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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US, Taliban deal aimed at ending Afghan War

BY J.P. LAWRENCE

Stars and Stripes

DOHA, Qatar — The United States and its foreign allies will withdraw all forces within 14 months and end the war in Afghanistan if the Taliban renounces terror groups and abides by an agreement signed in Doha on Saturday.

The agreement mandates a phased drawdown of American, NATO and foreign partner troops from Afghanistan and a disavowal of al-Qaida and other terror groups by the Taliban.

It also calls for intra-Afghan talks to include the Taliban and the government in Kabul beginning March 10, as well as security cooperation by all sides in fighting the Islamic State.

Zalmay Khalilzad, America's special envoy for Afghan reconciliation, signed the deal along with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's top political leader. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was the highest-ranking U.S. official to attend.

President Donald Trump said the agreement is a "powerful path forward to end the war" and to bring the troops home, should the deal's commitments be honored.

The U.S. is expected to reduce its troop strength in Afghanistan from about 12,000 to 8,600 within 135 days, the agreement states. All U.S. troops and their allies would also completely withdraw from five unspecified bases. Remaining troops would leave within 14 months of Saturday's accord.

A reduction in troops to 8,600, about the number in Afghanistan when President Donald Trump took office in 2017, would not harm a counterterrorism mission that combats ISIS and other groups, U.S. military officials have said since last fall.

The about 8,500 non-U.S.

Afghan veterans conflicted on agreement

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Veterans of America's longest war are finding themselves torn as the U.S. signs a potentially historic peace accord with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

For many, the U.S. is long overdue in withdrawing its forces after more than 18 years of fighting. Others question the trustworthiness of the Taliban, whose hard-line government the U.S.-led forces overthrew in 2001. Skeptics worry the Taliban's re-integration could cause Afghanistan to backslide on such issues as human rights.

"If they sign a peace treaty and Afghanistan goes back to the Taliban or Sharia law, then it's all been for nothing," said former Army Staff Sgt. Will Blackburn of Hinesville, Ga.

Though doubtful the Taliban will abide by the peace deal, Blackburn said he's

ready for hostilities to end. He first deployed to Afghanistan in 2004 with an infantry unit of the Army's 10th Mountain Division. A decade later, his son headed overseas for the same fight.

"Anything that would get us out of that country, I will support fully," said Blackburn, 58, who left the Army in 2010.

Other Afghanistan veterans interviewed by The Associated Press said that, while the peace deal may not be perfect, it's time to end the war that began weeks after the 9/11 terror attacks.

The toll has been heavy. More than 2,300 U.S. service members have been killed and more than 20,600 others wounded in Afghanistan since the war began in October 2001.

Former Sgt. Michael Carrasquillo served as an infantryman in the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade when his unit was ambushed in

Afghanistan in 2005. Shot five times while dragging a wounded comrade to safety, Carrasquillo spent the next two years in the hospital and underwent dozens of surgeries.

"Peace in any way, shape or form is a good thing," said Carrasquillo, 36, of Monrovia, Md., who leads a support group for wounded veterans through the Wounded Warrior Project. "We don't want more guys to die or to get injured."

The peace plan calls for the Trump administration to initially draw down U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan from 13,000 to 8,600. A timetable for a complete U.S. withdrawal hasn't been verified.

In return, the Taliban promise not to let extremists use the country to stage attacks on the U.S. or its allies. The Taliban and representatives from Kabul must negotiate a framework for a postwar Afghanistan.

NATO and foreign partner troops in Afghanistan, who along with the U.S. support an Afghan training and advising mission, would also draw down proportionally by mid-July under the agreement.

The U.S. reserves the right to halt its withdrawal if the Taliban don't meet the conditions of the agreement.

"We will closely watch the Taliban's compliance with their commitments and calibrate the pace of our withdrawal to their actions," Pompeo said Saturday. "This is how we will ensure that Afghanistan never again serves as a base for inter-

national terrorists."

Up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan government-aligned prisoners will be released by the first day of the planned intra-Afghan talks, under the terms of the agreement.

These intra-Afghan negotiations would tackle issues such as a long-term cease-fire, the country's constitution, the rights of women and minorities, and the integration of Taliban leaders and fighters into the government and military.

The talks will require time and patience, said Faiz Zaland, a delegate representing the Af-

ghan government in Doha.

The deal also requires the Afghan government to begin talks with the U.N. that would remove Taliban members from international sanctions lists within three months. The U.S. will remove its own Taliban sanctions by Aug. 27 if the group abides by the agreement.

Calling the agreement good for both Afghanistan and the international community, the Taliban's Baradar said through a translator that he hopes the world will help rebuild Afghanistan.

Navy wants total of 390 manned vessels

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly said Friday that the service wants to increase the fleet to 390 manned ships, with an additional 45 unmanned vessels.

