

STARS AND STRIPES®

Saturday, February 15, 2020

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Esper warns Europe of China's military rise

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Saturday issued a stark warning that allies in Europe must “wake up” to the threat posed by China’s rapid military advances, which will eventually make Beijing “the preeminent global military power.”

“It is essential that we, as an international community, wake up to the challenges presented by China’s manipulation of the long-standing international rules-based order,” Esper told an audience of global leaders at the annual Munich Security Conference.

Esper railed against China for intellectual property theft and using its economic heft as leverage against countries large and small. Esper also emphasized that when it comes to U.S. military strategy, countering China comes before all else.

“By 2035, the PRC intends to complete its military modernization, and by 2049, it seeks to dominate Asia as the preeminent global military power,” Esper said.

Dealing with China’s rise has been a focal point for the Pentagon. Washington has urged allies to take a tougher stance against Beijing and resist its attempts to extend influence in Europe with 5G tech-

nology that Washington says poses a security threat.

In Munich, Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo faced an audience with many skeptics who are worried about a weakening connection between the U.S. and Europe.

The angst was underscored by the theme of this year’s conference — “westlessness” — a word coined by organizers to describe a general sense of confusion among countries about how to deal with issues like the rise of China.

“Western societies and governments appear to have lost a common understanding of what it even means to be part of the West. ... it appears uncertain whether the West can come up with a joint strategy for a new era of great-power competition,” said the Munich Security Report, released as talks began.

Pompeo pushed back against the idea of “westlessness,” or a decline in American commitment to Europe. Pompeo rattled off a series of quotes in recent years made by European leaders claiming a crisis in the trans-Atlantic relationship.

He said the claims “don’t reflect reality.” “The death of the trans-Atlantic alliance is

grossly exaggerated,” Pompeo said. “The west is winning.”

Pompeo cited the U.S.’s upcoming Defender Europe exercise, one of the largest military drills on the continent since the Cold War, as an example of American backing of NATO.

Regarding Iran and China, “there is a common understanding about the threat,” Pompeo said, but he acknowledged there are tactical differences in how to deal with those threats.

What isn’t clear, however, is if the U.S. can bring key European countries over to its side in challenging China. The German economy relies heavily on exports to China and could be wary about taking a hard line on issues such as banning 5G Chinese technology for fear of economic repercussions.

French President Emmanuel Macron also has expressed skepticism about treating Beijing as an adversary.

In Munich, Macron said Europe should be more independent from the U.S. or at least find its own way to deal with emerging challenges like China. “My vision is a more sovereign and united Europe,” Macron said. “We are at a moment of truth for Europe.”

Esper says Taliban deal promising, not without risk

Associated Press

MUNICH — U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Saturday that a truce agreement between the United States and the Taliban that could lead to the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan is not without risk but “looks very promising.”

Ahead of a formal announcement of the seven-day “reduction in violence” deal, Esper said it was time to give peace a chance in Afghanistan through a political negotiation. He spoke a day after a senior U.S. official said the deal had been concluded and would take effect very soon.

Expectations are that agreement will be formally announced on Sunday and that the reduction in violence will begin on Monday, according to people familiar with the plan.

“So we have on the table right now a reduction in violence proposal that was negotiated between our ambassador and the Taliban,” Esper told an audience at the Munich Security Conference. “It looks very promising.”

“It’s my view as well that we have to give peace a chance, that the best if not the only way forward in Afghanistan is through a political agreement and that means taking some risk,” he said. “That means enabling our diplomats and that means working together with our partners and allies on the ground to affect such a thing.”

Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met on Friday in Munich with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who has been skeptical of the scheme, which, if successful, would see an end to attacks for seven days and then the signing of a U.S.-Taliban

peace deal. All-Afghan peace talks would then begin within 10 days as part of the plan, which envisions the phased withdrawal of U.S. forces over 18 months.

The U.S. has not agreed to suspend or end its counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, which have been focused mainly on an Islamic State affiliate, known as ISIS-K, and al-Qaida, said Pentagon spokeswoman Alyssa Farah, who was traveling with Esper.

“Under any agreement, General Miller retains the authorities necessary to protect U.S. national security interests, including the authorities and capabilities to strike ISIS-K and al-Qaida,” she said, referring to U.S. Gen Scott Miller, the commander of American and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Ghani has not yet spoken publicly about the agreement.

Pentagon finds \$6.5B in savings in 2019

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon's office of the chief management officer managed to find \$6.5 billion in savings at the Defense Department last year, the office announced recently, including selling "obsolete" weaponry to allied nations abroad, reforming information technology processes, and helping agencies change how contracts are structured.

The savings were diverted to support the military's readiness in other areas. Specifically, funds were reprogrammed for Army training exercises in Asia, upkeep on F-35 fighter jets operated by the Navy and Air Force, computer system

upgrades, and other initiatives.

The office of the chief management officer was created in 2018 to drive costs out of the Pentagon's supply chain and reform its business processes, a task that includes working with dozens of defense agencies to get a handle on \$2.7 trillion in assets, as one audit found. The first person to hold that position, Jay Gibson, left the job last year.

