," Boston coach Brad Stevens said. "Those guys are two of the best in the world and they showed it again tonight."

Gordon Hayward had 20 points in the Celtics' first loss since Jan. 26.

**76ers 110, Clippers 103:** Ben Simmons had 26 points, 12 rebounds and 10 as-

sists, pushing the host Sixers to the win.

Joel Embiid also scored 26 points and Tobias Harris added 17 points and 12 boards for Philadelphia, which has the NBA's best home record at 25-2. Josh Richardson scored 17 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter.

Kawhi Leonard led Los Angeles with 30 points, and reserve Landry Shamet scored 19 against his former team.

Richardson nailed his third three-point shot of the quarter to give the Sixers a 102-94 lead with 4:44 left. Then he scored on a driving left-handed layup and made the free throw to complete the three-point play, extending the lead to 11.

**Pelicans 138, Trail Blazers 117:** Zion Williamson scored a season-high 31 points, powering host New Orleans to the victory.

Playing 28 minutes in just his ninth NBA game, Williamson used his 6-foot-6, 285-pound frame, quick feet and explosive vertical to have his way with every defender Portland tried against him.

JJ Redick scored 20 and Josh Hart had 17 points for the Pelicans, who trailed by as

many as 16 in the first quarter before taking command en route to a third straight victory.

Trail Blazers star Damian Lillard scored 20 points — less than half of his 42-point average in his previous 10 games.

**Wizards 126, Bulls 114:** Bradley Beal scored 30 points, and host Washington held off Zach LaVine and Chicago for the victory.

Rui Hachimura added 20 points for the Wizards, who won for the fourth time in six games.

LaVine scored 19 of his 41 points in the fourth quarter as the Bulls whittled an 18-point deficit down to six points.

**Spurs 114, Thunder 106:** LaMarcus Aldridge had 25 points and 14 rebounds, and San Antonio won at Oklahoma City to stop a five-game slide.

Dejounte Murray also scored 25 points for the Spurs, who had dropped eight of 10 overall. Patty Mills had 20 points, and fellow reserve Derrick White finished with 17. Led by Aldridge and Murray, San Antonio made 25 of 27 foul shots.

## College basketball roundup

# San Diego State runs to 25-0 with rout of New Mexico

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The San Diego State Aztecs won the Mountain West Conference championship, were showered with confetti, cut down a net at Viejas Arena, doused coach Brian Dutcher with Gatorade and then reset their goals.

Just keep winning.

Junior forward Matt Mitchell had 22 points and 12 rebounds for his first career double-double and scored his 1,000th point for No. 4 San Diego State, which beat New Mexico 82-59 Tuesday night to win the MWC title and remain the nation's only undefeated team at 25-0.

"The hardest thing in basketball, obviously other than winning a Final Four, is winning a regular-season conference title, because you have to do it over the whole season," Dutcher said. "To have the

title outright already with four games to play is an incredible accomplishment.

"I told them in the locker room, now we have to get greedy," said Dutcher, who has won a Final Four, as Steve Fisher's assistant at Michigan in 1989. "We've got to try to win them all. It won't be easy. ... Four really hard games to go, but now that we have the title, we have to have another goal, and that goal has to be to have a perfect season. That will be the next step, to try to finish with a perfect season."

**No. 6 Dayton 81, Rhode Island 67:** Obi Toppin scored 22 points and led an opening 17-point spurt as the host Flyers dominated a matchup of the Toppin brothers and the Atlantic 10's top teams.

The teams brought double-digit winning streaks into a

chippy game that included seven technical fouls. Dayton (22-2, 11-0) got the better of it in every way, winning its 13th in a row.

Obi Toppin had a double-double with 10 rebounds and Trey Landers matched his career high with 14 rebounds.

**No. 9 Maryland 72, Nebraska 70:** Jalen Smith had 16 points and 13 rebounds, Eric Ayala scored 16 points and the host Terrapins extended their winning streak to seven games and remain alone atop the Big Ten. After Maryland (20-4, 10-3) let a 14-point lead dwindle to 71-70, Smith blocked a shot in the waning seconds and made a free throw on the other end.

**No. 12 Kentucky 78, Vanderbilt 64:** Tyrese Maxey scored 25 points and the visiting Wildcats rallied from their biggest halftime deficit of the

season (9 points).

**No. 13 Penn State 88, Purdue 76:** Mike Watkins matched his season high with 19 points and Seth Lundy added a career-high 18 to lift the visiting Nittany Lions.

**Michigan State 70, No. 22 Illinois 69:** All-Star guard Ayo Dosunmu crumbled to the floor clutching his left knee as the Spartans' Xavier Tillman threw down a huge dunk at the buzzer to lift his team to a road win.

**No. 25 LSU 82, Missouri 78:** Darius Days scored seven of his 20 points in the final five minutes as host LSU rallied to beat Missouri.

**Boise State 74, Air Force 57:** Justinian Jessup scored 18 points, including his team's first four-point play of the season, and Boise State won its 11th consecutive home game.