That would dramatically increase the number of combat ships in the Navy at a time when ship-building funds in the proposed budget for fiscal year 2021 have decreased and some appropriated money for ships has been diverted to build the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

During a House Armed Services Committee hearing Thursday, Modly told lawmakers that the goal for the Navy is to reach 355 ships by 2030. That ship count is based on the 2016 Force Structure Assessment that has since become a requirement for the sea service. The Navy is expected to have 297 ships this year.

On Friday, Modly said he's been calling for a fleet of "355 plus" ships since he was sworn in as undersecretary in 2017. Modly's remarks Friday were made during a discussion on Navy modernization and competing against China and Russia at the Brookings Institute, a Washington-based think tank.

The new ship total is in the Integrated Force Structure Assessment that has been sent to Defense Secretary Mark Esper for approval.

Unmanned vessels will be part of the future mix of ships in the fleet, he said, but the question remains whether they will be counted as part of total battle force.

"So our force structure is probably, if you include unmanned in the [force structure assessment] that we just did, the number is like 435 with unmanned in there. And it's like 390 without unmanned in there," he said.

Trump to pick envoy to Norway as Navy secretary

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump intends to nominate the U.S. ambassador to Norway, Kenneth Braithwaite, as the 77th Navy secretary, the White House announced Friday.

Braithwaite, who is from Pennsylvania, has been the ambassador to Norway since 2017.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in 1984, Braithwaite was an aviator. He served in the Navy and then the Navy Reserve for 27 years, retiring in 2011, according to the White House statement.

His last position in the Navy was as its vice chief of information. He deployed as part of the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the commanding officer of Fleet Combat Camera Atlantic [Reserve], according to his biography on the U.S. Embassy in Norway's website.

He will be officially nominated once the White House sends his nomination paperwork to the Senate.

Trump first mentioned his in-

tention to nominate Braithwaite after Defense Secretary Mark Esper fired former Navy Secretary Richard Spencer in November. Esper lost confidence in Spencer due to his handling of the case of Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, who was accused of committing war crimes. Gallagher was acquitted of murder but found guilty of posing in a photo with the dead body of an Islamic State fighter.

Esper recommended Braithwaite to Trump, who tweeted he is "A man of great achievement and success, I know Ken will do an outstanding job!"

In January, CBS News reported Braithwaite had not disclosed in government forms about a contract that he had with Cambridge Analytica in 2016, according to documents provided to the news organization by a former employee.

Braithwaite said in a statement that he had been in discussions with the firm but never signed a contract or received any income from the company.

Calif. Marine becomes 1st woman to lead howitzer unit

The San Diego Union-Tribune

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — A Marine stationed at Camp Pendleton became the first woman to graduate from the Corps' Howitzer Section Chief Course this month, taking on a combat artillery leadership role once reserved for men.

As a newly minted section chief, it will be the job of Cpl. Julianna Yakovac, 21, of 1st Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, to lead a crew. The M777 Howitzer is a cannon that can hit targets from almost 20 miles away. It requires a crew of at least six Marines to fire.

A howitzer section chief is the equivalent of an infantry squad leader, said Lt. Col. David Tumanjan, the executive officer of the 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.

"These (noncommissioned officers) are expected to run a gun crew of 8-10 Marines and are responsible for every bit of tech-

nical knowledge associated with emplacing, firing, movement, and local security around that howitzer," Tumanjan said in a statement.

Yakovac said she does not see herself as a trailblazer. She was quick to credit her team for where she is now.

"I (am) very fortunate to be part of a great unit," Yakovac said Thursday. The Marine, originally from Olympia, Wash., had just returned from field exercises at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms.

"I wouldn't say I'm a trailblazer — when I joined I didn't have that intention," she said. "I'm just happy to have the same opportunity everyone else has. It's not any more of an accomplishment than my male counterparts."

Not just for golf fans, the event brought out a range of lifestyle devotees for top-end dining options, indulgent experiences, and gracious hospitality.

The Marines, under orders from then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter, opened combat jobs to women in 2016. Men make up more than 90% of the Corps, which is the largest gender disparity of all military branches.

When she joined, Yakovac said, she didn't know there had been any restrictions or that rules had changed — she just wanted to be in the field. When she found out she'd be firing artillery, she was thrilled.

"It was extremely exciting," she said. "It's been more exciting as I've gone."

Yakovac said that when she reported to her unit she was one of two women there, but now, two years later, there are a lot more.

She said her male counterparts have been great teammates.

"I've been fortunate to have great experiences," she said. "I've never been talked down to; I've been built up."

USAF anthem now more gender-neutral

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — The U.S. Air Force changed lyrics in its service anthem by dropping gender references that exclude women.

The change announced Thursday by the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. David Goldfein, is designed to make the service friendlier to women, *The Gazette* reports.

“Our song must reflect our history, the inspiring service and accomplishments of all who’ve served, and the rich diversity that makes today’s Air

Force indisputably the strongest and most capable in the world,” Goldfein wrote in a message to airmen, cadets and academy alumni.

The change originated when female Air Force Academy cadets asked Goldfein why the anthem’s third verse hailed the bravery of men, but not women.