The department's newly-confirmed chief management officer, Lisa Hershman, says she views her office as "a startup within the largest, most entrenched bureaucracy in the world."

The Defense Department,

already the world's largest bureaucracy, has received sizable increases in funding since President Donald Trump took office in 2017. The president's most recent budget request keeps defense spending at roughly the same level as last year — meaning the department will have to look for savings if it wants to undertake ambitious new projects. The Pentagon already plans to divert \$3.83 billion from projects including aircraft purchases and military construction to pay for fencing along the U.S. border with Mexico.

Hershman's job has been to reform the Pentagon's business systems to drive out waste.

Much of that comes down to better leveraging the department's advantages, Hershman said. First and foremost is the bargaining power that comes with its massive scale.

"We need to better leverage our size and pay attention to not having disparate initiatives," Hershman said. "We can gain a lot of efficiency and effectiveness just by leveraging our buying power."

Dan Grazier, a former Marine Corps captain who now studies the defense spending at the Project On Government Oversight, a watchdog group, said the savings announced last week should be replicated elsewhere.

Threat not mentioned in memo on Soleimani strike

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A White House memo justifying the U.S. strike that killed Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani in early January makes no mention of an imminent threat, which was President Donald Trump's rationale for the attack.

The two-page memo made public by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Friday instead says the Soleimani strike was carried out in response to previous attacks and to deter Iran from conducting or supporting attacks in the future.

"Although the threat of further attack existed, recourse to the inherent right of self-defense was justified sufficiently by the series of attacks that preceded the January 2 strike," the memo reads.

Congressional Democrats, and some Republicans, were furious that Trump approved a deadly military attack that threatened to escalate tensions in an already strained region without consulting Congress. They cast doubt on whether

the White House had reacted to thwart an imminent threat.

"This official report directly contradicts the president's false assertion that he attacked Iran to prevent an imminent attack against United States personnel and embassies," said House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel, D-N.Y. "The administration's explanation in this report makes no mention of any imminent threat and shows that the justification the president offered to the American people was false, plain and simple."

A spokesman for the National Security Council said the White House had no further comment beyond the memo.

The letter appeared to confirm what Democrats had suspected almost from the start about the lack of a specific, immediate threat to U.S. forces or other personnel that would merit the killing of Soleimani and his traveling party almost immediately after he had arrived at the Baghdad airport. U.S. intelligence agencies have tracked Soleimani for years.

McCarthy: No probe into Vindman after testimony

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy said Friday that the service was not pursuing punishment for Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the former National Security Council staffer who testified during the impeachment case against President Donald Trump.

"There's no investigations of him," McCarthy said during an appearance at the National Press Club in Washington.

Trump suggested this week that the military should consider disciplining Vindman for his role in reporting details of a phone call last July between Trump and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky that was at the center of the impeachment proceedings. The Senate on Feb. 5 acquitted Trump of the charges against him, and two days later Vindman, the top Ukraine expert on the NSC, was removed from his job and escorted from the White House grounds.

Vindman has been moved to the Pentagon into a temporary role with the Army's headquarters, McCarthy said Friday. In the summer, when Vindman was initially scheduled to leave the NSC, he is expected to attend "a senior service college," the secretary said.

Trump on Tuesday accused of Vindman of reporting false information about the July 25 phone call between Trump and Zelensky. The president also accused the Army officer of leaking and "a lot of bad things."

"So we sent him on his way to a much different location, and the military can handle him anyway they want," Trump said, adding he believed the Pentagon would investigate Vindman.

Vindman's twin brother, Army Lt. Col. Yevgeny Vindman, was also removed Feb. 7 from his position as a lawyer on the National Security Council. Their lawyer, and several Democrats on Capitol Hill, accused the White House of retaliation for removing the brothers.

US Border agents to pursue migrants in 'sanctuary' cities

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal agents who patrol the U.S. border will deploy to “sanctuary” cities across the country where local jurisdictions are hindering stepped-up immigration enforcement, officials said Friday.

The deployment of Customs and Border Patrol agents, some with tactical training, to the interior of the country is unusual and represents another escalation in the confrontation between the Trump administration and the local jurisdictions that have set up roadblocks to immigration enforcement.

Acting Immigration and Customs Enforcement Director Matthew Albence said additional forces are needed because people without legal authorization to be in the country are being released from local jails in sanctuary cities and counties before his agents can take them into custody.

ICE then has to make “at large arrests” of these immigrants who have been released, Albence said in a statement announcing the move.

“This effort requires a significant amount of additional time and resources,” he said. “When sanctuary cities release these criminals back to the street, it increases the occurrence of preventable crimes, and more importantly, preventable victims.”

The acting director did not disclose when or where the agents would be deployed but an official, speaking on condition of anonymity to disclose details not provided in the statement, said they would include major sanctuary cities such as San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston and Detroit.

Albence also did not provide details on the specific types of agents being deployed, but the official said they would

come from varied U.S. locations and would include officers with tactical training that is typically intended to prepare them for potential confrontations with traffickers and other criminals.

