

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Afghan officials: Islamic State in south

*The Associated Press*

CAMP SHORABAK, Afghanistan — Afghan officials confirmed for the first time Monday that the extremist Islamic State group is active in the south, recruiting fighters, flying black flags and, according to some sources, even battling Taliban militants.

The sources, including an Afghan general and a provincial governor, said a man identified as Mullah Abdul Rauf was actively recruiting fighters for the group, which controls large parts of Syria and Iraq.

Gen. Mahmood Khan, the deputy commander of the army's 215 Corps, said that within the past week residents of a number of districts in the southern Helmand province have said Rauf's representatives are fanning out to recruit people.

"A number of tribal leaders, jihadi commanders and some ulema (religious council members) and other people have contacted me to tell me that Mullah Rauf had contacted them and invited them to join him," Khan said.

But he said the Taliban, which are active across Helmand and control some districts, have warned people not to contact Rauf.

"People are saying that he has raised black flags and even has tried to bring down white Taliban flags in some areas," said Saifullah Sanginwal, a tribal leader in Sangin district. "There are reports that 19 or 20 people have been killed" in fighting between the Taliban and the Islamic State group, he added.

Rauf was a corps commander during the Taliban's

1996-2001 rule of Afghanistan, according to Amir Mohammad Akundzada, the governor of Nimroz province, neighboring Helmand.

Akundzada said he is related to Rauf but has not seen him for almost 20 years.

Both Khan and Akundzada said Rauf was apprehended after the fall of the Taliban in the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and was detained for years at Guantanamo Bay.

Khan and Akundzada suggested Rauf may have fallen out with the leaders of the Afghan Taliban after spending time in the Pakistani city of Quetta, where Afghan officials and analysts believe senior Taliban leaders are based.

A video released online Saturday purports to show militants from both Afghanistan and Pakistan pledging support

to the Islamic State group.

But Akundzada said the Islamic State was not likely to gain traction with ordinary Afghans. "People who want to fight in Afghanistan just create new names — one day they are wearing white clothes (of the Taliban) and the next day they have black clothes and call themselves Daesh, but they are the same people," he said, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group.

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the U.S. has noted the "rhetorical message of support" for the Islamic State group by some in Afghanistan.

"We continue to watch for signs that these statements could amount to something more than just rhetorical support," she said. "That doesn't mean it's unimportant."

## Kerry praises Pakistan for battle against militants

*The Associated Press*

ISLAMABAD — Secretary of State John Kerry on Tuesday praised the Pakistani military's operation against militants in the country's northwest, saying the results are "significant," but cautioned that more work needs to be done.

Pakistan launched a major operation in the North Waziristan region in June. The U.S. had long advocated for such an operation because the region had become a hub for militant groups who attack targets in both Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan and a source of tension between the U.S., Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The current operations "in the northwest have disrupted militant activities in the tribal areas and resulted in impor-

tant seizures of weapons," Kerry said, speaking during a press conference in Islamabad with Sartaj Aziz, the Pakistani prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs.

"The operation is not yet complete but already the results are significant. Pakistani soldiers and their commanders deserve enormous credit," he said.

"But make no mistake: The task is a difficult one and it is not done. We all have a responsibility to ensure that these extremists are no longer able to secure a foothold in this country or elsewhere," he said.

Kerry also announced that \$250 million in previously appropriated money will be given to emergency relief efforts in the tribal areas, mainly North Waziristan. Hundreds of thou-

sands of people fled the area due to the fighting.

Kerry also praised the re-opening Monday of the school in Peshawar where Taliban gunmen on Dec. 16 slaughtered 150 students and teachers in one of the country's worst terrorist attacks. Kerry called it a testament to the resolve of the Pakistani people.

The secretary arrived in Pakistan on Monday and met with Aziz as well as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He met later Tuesday with Pakistan's army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, at military headquarters in Rawalpindi, and was expected to fly to Geneva for a meeting Wednesday with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif to discuss nuclear negotiations that are to resume on Thursday in the Swiss city.