The third verse is meaningful to cadets at the academy near Colorado Springs, where it is sung after sports victories, but students took issue with the third line: “To a friend we send a message of his brother men

who fly.”

In the new version, the line is changed to read, “To a friend we send a message of the brave who serve on high.”

Other gender references in the song remain, including “at ‘em boys, give ‘er the gun.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Lt. Gen. Jay Silveria, the academy superintendent, who added that females are more than a demographic.

“They are among our top performers, vital to our success as an institution and as a military,” Silveria said.

The “brother men” line was

written into the song in 1938, when only men could fly Army Air Corps planes. Women joined the Air Corps in World War II, but were limited to flying planes from factories to forward bases.

The Air Force Academy, established in 1954, was open only to males until 1976.

Since 2003, the academy has had its first female commandant, dean and superintendent.

Women are seeking admittance in unprecedented numbers, making up 32% of the academy class of 2024 entering in June.

Judge denies Navy pier funds to be used for wall

Associated Press

SEATTLE — President Donald Trump may not divert \$89 million intended for a military construction project in Washington state to build his border wall, a U.S. judge in Seattle ruled Thursday.

The U.S. Supreme Court and some other courts have said the administration can begin diverting billions of dollars in military spending to the wall, and work has been done on some sections.

But U.S. District Judge Barbara Rothstein ruled Thursday that a case brought by Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson contains different issues which are not covered by those decisions.

Rothstein found that diverting the money is unlawful because Congress — which has the power of the purse under the Constitution — specifically barred Trump from spending additional money on the wall. The decision was also unlawful because it would take money that Congress appropriated for military construction and use it for domestic law enforcement, she said.

“Congress repeatedly and deliberately declined to appro-

priate the full funds the President requested for a border wall along the southern border of the United States,” Rothstein wrote.

While Trump long insisted that Mexico would pay for the wall, that hasn’t been the case. Congress in late 2018 and early 2019 refused to give Trump all of the money he wanted for a border wall, leading to a 35-day partial government shutdown. Lawmakers eventually gave him \$1.4 billion.

In reaction, Trump declared a national emergency. The administration claimed that allowed him to shift almost three times that much money — \$3.6 billion — from military accounts to build a combined 175 miles of fencing in California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico.

The U.S. Supreme Court last summer lifted a court order that prevented the government from spending \$2.5 billion from the Defense Department’s money for military pensions and anti-drug efforts.

The \$89 million was intended for a pier at Naval Base Kitsap, the base west of Seattle where the Pacific fleet of nuclear submarines is based.

John Ratcliffe to be top intelligence chief, again

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Friday picked Rep. John Ratcliffe again to be the nation’s top intelligence official, just months after abruptly ending an earlier effort to install him amid bipartisan criticism that the Texas Republican was unqualified for the post.

Trump’s decision meant that once again the GOP-led Senate would have to decide whether to put the three-term lawmaker in charge of overseeing the 17 U.S. spy agencies that the president repeatedly scorns.

It also puts the leadership of the intelligence community in the spotlight early in an election year in which those agencies are already warning that Russia is trying anew to interfere in the presidential race. Democrats have also accused Trump of installing people atop some agencies most noteworthy for their fealty to him, not intelligence expertise.

“All while our elections are perilously at risk of foreign interference. Just the way the President likes it,” tweeted Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., who chairs the House Intelli-

gence Committee and helped lead his impeachment by the House.

Trump initially named Ratcliffe for the job last summer, but abruptly withdrew his name just five days later, before the Senate even considered him. The president bowed to questions about Ratcliffe’s qualifications and bipartisan concerns that he had little experience in the field of intelligence.

At the time, news reports challenged the accuracy of Ratcliffe’s resume. His selection then drew sharp criticism from Democrats and a lukewarm response from some Republicans.

Before being elected to Congress in 2014, Ratcliffe was mayor of Health, Texas, and a U.S. attorney in the Eastern District of Texas.

But since last summer, Ratcliffe’s visibility rose as an ardent defender of Trump during the House’s impeachment proceedings against him.

“John is an outstanding man of great talent!” Trump said in announcing his choice in a tweet.

Ratcliffe’s fate in the Senate this time remains unclear.

First coronavirus death in US confirmed

Associated Press

A woman has died in Washington state of COVID-19, state health officials said Saturday, marking the first such reported death in the United States.

At a Saturday news conference, President Donald Trump said the woman was in her late 50s and had a high medical risk.

Trump said 22 people in the U.S. have been stricken by the virus and additional cases are “likely.” He said healthy Americans should be able to recover if they contract the virus.

Washington state officials

issued a terse news release announcing the death, gave no details and scheduled a news conference. A spokesperson for EvergreenHealth Medical Center, Kayse Dahl, said the person died in the facility in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, but gave no other details.

State and King County health officials said “new people (have been) identified with the infection, one of whom died.” They did not provide the number of cases.

Amy Reynolds of the Washington state health department said in a brief telephone interview: “We are dealing with an

emergency evolving situation.”