Immigrant advocates dismissed the deployment as a political move by President Donald Trump to excite anti-immigration elements among his supporters and intimidate communities that have adopted sanctuary policies to ensure people cooperate with local law enforcement regardless of whether they are in the country illegally or not.

More than 700 counties have now declined to continue holding people sought by ICE and more than 160 have prohibited officers from even asking people about their immigration status, according to the Immigrant Legal Resource Center.

Trump aims to rev up his base at Daytona 500

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is out to rev up his appeal with a key voting demographic — NASCAR fans — as he takes in the Daytona 500 on Sunday.

NASCAR drivers may veer to the left during their trip around the oval racetrack, but their fans lean right, which helps explain the regularity with which GOP presidents have made their way to the track.

Trump will be the second sitting president to attend the Daytona 500, after George W. Bush in 2004. Like Trump, he also attended the race during a presidential election year. Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush also visited the track at Daytona but during races other than the 500.

This year, Trump will serve as grand marshal and give the command for drivers to start their engines.

Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman under George W. Bush, said the visit should appeal to Trump on two fronts.

“There’s a real sense of positive, overwhelming affirmation to hear the roar of the crowd. What politician doesn’t want that?” Fleischer said. “Secondly, there’s what I call the reverberation effect. People watching at home, who hear the roar of the crowd for a president, that can drive them toward some sense of approval or fondness or liking for the president.”

Just in case anyone misses the point, Trump’s reelection campaign will run a TV ad during the Fox broadcast of the race and fly an aerial banner near the speedway.

Trump scored a coup in 2016 when Brian France, then NASCAR’s chairman and chief executive, endorsed him in the presidential race.

Nev. offers diversity test for candidates

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — As the Democratic presidential race hurtles toward Nevada, candidates in the still-crowded field are jumping into their first test in a racially diverse state with solid union muscle and shaky plans for a presidential caucus.

Nevada has no obvious front-runner, though Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders heads into the contest on strong footing. The state has received only a sliver of the attention of the first two states on the primary calendar, Iowa and New Hampshire. Looking at the jumbled field, the state’s most powerful union decided to take a pass on endorsing a candidate, rather than make a divisive choice or risk picking a loser. Most of the state’s most prominent officials have stayed neutral.

The open race has every Democrat spending much of the next week searching for fortunes in the state’s working-class neighborhoods, union halls, casino convention halls and stuccoed suburbs. For Sanders and former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg, it’s a chance to prove their staying power after strong finishes in Iowa and

New Hampshire. For former Vice President Joe Biden and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, it could be a life preserver to rescue their bids after disappointing starts. For Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, it’s a chance to prove her third-place finish in New Hampshire wasn’t a fluke.

Candidates were making a get-out-the-vote push Saturday morning as early voting started, and they planned to attend a Saturday night fundraising gala for the Las Vegas-based Clark County Democratic Party. Several candidates are making the hourlong flight up to Reno, a city newly flush with tech money and California transplants, and are due back in Las Vegas on Wednesday for the ninth Democratic debate.

This year, with the results of Iowa’s caucuses muddled by technology and reporting problems, Nevada is under pressure to pull off a problem-free caucus. The Nevada State Democratic Party abandoned its original plans to use an app like the one that caused trouble in Iowa and has scrambled to come up with a new system to tabulate results.

China announces new anti-virus measures

Associated Press

BEIJING — China reported 143 virus deaths and a dip in new cases Saturday while the government announced new anti-disease measures as businesses reopen following sweeping controls that idled much of the economy.

Also Saturday, France reported Europe's first death from the new virus, a Chinese tourist from Hubei province, where the disease emerged in December. Meanwhile, the United States was preparing to fly home American passengers quarantined aboard a cruise ship in Japan.

China reported 2,641 new cases in the 24 hours through midnight Friday, raising the country's total to 66,492. Mainland China's death toll rose to 1,523.

The number of new cases was down from the 5,090 in the previous 24-hour period after authorities changed the basis for counting patients.

Numbers of new cases have fluctuated, fueling optimism the disease might be under control as well as warnings such hopes are premature.

The government suspended most access to Wuhan, the city at the center of the outbreak, on Jan. 23. Restrictions have expanded to cities with a total of 60 million people in the broadest anti-disease measures ever imposed. Restaurants, shops and other businesses nationwide were ordered to close.

The Lunar New Year holiday was extended to keep factories and offices closed, but officials have been ordered to revive business activity as economic losses mount.

Authorities have announced measures to try to curb new infections as millions of workers crowd into planes, trains and buses to return to densely populated cities.

Under the new measures, people returning to Beijing will have to isolate themselves at home for 14 days, according to a notice published Friday. It said people who fail to comply will face legal consequences but gave no details.

COVID-19, a disease stemming from a new form of coronavirus, has spread to more than two dozen countries.

The 80-year-old Chinese tourist who

died in France was hospitalized Jan. 25 with a lung infection, according to Health Minister Agnes Buzyn. His daughter also fell ill but authorities say she is expected to recover.

On Friday, Egypt reported the first infection on the African continent.