Kerry had hoped to travel to Peshawar to visit survivors of the school attack at a hospital but weather forced the trip's cancellation, said a State Department official speaking on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak to the media on the subject.

Pakistan has boosted operations against violent extremists in recent months. But U.S. officials traveling with Kerry said Washington wants to ensure that there is a "real and sustained effort" to limit the abilities of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network and Lashkar e Tayyiba, which pose direct threats to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, as well as to American interests.

# US, S. Korea begin anti-sub warfare drill

BY ASHLEY ROWLAND  
AND YOO KYONG CHANG

*Stars and Stripes*

SEOUL, South Korea — The U.S. and South Korea on Tuesday kicked off a two-day joint naval drill that includes two U.S. destroyers and several South Korean vessels.

The USS Mustin and the USS John McCain, each with about 280 personnel, are participating off South Korea's eastern coast. Commander Naval Forces Korea spokesman Lt. Arlo Abrahamson said the exercise includes anti-submarine warfare training, communication drills, ship maneuvers and liaison officer exchanges.

"Some of it they've done ashore, and some of it they do at sea," he said.

The South Korean destroyer Gwang-

gaeto, a submarine, anti-submarine aircraft and two helicopters are also taking part, according to a South Korean navy spokesman, who said the exercise is meant to reinforce the allies' readiness posture against North Korea, which is believed to have some 70 submarines.

He would not disclose the number of South Korean troops involved in the exercise.

Both militaries described the drill as routine training and unrelated to a report that North Korea is trying to increase its submarine capabilities.

Meanwhile, South Korea has announced the creation of a new submarine command that will fall under the command of a two-star general and will include nine 1,200-ton and four 1,800-ton subs, plus five more 1,800-ton submarines that are scheduled to be built by 2018,

the South Korean spokesman said.

The U.S.-Korea Institute at John Hopkins University reported last week on its website 38 North that recent satellite imagery shows a North Korean submarine that may be outfitted with launch tubes for ballistic or cruise missiles, a development that could eventually give Pyongyang's weaponry a wider range.

"Submarines carrying land-attack missiles would be challenging to locate and track, would be mobile assets able to attack from any direction, and could operate at significant distances from the Korean peninsula," the website said.

Imagery collected during the last six months also shows that the North has been readying a naval shipyard for "a significant naval construction program" that could be submarine-related.

## Social media is monitored after CENTCOM hack

JOHN VANDIVER

*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Other combatant commands are closely monitoring their social media platforms after U.S. Central Command's Twitter feed was briefly taken over Monday by hackers claiming to be affiliated with the Islamic State group.

At U.S. European Command headquarters in Stuttgart, officials say new and tougher security measures were already in place before Monday's attack on CENTCOM.

"We routinely emphasize to the command, the importance of ensuring social media privacy settings are reviewed and updated based on the current cyber environment," Navy Capt. Greg Hicks, a EUCOM spokesman, said in a statement. "In fact, we have

been actively reviewing our social media security measures for months now, as part of our [force protection] changes announced a while back."

In November, EUCOM ordered all personnel in its area of operation to refrain from wearing uniforms off base to lower the profile of military members. In conjunction with that directive, EUCOM advised troops to ensure individual social media accounts didn't reveal too much personal information on their geolocation functions and profiles.

EUCOM also took steps to secure its official social media platforms.

"In addition to the security measures already in place, we took additional steps to ensure all official U.S. European Command social media platforms have the proper security levels and protections to defend

against cyber intrusions," Hicks said.

Meanwhile, at U.S. Africa Command, officials are monitoring their respective sites, saying strong security measures are in place.

"We continue to vigilantly monitor our social media sites for vulnerability and are adhering to the DOD policy guidance," Lt. Col. Mark Cheadle, AFRICOM spokesman, said in an email. "We haven't changed our policy or high standards of precaution. Operational information security is something we take very seriously to protect our people and assets from threats around the world."