The number of coronavirus cases in the United States is considered small. Worldwide, the number of people sickened by the virus hovered Friday around 83,000, and there were more than 2,800 deaths, mostly in China.

Most infections result in mild symptoms, though some can become more serious and lead to pneumonia. Older people, especially those with chronic illnesses such as heart or lung disease, are especially vulnerable. Health officials think it spreads mainly from droplets when an infected person

coughs or sneezes, similar to how the flu spreads.

Health officials in California, Oregon and Washington state are worried about the coronavirus spreading through West Coast communities after confirming three patients were infected by unknown means.

The patients hadn’t recently traveled overseas or had any known close contact with a traveler or an infected person, authorities said.

Convinced that the number of cases will grow but determined to keep them from exploding, health agencies were ramping up efforts to identify patients.

Virus’ effect on world economy grows

Associated Press

TOKYO — The coronavirus outbreak’s impact on the world economy grew more alarming on Saturday.

China’s manufacturing plunged in February by an even wider margin than expected after efforts to contain the virus outbreak shut down much of the world’s second-largest economy, an official survey showed.

The survey, coming as global stock markets fall sharply on fears that the virus will spread

abroad, adds to mounting evidence of the vast cost of the disease that emerged in central China in December and its economic impact worldwide.

The monthly purchasing managers’ index issued by the Chinese statistics agency and an industry group fell to 35.7 from January’s 50 on a 100-point scale on which numbers below 50 indicate activity contracting.

The list of countries touched by the virus has climbed to nearly 60. More than 85,000

people worldwide have contracted the virus, with deaths topping 2,900.

Stock markets around the world plunged again Friday. On Wall Street, the Dow Jones index took yet another hit, closing down nearly 360 points. The index had dropped more than 14% from a recent high, making this past week the market’s worst since 2008.

Europe’s economy is already teetering on the edge of recession. A measure of business sentiment in Germany fell sharply

last week, suggesting that some companies could postpone investment and expansion plans. Economists have forecast global growth will slip to 2.4% this year, the slowest since the Great Recession in 2009, and down from earlier expectations closer to 3%. For the United States, estimates are falling to as low as 1.7% growth this year, down from 2.3% in 2019.

But if COVID-19 becomes a global pandemic, economists expect the impact could be much worse.

Turkish soldier killed by shelling in Syria

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey’s Defense Ministry said one of its soldiers was killed and two were injured by Syrian government shelling, the latest fatality after 33 Turkish troops were killed in an airstrike in Syria earlier last week.

The announcement late Friday also said Turkish forces hit Syrian government targets and a number of Syrian troops were “neutralized.”

Syrian government forces

have been on a weekslong offensive into Idlib province, the country’s last rebel stronghold, which borders Turkey. Thousands of Turkish soldiers are deployed inside rebel-controlled areas of Idlib province, which is dominated by al-Qaida-linked militants.

On Thursday, at least 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in airstrikes in Idlib blamed on the Syrian government.

The deaths — the highest number in a single day since Turkey first intervened in Syria

in 2016 — were the most serious escalation between Turkish and Russian-backed Syrian forces. It’s raised the prospect of an all-out war with millions of Syrian civilians trapped in the middle.

It remained unclear whether Syrian or Russian jets carried out the strike, but Russia denied its aircraft were responsible.

Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had given the Syrian government until the end of February to pull back from areas captured in Idlib,

threatening large-scale military action if they didn’t. But any large scale Turkish military action risks more loss of life among Turkish soldiers, and it’s not clear what Erdogan might do. He’s kept unusually silent since the 33 deaths.

Since the start of February, 55 Turkish soldiers have been killed after Turkey began reinforcing its forces in Idlib. It was a bid to thwart the Syrian government offensive, which began in early December.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Nanny caught giving pills to toddler

MD SEVERN — A nanny in Maryland was accused of drugging a toddler who has a congenital heart condition.

Shannon Michelle Emery, 38, was arrested and charged with second-degree child abuse, neglect and reckless endangerment, Anne Arundel County police told news outlets.

The toddler's mother said she suspected the nanny was giving her 2-year-old daughter unauthorized pills. The mother watched home surveillance videos and said Emery was seen feeding white pills to the toddler. The child was then seen sleeping for several hours.

A lab test of the child's sippy cup revealed it contained diphenhydramine, commonly known by the brand name Benadryl, the Capital Gazette reported.

Mother: Daughter hurt by viral online prank

IA SIOUX CITY — A Sioux City mother complained to the local school board after she said her sixth-grade daughter suffered a broken arm and elbow at the hands of two classmates carrying out a viral online prank.

The woman said during a school board meeting that her daughter had been hurt when two West Middle School classmates cajoled her into a jumping contest, then kicked the girl's feet out from under her mid-jump, causing her to fall on her shoulder, the Sioux City Journal reported.

Called the "skull breaker challenge," the prank was made popular on the social media platform TikTok.