In Japan, the U.S. Embassy said it would fly home Americans aboard the cruise ship Diamond Princess in Yokohama, near Tokyo. It said they will go into quarantine in the United States.

Those who return to the U.S. will fly to Travis Air Force Base in California and some will fly onward to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, said an embassy statement. It said no one with symptoms would be allowed aboard the flight.

So far, 285 people from the ship have tested positive for the virus. Japan's Health Ministry allowed 11 passengers to disembark Friday. It said passengers above 80 years of age, those with underlying medical conditions and those who stayed in windowless cabins during the 14-day quarantine can move to a facility on shore.

Digital census raises fear of Iowa-like crash

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — The stakes are high when a major civic exercise involves a large population, new technology that has not been thoroughly tested and an entire country waiting on the results.

Just ask the organizers of the Iowa caucuses, which offered a cautionary tale on the technological woes that could befall a big political event. Some observers worry that this year's census carries the same potential for mayhem — except on an infinitely larger scale.

The U.S. Census Bureau plans to try out a lot of new technology. It's the first once-a-decade census in which most people are being encouraged to answer questions via the internet. Later in the process, census workers who knock on the doors of homes that have not responded will use smartphones and a new mobile app to relay answers.

A government watchdog agency, the Census Bureau's in-

spector general and some lawmakers have grown concerned about whether the systems are ready for prime time. Most U.S. residents can start answering the questionnaire in March.

The Census Bureau says it's ready. The agency promises that responses to the questionnaire will be kept confidential through encryption and that it's working with the Department of Homeland Security and private-sector security experts to thwart cyber attacks. To hinder illegitimate responses, the bureau is blocking foreign IP addresses and stopping bots from filling out fake responses, among many other measures.

The bureau says it has developed two secure data-collection systems so that if one goes down, the other can substitute. Other mechanisms are in place to prevent failure and to back up essential functions.

"All systems are go," bureau Director Steven Dillingham said.

2nd flu wave hits amid coronavirus concerns

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A second wave of flu is hitting the U.S., turning this into one of the nastiest seasons for children in a decade.

The number of child deaths and the hospitalization rate for youngsters are the highest seen at this point in any season since the severe flu outbreak of 2009-10, health officials said Friday. And the wave is expected to keep going for weeks.

Experts say it is potentially a bad time for an extended flu season, given concerns about the new coronavirus out of China, which can cause symptoms that can be difficult to distinguish from flu without testing.

If coronavirus were to begin spreading in the U.S., there could be confusion about whether people are getting sick with it or the flu, said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-diseases expert at Vanderbilt University.

This flu season got off to its earliest start in 15 years, with surges of flu-like illnesses seen in parts of the South as early as October. Most cases were caused by a type of flu that usually causes substantial infections only in the spring, at the tail end of the flu season.

That wave peaked in late December and dropped steadily for weeks afterward.

But a second surge began in late January. Last week saw another rise in the percentage of doctor's office visits that were due to flu-like illness, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Overall, the CDC estimated that 26 million Americans have gotten sick with flu this past fall and winter, with about 250,000 flu-related hospitalizations and around 14,000 deaths.

The health agency is expected to release an estimate next week of how effective the flu vaccine has been.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man arrested for living in someone else's home

MI BAY TOWNSHIP — A suburban Detroit man was arrested in northern Michigan after moving into a seasonal home belonging to someone else.

The 55-year-old man was charged with home invasion, the Charlevoix County sheriff's office said.

He is from Shelby Township, north of Detroit.

Charlevoix County deputies found the man living in a home in Bay Township, about 265 miles northwest of Detroit. The property owner's belongings were moved out of the house, the locks were changed, and a new mailbox was put up.

Pair pleads guilty to trafficking roosters

CO BRECKENRIDGE — Two men pleaded guilty to animal cruelty resulting from their arrest for illegally transporting roosters through Colorado.

Cody Smith of Kentucky and Austin Clanton of Tennessee were caught driving the birds across state lines in May, Summit Daily News reported.

Authorities believed the 33 roosters found in an SUV were likely to be used for unlawful purposes such as cockfighting.

During a traffic stop, the trooper heard a "squawking sound" coming from the rear of the vehicle.

Police chief charged with stealing cell phone

TN SELMER — A West Tennessee police chief was charged with stealing a cell phone that was being held as evidence, authorities said.

Selmer Police Chief Elmer

Neal Burks was indicted in McNairy County on charges of theft of property under \$1,000 and official misconduct, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation said.

District Attorney Mark Davidson asked the TBI in December to investigate the theft of a cell phone being held by Selmer police. The state police agency said Burks took the cell phone, which was found in his son's bedroom closet.

Man loses \$200K in online-dating scam

OR SALEM — Officials warned of online dating service scams after an Oregon man lost money believing he was entering a personal and business relationship with a person posing as a Florida woman.

The 80-year-old man was convinced to hand over \$200,000 for what he believed to be an investment to bring a piece of art to a Florida art gallery, according to the Oregon Division of Financial Regulation.