In Monday's attack on CENTCOM's Twitter feed and YouTube channel, hackers posted a series of threats to servicemembers and contact information of military staff and retired generals.

## House passes suicide prevention bill

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The House on Monday passed a bill named after deceased Marine Corps veteran Clay Hunt that would overhaul Department of Veterans Affairs suicide prevention programs.

The vote was a crucial first step by supporters who hope to pass the bill through the new Congress after it was blocked in December by retiring budget hawk Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla. There were 403 votes for the bill, no opposition and 30 law-

makers who did not vote. Now it heads to the Senate.

The legislation calls for a one-stop website with suicide prevention resources for veterans, more VA psychiatrists and an independent review of current department programs.

Hunt, who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, committed suicide in 2011. His parents and veterans service organizations back the overhaul as a way to reduce an average of 22 veteran suicides daily in the United States.

## Black lab rides the bus solo

SEATTLE — A black Labrador named Eclipse just wants to get to the dog park. So if her owner takes too, and their bus arrives, she climbs aboard solo and rides to her stop — to the delight of fellow Seattle bus passengers.

The dog and her owner, Jeff Young, live near a bus stop.

In Young's words, "She's a bus-riding, sidewalk-walking dog." Young said his dog sometimes gets on the bus without him, and he catches up with her at the dog park.

Bus riders report she hops onto seats next to strangers and watches for her stop.

From The Associated Press

# Rockets top slumping Nets

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — James Harden scored 30 points, carrying Houston on a night when Dwight Howard did little after fighting with Kevin Garnett, and the Rockets beat the slumping Brooklyn Nets 113-99 on Monday.

Garnett was ejected in the first quarter after head-butting Howard in the face and throwing the ball at him, while Howard received a technical foul after appearing to punch or slap Garnett in the neck.

Howard had a quiet night otherwise, finishing with eight points and five rebounds, but the Rockets didn't need

much in the middle while dominating from the outside with 16 three-pointers in 40 attempts.

**Pistons 114, Raptors 111:** Brandon Jennings had 34 points and 10 assists, and visiting Detroit won for the ninth time in 10 games.

Greg Monroe had 22 points and 10 rebounds as the Pistons snapped a four-game losing streak against Toronto.

**Magic 121, Bulls 114:** Nikola Vucevic had 33 points and 11 rebounds, and Orlando snapped a six-game losing streak.

Orlando shot a season-high 59 percent

from the field in its first win in Chicago since an 83-82 victory on Dec. 16, 2013. The Magic had lost three in a row and 12 of 15 against the Bulls since the start of the 2010-11 season.

**Celtics 108, Pelicans 100:** Jared Sullinger had 27 points and 10 rebounds for host Boston, and rookie Marcus Smart nailed a key three-pointer in the closing minute.

The Celtics won for the third time in their last 12 games. Jae Crowder scored 22 points, Marcus Thornton had 13 and Brandon Bass finished with 12.

# Flyers net 5 in 2nd in rout of Lightning

The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Jake Voracek was one of five Flyers to score in the second period, leading Philadelphia to a 7-3 win over the Tampa Bay Lightning on Monday night.

Voracek, Pierre-Edouard Bellemare, Mark Streit and Brayden Schenn all scored in a 6-minute, 52-second span in the second to chase goalie Evgeni Nabokov and help the Flyers match a season high in goals. Michael Raffl also scored in the five-goal period.

Voracek boosted his NHL-best point total to 52. Claude Giroux, who turned 27, had two assists to give him 34 on the season and match his teammate for the league lead. Voracek and Giroux were named NHL All-Stars over the weekend.

Philadelphia's Rob Zepp won his second career game in place of injured Steve Mason. Mason is expected to miss two weeks because of a lower-body injury.

**Capitals 2, Avalanche 1:** Alex Ovechkin scored a tiebreaking power-play goal late in the second period to help Washington beat visiting Colorado.