Police: Man arrested in semen-filled syringe hit

MD CHURCHTON — Police arrested a man accused of stabbing a woman with a syringe filled with semen at a Maryland grocery store in an attack caught on surveillance video.

Thomas Bryon Stemen was arrested after Anne Arundel County police said they received a tip about the suspect.

Video from the store in Churchton shows a man follow the woman into the cart area and bump into her.

Police are looking for additional victims.

Man who sent white powder to FBI sentenced

MA SPRINGFIELD — A Massachusetts man who sent threatening packages containing white powder to federal officials, including one that had a death threat against President Donald Trump, has avoided additional time behind bars.

Kevin Johnson, 48, of Southwick, was sentenced in federal court to time served, the 15 months he has spent in jail since his arrest in November 2018.

In July 2018, Johnson threw an envelope at the front door of the FBI's Springfield office that included a handwritten note that said "Death to Trump," prosecutors said.

Woman gets probation for rhino horn smuggling

CA LOS ANGELES — A Southern California woman who helped illegally trade the horns of endangered black rhinos is avoiding prison.

Nhu Mai Nguyen was sentenced in Los Angeles federal court to three years of proba-

tion and ordered to pay a \$2,000 fine.

Prosecutors said Nguyen was part of an Orange County-based smuggling ring. She received packages of South African rhinoceros horns at a nail salon she used to operate in Highland, then sent them to her former boyfriend.

The horns were then shipped to Vietnam and China, where they are believed to have medicinal powers and carry an immense black market price tag.

Troopers tackle suspect in middle of highway

NC RALEIGH — North Carolina troopers tackled a man to the ground in the middle of a highway after he walked into morning rush hour traffic and threatened to pull out a gun, according to authorities and video from the scene.

State troopers were patrolling along Interstate 40 just outside Raleigh when a man walking on the shoulder of the road threw a large bag into their path, the agency said.

The suspect, John Avery Rodriguez, 34, told troopers he was armed and then ran into the roadway, the news outlet said. Troopers stopped traffic in both directions, surrounded Rodriguez with weapons drawn and fired pepper spray at him before bringing him to the ground.

World's first in vitro cheetah cubs born

OH POWELL — Two cheetah cubs were born through in vitro fertilization and embryo transfer to a surrogate mother for the first time, Ohio zoo officials announced.

The male and female cubs were born to 3-year-old Izzy at

the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, the zoo said in a statement.

The biological mother of the cubs is 6-year-old Kibibi who has never reproduced and is too old to become pregnant naturally.

Reward offered in golden eagle poisoning

WY CHEYENNE — Federal investigators want help from the public as they try to find out who poisoned a golden eagle and ravens in southwest Wyoming four years ago.

They're offering a reward of up to \$2,000 for information leading to a conviction.

The golden eagle and four ravens were found dead southwest of Wamsutter in 2016. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said investigators also found poison-laced baits.

Golden eagles are federally protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

Rare snake wins protection under lawsuit

MS JACKSON — A rare snake won protection in two states under a critical habitat lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said.

As a result of the suit, the wildlife service said 325,679 acres of critical habitat in Mississippi and Alabama will be protected for the rare black pinesnake, which can grow up to 7 feet in length. Critical habitat protection means federal agencies must consult with the wildlife service for any federally funded or permitted projects to make sure activities don't hurt the pinesnake or its habitat.

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Prospects use Senior Bowl to prepare

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Linebacker Malik Harrison came to the NFL's annual scouting combine fully prepared.

He expected the early mornings, the late nights and the wall-to-wall interview schedules. He answered endless questions and took the psychological tests. And over the past month, the former Ohio State star even mapped out a plan for what could be the most important week of his life.

Acing it could set up Harrison for a big payday on draft weekend. Struggle, and his stock could start sliding.

For Harrison and the other Senior Bowl veterans in Indianapolis this week, this is not a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; it's an opportunity to take advantage of their previous experiences.

"The Senior Bowl is just like this: late nights and early mornings. Long days. So, it prepared me mentally and physically,"

Harrison said. "It helped a lot."

No, the two events are not exactly the same.

In Mobile, Ala., a few dozen players practice in pads and get one-on-one instruction from NFL coaching staffs. Some might even be asked to try out at new positions.

Or as Harrison describes it — it's football and technique.

Here, more than 300 draft prospects are poked and prodded by medical staffs, run and jump in shorts, lift weights and anxiously wait to compare results. Many of the top prospects do only limited work or none at all, waiting instead for their pro days — perhaps their only chance to work out for scouts.

Players like Harrison welcome a second chance to perform on center stage, eager to show scouts what they learned in Mobile and how they've used those lessons to develop.

"It's a tremendous opportunity when you come from a Group of Five school," Wyo-

oming linebacker Logan Wilson said. "It helped give me a head start on it, knowing what was coming here at the combine. When you've been through it once, it makes it easier the second time."

And good results in Mobile can create more buzz around guys like Harrison or Jordan Love, the Utah State quarterback, and generate more interest when they land in Indy.