The scammer proposed a business investment opportunity to cover transportation costs for bringing what was described as a 500-ton marble lion sculpture from China to a Florida art gallery.

Police kill dog during stop; man dies in custody

NJ RINGWOOD — A Florida man who allegedly released his dog on police officers during a traffic stop in New Jersey died after he apparently suffered a seizure while in custody, authorities said.

John Baker, 54, of Spring Lake, Fla., was in an intake unit at the Passaic County Jail when he became ill, authorities said. He was taken to a hospital but was pronounced dead there a

short time later.

Baker had faced numerous charges after a series of events that began when Wanaque police tried to stop a tractor-trailer he was driving. When Baker — who allegedly was driving drunk — refused to stop, Ringwood police also responded and forced him to stop the truck.

Baker eventually let the dog off its chain during the stop despite warnings from police, authorities said. One officer fired one shot at the pit bull as it lunged at them, while another fired four or five times, authorities said.

Deer stranded on ice, swims across river

NH CLAREMONT — A deer stranded on a chunk of ice on a river that caused bystanders a lot of anxiety made it across the water, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department said.

Col. Kevin Jordan said an officer saw deer tracks coming out of the Sugar River onto the bank in Claremont.

For hours, passers-by watched the deer sitting on the ice. People wondered if she could be rescued.

Officers decided to wait the situation out, hoping that with the cover of night and fewer people around, the deer would feel safe enough to swim out on her own.

Seal pup rescued and recovering at aquarium

DE DEWEY BEACH — A team of volunteers rescued a 1-month-old gray seal pup who was found injured and stranded along a Delaware beach.

The Lewes-based Marine Education Research and Rehabilitation Institute was called to a lifesaving station south of

Dewey Beach to help the distressed female pup, The Delaware News Journal reported. The 3-foot-long baby had suffered serious wounds to her neck and flippers, the institute said in a Facebook post.

She's since been taken to the National Aquarium in Baltimore for treatment.

Manatee found dead far from usual waters

NJ MIDDLE TOWNSHIP — Officials were trying to determine what caused the death of a manatee in southern New Jersey.

The 11-foot male was found along the Delaware Bay in Middle Township in Cape May County. Manatees usually are found in Florida's warmer coastal waters.

"Generally with these guys, especially up in this area, if we find them deceased, it's somehow associated with the cold water," Jay Pagel of the New Jersey-based Marine Mammal Stranding Center told WCAU-TV.

Man injured in tumble down 300-foot cliff

ME DIXFIELD — A Massachusetts man tumbled down a 300-foot cliff when he lost his footing while peering over the the side, wardens said.

Robert Burns, 54 of Waltham, Mass., suffered numerous injuries and was airlifted to Central Maine Medical Center, wardens said.

Burns drove his tracked all-terrain vehicle to the top of Holt Hill, and was looking over the cliff known as Bull Rock when he lost his footing and slid down.

From wire reports

On a mission to provide objective reporting to America's military, wherever they serve.
Read us online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

JGR stands above the rest in NASCAR

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Joe Gibbs was trying to apologize. His driver won another checkered flag at Daytona — the same track where Gibbs' eponymous race team is the defending Daytona 500 champion — and the 79-year-old wanted to make some things right.

He was eight days removed from giving his NASCAR Hall of Fame speech, and it seemed sitting behind another podium was the perfect setting to thank a few more people he forgot to mention at the ceremony.

"I really messed up on that speech, the acceptance speech," said Gibbs, who then acknowledged business partners, friends of his late son, J.D., and vowed to scores of others he omitted: "I'm going to try to take care of that."

Gibbs could be forgiven for the lapse on such a busy weekend. He was feted in Miami during the Super Bowl as part of the NFL's 100 All-Time Team, trading a NASCAR blue blazer on a stage in Charlotte, N.C., for a maroon "100" jacket a little less than 48 hours later. No one had a better weekend than the dual Hall of Famer 24 years apart.

NASCAR's Hall of Fame is

filled with drivers, mechanics and crew chiefs, but Gibbs gave the hall its first coach. More like Coach. It's what everyone calls him, from drivers to journalists, a nickname as synonymous with Gibbs in the sport as much as The King is paired with Richard Petty.

On Daytona 500 weekend, he's at the top of the industry — he boasts the Daytona 500 champion (two-time winner Denny Hamlin), the reigning Cup Series champion (Kyle Busch), a seven-time winner in 2019 (Martin Truex Jr.) and the driver who made him the winningest owner in Busch Clash history with nine (Erik Jones). Joe Gibbs started his race team in 1992 and it controls NASCAR much the way his "Hogs" with the Washington Redskins controlled the line of scrimmage — just try to get past them.

Forbes valued Joe Gibbs Racing at \$230 million, behind only Hendrick Motorsports at \$315 million.

Hamlin will try to become just the fourth driver to win consecutive Daytona 500s. Petty (1973-1974) and Cale Yarborough (1983-1984) both won consecutive Daytona 500s, and no driver has had his name etched on the Harley J. Earl Trophy in two straight years since Sterling Marlin (1994-95).