The linebackers don't work out until Saturday.

But after turning heads last month, Love delivered another impressive workout Thursday. Earlier this week, he acknowledged the challenge of transitioning from a college spread offense to a more traditional NFL offense. Just one week with the Detroit Lions coaching staff appears to have made a difference — at least with Love's improved footwork.

"The best part was just getting in that offense, and learning the NFL style," Love said. "It wasn't the full playbook, but

I was able to get a feel for it and know what I needed to work on. Getting in the huddle, calling the plays, the long verbiage. It's definitely different than what I ran in college."

Some believe Love played his way into the first round in Mobile and potentially into the top 10 on Thursday.

The lessons don't stop on the football field, either.

While just about everyone trains to excel in the drills, even the new ones this year, others like Utah linebacker Francis Bernard used the past month to contemplate other ways to improve their stock.

"Going back and looking at how I answered some of the questions at the Senior Bowl made me think a little more about how I would answer them here," he said. "I've definitely refined those answers and some teams have noticed and asked what changed. I just explained that I'd thought about them a little more and they said I did a better job here."

Indians got used to rotation without Kluber, Bauer

Associated Press

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Shane Bieber and all the young Indians starters have pretty much gotten used to being without stalwarts Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer in Cleveland's rotation. They got a head start last season on what it would be like without them.

"We didn't have much of a choice last year," said Bieber, the MVP of the All-Star Game in Cleveland last summer. "I guess that kind of benefits us moving forward in this year because we're already kind of familiar with it, and the roles that we have to step into."

Kluber suffered a broken right forearm when struck by a comeback liner in his seventh start last season. That was three months before the Indians traded Bauer in a deadline deal, and two-time Cy Young winner Kluber sustained an

oblique injury when close to his return. The unquestioned ace then got traded to Texas the week before Christmas by Cleveland, which initially exercised a \$17.5 million contract option for Kluber only days after the season ended.

With those All-Star pitchers now on other teams, two of Cleveland's returning veteran starters have had some early setbacks this spring.

Carlos Carrasco, now the rotation's elder statesman, sustained a mild strain of his right hip flexor after feeling discomfort while doing squats in the weight room. Mike Clevinger tore the meniscus in his left knee after getting to Arizona, requiring surgery that will force him to miss the start of the season.

Carrasco, who turns 33 five days before the season opener, made an inspiring comeback last year after being diagnosed

with leukemia. Clevinger, the 29-year-old right-hander who is 38-18 over the past three seasons, was 13-4 with a 2.71 ERA in 21 starts last year while missing two months with a back strain.

Before last year, Kluber and Bauer combined to make more than 50 starts a season from 2014-18. The duo also accounted for nearly one-third of Cleveland's wins during the five-year span that included three consecutive AL Central titles and the 2016 American League pennant.

"It's kind of settling in that things are changing around here," said Zach Plesac, the 25-year-old right-hander who was 8-6 with a 3.81 ERA in 21 starts as a rookie last season. "It's just cool to see where those guys came from and the dynasty they created, and kind of like the culture they created and then kind of see how they

leave, and it's a new direction, but almost like same type of mentality."

Aaron Civale had a 2.34 ERA when making his first 10 big league starts, all but one coming after Bauer was traded to Cincinnati on July 31, but has been slowed this spring by discomfort in his groin. Adam Plutko (7-5, 4.86 ERA) made all 20 of his starts last season after Kluber got hurt May 1, and Plesac's MLB debut also came after then.

"The guys we're transitioning to, the Clevingers, the Biebers of the world, we're kind of excited about that. They have shown there's no reluctance to carry a little bit more of the load," manager Terry Francona said. "And then the younger kids that we probably pushed, like Plesac and Civale, they pitched right in the middle of a pennant race and it didn't seem to faze them."

US luger Sweeney ends season early

Associated Press

Luge's World Cup campaign ends this weekend in Germany, where most of the best 100 sliders in the sport will be looking to close their international seasons on a high note.

Emily Sweeney won't be among them.

Her season ended a couple of weeks ago, on her terms.

The USA Luge veteran is officially two years into her recovery from a crash at the Pyeongchang Olympics that she walked away from — even with a broken neck and broken back — and two years away, she hopes, from being a medal contender at the Beijing Games. She decided to listen to her body and step away from the frantic end of the season, heading home instead to meet her sister's new baby and formulate a plan for her offseason.

Here's what she has learned: Fractures heal, but everything else takes time. So while her body still betrays her from time to time on the track, an additional focus on the mental game is what Sweeney hopes

will get her to the medal podium in Beijing in 2022.

"I am very comfortable about thinking about my weaknesses because I failed so much early on," Sweeney said. "I didn't make two Olympic teams right in a row. I constantly had to look at myself and say 'What's wrong? What am I not like?' I had to be creative with my training and with the whole process. And so, I think I'm pretty comfortable with challenges."