"To win a Daytona 500, a championship, everything that went in between, that's just really hard in pro sports," Gibbs said. "But being realistic about it, I don't think many people would give us odds to be able to duplicate that."

Actually, Hamlin (+800) is the favorite to win Daytona, and Busch and Truex are both +500 favorites to win the championship.

Hall of Fame driver Dale Jarrett won Gibbs his first Daytona 500 in 1993, the first of 176 Cup victories for the Gibbs team. JGR won a modern-day record 19 of the 36 Cup Series races in 2019 and made Toyota a regular in victory lane.

His drivers say their prosperity starts with Gibbs, how he counsels, develops talent, surrounds his drivers with the best crew in their field to succeed or even, as Hamlin put it, "He finds a way to intimidate you even though he's not an intimidating guy."

Gibbs, who won three Super Bowls coaching the Washington Redskins and five more titles at JGR, demurred when it came to taking credit for JGR's growth into a NASCAR juggernaut.

"Yeah, you have a role in it, you fight hard, you try to do what you can do to help the team, but there's so many

people that put our race team where it is," Gibbs said. "Certainly, I was just a part of it. I get shoved up front, get an award and all that. When I reflect on it, it's all the people that put you there."

Look no further for proof than Gibbs' Hall of Fame class and his current roster.

He was inducted alongside Tony Stewart and Bobby Labonte, two drivers who built the foundation at JGR and proved to doubters that racing wasn't just a silly dalliance for Gibbs. Hamlin is a Gibbs lifer, Busch has won two titles and surged into the conversation as one of NASCAR's greats under Gibbs' watch, and Truex will likely cap a Hall of Fame résumé driving for Gibbs.

"He's not one of those guys that sits at home, just hangs out and does chores around the house," Hamlin said. "He likes to work hard. That really is, in my opinion, the difference in him and any other team owner, is that he's at the race shop every single day at 8 a.m. calling sponsors, walking down the shop, figuring out how we can be faster."

Gibbs may have forgotten a few names during his Hall of Fame speech. But it's a certainty that Coach will be name dropped by scores of his drivers in speeches to come.

Enfinger wins in overtime of Truck Series opener

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — NASCAR opened the Truck Series season with one fiery crash, a truck stuck on its roof and Grant Enfinger in victory lane following overtime and a door-to-door race to the finish line.

Enfinger beat Jordan Anderson in a frantic push to the finish that drew sparks as the trucks banged in Friday night's closing lap at Daytona International Speedway.

The race had been delayed by rain, stopped when a crash caused Ty Majeski to flip onto

his roof, and then oddly delayed in a crash that saw a fiery truck stopped on the apron when it was rear-ended from behind in a case of faulty equipment.

Enfinger cycled into a lead after late accidents and was out front when the race went to a two-lap overtime shootout. He first used a block on Ross Chastain to preserve the win, then had to beat Anderson to the finish line.

"I thought I set him up good," Anderson said. "I got on Grant's bumper there coming off (turn) 4 and got a good run and I'm like, 'Man, this is like NASCAR Thunder 2003 all over again.'

I'm like, 'I can do this.' I push him out of the way and thought we had it. ... This is what NASCAR is about. At Daytona, we almost won!"

Enfinger's win was the 100th victory in the Truck Series for Ford, which won its first race in this series in 1995. It was Enfinger's third career victory; the other two were at Talladega Superspeedway and Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

Ty Majeski was flipped upside down in the closing laps of the first stage when he was plowed into on the side as the trucks at the front of the pack jockeyed for position.

His Chevrolet was stuck on its roof for several minutes as the race was red-flagged and safety workers attempted to flip the Silverado. Majeski was trapped inside, hanging by his seat belts, as the rookie waited to be freed from the vehicle.

It was not the Daytona debut the 25-year-old was expecting. Majeski had one previous Truck Series start.

"Nothing like I've ever experienced before," he said. "I am not hurt, thankfully. Just my pride. We'll live to race another day."

Kobe among finalists for next HoF class

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The list of finalists for the Basketball Hall of Fame is considerably shorter than usual.

The voters really didn't need more this year.

Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett — 48 All-Star nods between them — headlined the class of eight finalists announced Friday by the Hall of Fame. Each will still need to collect 18 votes from a 24-person panel before officially becoming Hall of Famers, which is certainly no more than a formality at this point.

In recent years, finalist classes have been around 13 people. But the star power at the top forced the Hall to change its thinking this year, a decision that was made before Bryant died unexpectedly in a helicopter crash in Southern California on Jan. 26.

"We did it because of the enormity, even before Kobe's

death, that we think Kobe and Duncan and Garnett bring to it," said Jerry Colangelo, Chairman of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. "We've never had a class that strong at the top. And then, of course, with Kobe's death it added more focus."

Bryant, Duncan, Garnett and 10-time WNBA All-Star and four-time Olympic gold medalist Tamika Catchings are all first-time finalists. The other finalists have all been to this point previously: Baylor women's coach Kim Mulkey, former Houston Rockets coach Rudy Tomjanovich, five-time Division II women's coach of the year Barbara Stevens of Bentley, and four-time national men's college coach of the year Eddie Sutton.