That's why, this season, when she felt like her body couldn't do it anymore, she simply went home. The decision was not easy: Her team is still competing, she has plenty of friends on the circuit and her long-time boyfriend — Italian star Dominik Fischnaller — is a serious contender to win the men's World Cup overall title.

But a setback right now could throw a serious wrench into her Olympic plans. The problem was pressure, not in the sense of what comes with the prospects of winning or losing in competition, but the massive gravitational force that sliders feel and

fight through when they are on the ice at speeds often topping 80 mph. It takes tremendous strength, and Sweeney's neck still isn't always up to the challenge. So, with wear and tear of the season taking a toll, she headed home.

"It's not a question of if I'm good enough," said Sweeney, who won a bronze medal at last season's world championships — cementing her status as one of the fastest women on ice. "I see it in my splits. I would have first-place splits, then get to the pressure and I ended up 15th. I just couldn't keep going through this cycle of pushing it, pushing it, pushing it and then losing all my speed as soon as I can't hold my head up anymore."

So she's working on her body and her mind. Sweeney is one of the most upbeat sliders on the luge circuit; always smiling, always happy, and most of the time her good mood is genuine. After the crash, however, the good mood wasn't always there and it took Sweeney some time to realize that there was more wrong than just the fractures

in her neck and back.

"I went into a depression," Sweeney said. "It's weird saying that. But it feels foreign to me to say I broke my neck and my back two years ago. And it feels dramatic to say, which I guess I need to just get more comfortable with that. But I think that just the way I was raised was like, 'All right, brush it off and move on.' And that's why I think I appear a lot of times like it's just sunshine and rainbows, but this one forced me to stop. But you have to. And the alternative is to stay at that low and that just becomes miserable."

From therapy came a plan: Do one thing a day to feel better toward the ultimate goal of medaling in 2022.

Most days, she succeeds. When Sweeney is right, especially in sprint events, few women in the world have a chance of catching her. Her sliding career is peaking. Her mental game, she thinks, is catching up. And now she's got two years to put the whole package together.

Fourth-ranked Dayton wraps up Atlantic 10 crown

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — No reason to cut down the nets after Dayton clinched a conference title. These fourth-ranked Flyers have more big moments in mind as March approaches.

Obi Toppin demonstrated his assortment of dunks while scoring 23 points with near-perfect shooting, and the Flyers wrapped up the Atlantic 10 regular-season crown Friday night by beating Davidson 82-67.

The Flyers got their 18th victory in a row with their best shooting performance in 34 years. Dayton (27-2, 16-0) shot 72.3% from the field, its best mark since 1986, and made all but one of its shots from inside the arc.

"We went 27 of 28 on two-point field goals, which is unheard of," coach Anthony Grant said. "A great job tonight of taking quality shots and sharing the ball."

Toppin led the way, providing a pair of fast-break dunks in the second half that were exclamation points on Dayton's sensational season. He went 10-for-11 from the field — his only miss was from beyond the arc — and had 12 rebounds.

"We definitely want to finish this off and make a statement so when we get to March we've got a statement on our back," Toppin said.

Five Flyers finished in double figures as Dayton had its best shooting night since it made 77.5% from the field against Southern on March 1, 1986.

Junior guard Ibi Watson

came off the bench and scored 13 points, taking on a bigger role in the offense with Jalen Crutcher in foul trouble. Crutcher finished with 14 points.

Grant decided not to cut down the nets, given that the Flyers have another home game left and bigger goals ahead. Dayton got the title in Grant's third season since returning to his alma mater.

Kellan Grady had 23 points for Davidson (15-13, 9-7).

Toppin was the catalyst. He had a dunk, a long three from the top of the key and a floater in the lane that gave Dayton a 21-13 lead.

The Flyers' guards then took control.

Rodney Chatman had a layup and a three-pointer, Watson scored on three consecutive

drives to the basket and Toppin hit another three for a 40-21 lead, the Flyers' biggest of the half.

Dayton came into the game leading the nation in field-goal percentage at 52%. The Flyers shot 69% in the first half, with most of their points coming off drives to the basket.

Toppin had a pair of fast-break dunks — the second one a reverse slam — that brought the crowd of 13,407 to its feet and pushed Dayton's lead to 56-33 early in the second half, when Dayton went 16-for-21 from the field with all five misses from beyond the arc.

Davidson's Jon Axel Gudmunsson scored 17 of his 20 points in the second half, when the Wildcats never got closer than 12.

NBA roundup

Bucks hand Thunder 'butt whooping'

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo and the NBA-leading Milwaukee Bucks made quick work of the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Antetokounmpo had 32 points and 13 rebounds and Milwaukee surged to a 24-point lead in the second quarter in a 133-86 victory Friday night. The 47-point margin was the Bucks' largest of the season — and the Thunder's worst of the season.

"It feels good. It feels good seeing other guys going out there, playing hard and being up 40 points, sitting on the bench, relaxing, having fun," Antetokounmpo said. "Everyone is smiling. Games like these are always the best games."

"We were extremely ready. We moved the ball. We were defending. We know that in the fourth quarter, they always come back to the game. We never relaxed."