This year's enshrinement class will be announced on April 4 at college basketball's Final Four in Atlanta. The induction ceremony in Springfield, Mass., is Aug. 29.

"Hall of Famer is something you don't really think about, you don't really dream about," Garnett said. "It just happens. ... This is one of the more overwhelming situations I've ever been in."

Bryant was an 18-time All-Star and five-time NBA champion during a 20-year career with the Los Angeles Lakers, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and is the No. 4 scorer in league history. He died with his 13-year-old daughter Gianna and seven others as the group was on its way to a basketball tournament last month.

The Hall is hoping to find a way to strike very different tones this year: Celebrating the new Hall of Famers, while also paying tribute to giants of the game who have died in recent weeks — Bryant, former NBA Commissioner David Stern and legendary high school coach Morgan Wootten among them.

"There's a great sensitivity ... but it's going to be done the

right way," Colangelo said.

Catchings is also a past WNBA MVP, won a national championship under coach Pat Summitt at Tennessee and was a four-time All-American with the Lady Vols.

"I'm just so blessed," Catchings said. "I'm so thankful."

The Hall also announced its Curt Gowdy Media Award recipients for this year: sports writer and commentator Michael Wilbon, who spent three decades at The Washington Post and now is with ESPN, and longtime NBA play-by-play commentator Mike Breen — the voice of the NBA Finals.

Breen learned of his award on a plane, when he got an email a few days ago. He cried then, and his eyes welled with tears again Friday — as they likely will at what promises to be a very emotional ceremony as the game continues mourning Bryant's death.

"It's going to be incredibly sad," Breen said.

US team beats World team in Rising Stars Challenge

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Miles Bridges soared like his boss once did in Chicago. Ja Morant dazzled with precision passes. Zion Williamson delivered his share of punishing dunks, even damaging the rim.

It all added up to a high-flying start to the All-Star weekend.

Bridges scored 20 points and took MVP honors, Eric Paschall added 23 more and the U.S. beat the World 151-131 in the Rising Stars Challenge on Friday night.

Bridges has been a bright spot for Charlotte in a difficult season. The Hornets are 11th in the Eastern Conference at 18-36. But the second-year pro put on a show in owner Michael Jordan's old home and was presented the MVP trophy by Hall of Famer and Chicago product Isiah Thomas.

"We wanted to come out and play hard in the Rising Stars

and show what Charlotte is about — me, Devonte' (Graham) and P.J. (Washington)," Bridges said. "And that's what we did."

Cleveland's Collin Sexton had 21 points, and Atlanta All-Star Trae Young added 18. Williamson scored 14 and had the baskets inside the United Center shaking whether he made or missed.

New York rookie RJ Barrett led the World with 27 points, and Washington's Brandon Clarke scored 22.

The annual showcase of the top rookies and second-year players helped kick off the first All-Star weekend in the Windy City since 1988, when Jordan dazzled the home crowd at the old Chicago Stadium. Back then, His Airness edged Dominique Wilkins in a slam dunk contest that arguably remains the standard and scored 40 points to lead the East over the West in the game.

Jamming: Williamson continued to dazzle after his highly anticipated debut for New Orleans got pushed back three months because of right knee surgery. Averaging 22.1 points in 10 games for the Pelicans, the No. 1 pick was unaware he bent the rim. It happened late in the first half, on an alley-oop off a between-the-legs feed from Ja Morant.

"Went into halftime and my teammates started telling me about it," he said. I don't know which dunk it was on, but I don't think it was me."

As impressive were two misses near the end of the game.

Williamson attempted a 360, only to have it go flying off the rim. Given a do-over as players on both teams stood and watched, he went between his legs and off the glass only to miss again.

Kobe tribute: On Friday, Kobe Bryant's presence loomed large.

Players wore patches featuring the numbers 2 and 24 surrounded by nine stars in honor of the Lakers great and his daughter, Gianna, who were among nine people killed in a helicopter crash on Jan. 26. Pau Gasol, along with WNBA great Sue Bird, addressed the crowd at midcourt as part of a pre-game tribute to Gasol's former teammate and late NBA Commissioner David Stern.

As for the game, itself? As expected, there were plenty of flashy dunks and not much in the way of defense.

Dallas All-Star Luka Doncic drew a big roar from the crowd when he banked a three from halfcourt just before the halftime buzzer to send the World to the locker room with an 81-71 lead. Bridges had the fans cheering late in the third quarter when he flipped the ball off the glass and jammed it during the quarter when the U.S. took control.

Astros' apology hasn't quieted critics

Associated Press

NL MVP Cody Bellinger called out Jose Altuve and the Houston Astros for swiping their trophies and said he suspected they kept scheming last season, too.

"One hundred percent," the Dodgers slugger said. "I don't know why they would stop."

All-Star pitcher Trevor Bauer went even farther.

"I'm not going to let them forget the fact that they are hypocrites, they are cheaters, they've stolen from a lot of other people and the game itself," Bauer told reporters at Cincinnati's spring training camp in Goodyear, Ariz.

The fallout from the Astros' sign-stealing scam continued Friday, a day after Houston owner Jim Crane was widely criticized for an apology that rang hollow to many.

"They cheated. They were found guilty of it. And I haven't heard it yet," said Washington general manager Mike Rizzo, whose team beat Houston in Game 7 of the World Series last

year.

"The thing that pains me the most is it puts a black cloud over the sport that I love. And that's not right. The commissioner did an investigation and found that they cheated in 2017 and 2018. Somebody's got to say the words over there: 'cheated.' And that's important to me," Rizzo said.

New Dodgers pitcher Alex Wood had another message for the Astros: look out. There's been speculation Houston hitters might face on-field retaliation from opposing pitchers.

"You'd be hard-pressed to say no. I mean, they messed with a lot of guys' lives," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me if something like that happened, just to be honest. It's funny, because I'm pretty sure it probably will happen. Somebody will take it into their own hands, and they'll get suspended more than any of those guys got for the biggest cheating scandal in 100 years. It'll be pretty ironic when that happens, because I'm sure that's how it will end up playing out."

Meanwhile, a few more Astros on that 2017 team spoke up.

"There's a line and it was definitely crossed. I want to say sorry to the fans, Major League Baseball, my peers, and anybody else who was affected by this," new Mets outfielder Jake Marisnick said.

Mets teammate J.D. Davis said he felt "ashamed" to be part of the scandal. He also admitted not telling the truth in December when, asked what he knew of Houston's trash can-banging scheme, said: "I really have no idea or no clue."

"I spoke a little bit prematurely," Davis said at the Mets' camp in Port St. Lucie, Florida. "MLB called and I cooperated with them."

New York Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said he thought the Astros had been breaking rules long before Commissioner Rob Manfred released his report in January.

"I'll acknowledge that we had many a conversation with Major League Baseball the last number of years about suspi-

cions, but having suspicions and being able to prove it are two different things," Cashman said.

Crane initially said he didn't think the scam impacted games as the Astros won the 2017 World Series, then backtracked and said it was hard to determine. The Yankees lost to the Astros in a seven-game AL Championship Series that year, dropping all four games in Houston.

"I definitely think it had an effect on things, without question," Cashman said at Yankees camp in Tampa, Fla. "Certainly the Houston Astros were the only one with a distinct advantage more so than their opponents. That's the fact. So I don't think anybody can disagree with that even though they may try."

Bauer wasn't nearly so diplomatic.

"They mocked everything about everyone who said they were doing something under the table or illegal or whatever," Bauer said, tossing a few expletives while adding, "Now you're lying about your apology."

NHL roundup

Zucker scores first 2 goals with Pens in win over Habs

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Newly-acquired Jason Zucker scored his first two goals with the Pittsburgh Penguins during a 4-1 win over the Montreal Canadiens on Friday night.

Zucker scored his 15th and 16th of the season in a 1:42 span, with Montreal's Tomas Tatar getting a goal in between. Zucker provided 2-0 and 3-1 leads and has nine goals in 12 career games against the Canadiens.

Kris Letang scored a power-play goal against his hometown team and his 13th overall of the season, and Zach Aston-Reese added an empty-net goal.

Penguins captain Sidney Crosby had three assists. He

has five goals and 17 points in his last 11 games.

Tristan Jarry made 34 saves for the Penguins, who have 10 wins in their last 14 games.

The Penguins acquired Zucker from the Minnesota Wild on Monday for forward Alex Galchenyuk, defensive prospect Calen Addison and a conditional 2020 first-round pick.

Sharks 3, Jets 2: Melker Karlsson and Timo Meier scored in an 89-second span in the third period to lift visiting San Jose over Winnipeg.

Marcus Sorensen also scored for the Sharks, who are 4-3-0 in their last seven games.

Aaron Dell made 29 saves for San Jose.

Kyle Connor scored his team-

leading 29th goal of the season and Blake Wheeler had a goal and assist for the Jets.

Rangers 3, Blue Jackets 1: Chris Kreider scored the go-ahead goal in the third period, Alexandar Georgiev had 36 saves and visiting New York topped Columbus.

Kreider scored on a wrist shot from the slot with 3:12 left in the game, just 2 seconds after a Rangers' power play ended and Columbus' Jakob Lilja was rushing out of the box. Ryan Strome added an empty-netter with 1:11 left.

Pavel Buchnevich also scored for the Rangers, who have won four straight and are 7-2 in their last nine.

Oliver Bjorkstrand got his

team-leading 19th goal and Elvis Merzlikins had 25 saves for injury-ravaged Columbus, which is winless in its last four games (0-2-2).

Hurricanes 5, Devils 2: Andrei Svechnikov scored on a perfectly executed rush in the second period to push his point streak to six games and help host Carolina beat New Jersey.

Nino Niederreiter and Warren Foegele scored first-period goals for the Hurricanes. Martin Necas and Joel Edmundson added two more in the third period.

Petr Mrazek finished with 35 saves for Carolina after losing his previous three starts.

Mirco Mueller and Joey Anderson scored for the Devils.