Chris Paul scored 18 points for Oklahoma City.

"We got a lot of really good

looks, but our defense and our rebounding wasn't much tonight," Paul said. "It's just an old-fashioned butt whooping."

Both teams were without their second-leading scorers. Bucks All-Star Khris Middleton was a late scratch with a sore neck. An ankle injury kept Thunder forward Danilo Gallinari out.

Milwaukee outrebounded Oklahoma City, 67-36.

The Bucks made a season-high 21 three-pointers. The Thunder were 6-for-35 from beyond the arc.

Hornets 99, Raptors 96: Terry Rozier hit a tiebreaking free throw with 2.1 seconds remaining and visiting Charlotte handed Toronto its second consecutive loss and third in 20 games.

Bismack Biyombo had 13 points and 11 rebounds against his former team, and Devonte Graham scored nine of his 18 in the fourth quarter as the Hornets won their second straight and beat short-handed Toronto for the third time in 10

meetings.

Pelicans 116, Cavaliers 104: Brandon Ingram scored 29 points, Zion Williamson added 24, and host New Orleans beat Cleveland.

Jrue Holiday scored 22 points and Derrick Favors grabbed 15 rebounds for the Pelicans, who earned their third victory in four games.

Heat 126, Mavericks 118: Jimmy Butler scored 26 points, Duncan Robinson added 24 and Miami scored the first 13 points of the fourth quarter against visiting Dallas to win for just the third time in 10 games and spoil Luka Doncic's 21st birthday.

Clippers 132, Nuggets 103: Paul George hit six three-pointers while scoring 24 points, Kawhi Leonard added 19 points and host Los Angeles routed Denver in a meeting of Western Conference powers.

Pistons 113, Suns 111: Derrick Rose scored 31 points, Christian Wood and Brandon Knight added 19 apiece and visiting Detroit snapped a seven-

game losing streak by beating Phoenix.

Jazz 129, Wizards 119: Donovan Mitchell scored 10 of his 30 points in an 82-second span of the fourth quarter, and host Utah snapped a four-game losing streak.

Kings 104, Grizzlies 101: De'Aaron Fox scored 25 points, Harry Giles added 16 and visiting Sacramento gained a step on the final Western Conference playoff spot with a win over Memphis.

Hawks 141, Nets 118: John Collins had 33 points and 13 rebounds, rookie Cam Reddish scored 17 of his career-high 26 points in the third quarter, and Atlanta handed visiting Brooklyn its third straight loss.

Magic 136, Timberwolves 125: Terrence Ross scored 19 of his season-high 33 points in the fourth quarter and Aaron Gordon finished with 17 points, 11 rebounds and a career-high 12 assists for his first career triple-double in host Orlando's win over Minnesota.

NHL roundup

Suddenly hot Flyers down Rangers, win fifth straight

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Claude Giroux scored twice and Carter Hart stopped 26 shots to lead the Philadelphia Flyers to their fifth straight win, 5-2 over the New York Rangers on Friday night.

The Flyers have been sensational of late as they surge up the Eastern Conference standings. They are an impressive 23-5-4 at home and Hart improved to 18-2-2 at Wells Fargo Center — 14-1 over his last 15 starts.

Sean Couturier, James van Riemsdyk and Kevin Hayes also scored to help the Flyers beat the Rangers for the eighth

time in the last nine games of the series.

Jesper Fast and Brett Howden scored for the Rangers, and Alexandar Georgiev — starting for the second straight night — finished with 35 saves. The Rangers came into the game with a franchise-record nine straight road wins, and nine wins in their last 10 overall. They trail Columbus — which lost 5-0 to Minnesota — by two points for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

Wild 5, Blue Jackets 0: Alex Stalock stopped 24 shots for his fourth shutout of the season and Minnesota beat host Columbus for the second time this week.

Zach Parise and Kevin Fiala

each had a goal and an assist to help the Wild win their third straight and improve to 12-5-1 in their past 18. They moved within a point of a wild card in the crowded Western Division.

Avalanche 3, Hurricanes 2: Samuel Girard scored the tiebreaking goal with 2:37 left in the third period and visiting Colorado won its fifth straight.

Tyson Jost scored twice for the Avalanche, and Pavel Francouz stopped 45 shots to win his fifth consecutive start. Colorado won its seventh consecutive road game, matching the longest such streak in franchise history.

Golden Knights 4, Sabres 2: Reilly Smith scored twice,

Robin Lehner stopped 32 shots in his debut with his new team and host Vegas got its franchise-record eighth straight win.

William Karlsson and Nicolas Roy also scored to help Vegas open a six-point lead ahead of Vancouver and Edmonton in the Pacific Division — the largest lead in the division by any team this season.

Ducks 3, Penguins 2: John Gibson made 28 saves, Brendan Guhle scored the winning goal in the second period and host Anaheim won its second straight.

Danton Heinen and Ryan Getzlaf also scored for the Ducks, who were missing their top three defensemen.