Jay Beagle also scored and Braden Holtby stopped 31 shots to earn his 21st victory for the Capitals.

Alex Tanguay scored for the Avalanche, and Semyon Varlamov finished with 36 saves.

**Kings 2, Maple Leafs 0:** Martin Jones made 19 saves in his seventh career shutout, and Anze Kopitar scored in the opening minute of Los Angeles' victory over visiting Toronto.

Marian Gaborik got an empty-net goal to seal Jones' third shutout in his last four starts for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who snapped their three-game skid with just their second victory in seven games.

# 27 years later, Wyoming back in Top 25

The Associated Press

It took Wyoming nearly three decades to get back into the AP Top 25. Now Larry Shyatt's Cowboys get the chance to stick around.

Back in the poll for the first time since 1988, No. 25 Wyoming hosts San Diego State on Wednesday night as it tries to stay unbeaten in the Mountain West Conference.

"I think if you were to ask them (about the ranking), they'd probably say, 'That's pretty neat for other people but we've got a lot of work to do,'" Shyatt said of his players.

Wyoming (15-2, 4-0) has won seven straight games overall and 13 straight at home, the program's best streak there since the 2000-01 season.

After hosting the Aztecs — who were ranked 13th in December — Wyoming travels to Fresno State on Saturday.

This is the first time the Cowboys have been ranked since the Fennis Dembo-led squad checked in at No. 13 in March 1988. Shyatt coached against that squad as an assistant at New Mexico, and has now helped bring back that same program.

Wyoming hasn't won the Mountain West regular-season title or been to the NCAA tournament since 2002.

"The only thing we're going to talk about

is the team we have coming up: San Diego State," Shyatt said. "They actually have what it is that these guys want. They have championships."

**Kentucky still No. 1:** Kentucky stayed No. 1, but not unanimously.

The top-ranked Wildcats (15-0) were atop 63 of 65 votes cast Monday, ending a run of five straight weeks as the unanimous No. 1. Kentucky beat Mississippi at home in overtime in its Southeastern Conference opener then won in double OT at Texas A&M.

Kentucky hosted Missouri on Tuesday and travels to Alabama on Saturday.

"We're still winning tough games and we're fighting like crazy," coach John Calipari said. "It's just that we're not exactly where we were, and it's all good because I don't want us to be like it's March right now. It's too early to be like it's March."

**Virginia's votes:** No. 2 Virginia (15-0), the only other unbeaten team remaining, earned the other two first-place votes.

The voters who switched to Virginia had similar logic behind their decision. John Feinstein of The Washington Post and Zach Osterman of The Indianapolis Star both cited Kentucky's overtime struggles compared to Virginia's road win against

a ranked Notre Dame team that had won 11 straight.

Both also said they vote based on who is playing the best right now instead of who will finish No. 1.

Virginia hosted Clemson on Tuesday, then travels to Boston College on Saturday.

**Jackson to have foot surgery:** Wisconsin's Traevon Jackson will have surgery on his injured right foot this week, depriving the seventh-ranked Badgers of their veteran point guard in Big Ten play.

Jackson was hurt in Sunday's 67-62 loss at Rutgers. He is scheduled to have surgery Thursday.

The team said Monday that Jackson will begin rehab in two or three weeks, but did not specify when he might return to the court. Jackson said in a statement that he was looking forward to finishing off the year.

Coach Bo Ryan relies on Jackson to take big shots late in close games. He was averaging 9.4 points and 2.9 assists.

Sophomore Bronson Koenig will take over the starting point guard duties for the Badgers (15-2), who host Nebraska on Thursday.

# Former Dolphin fullback swims 16 hours to safety

The Associated Press

PLANTATION, Fla. — The former NFL fullback entered the room with a wobble in his walk, and needed assistance climbing a podium so he could face a media throng and discuss his death-defying 16-hour swim to shore.

Rob Konrad, 38, who played for the Miami Dolphins from 1999 to 2004, had been around boats since his childhood on Boston's North Shore. So he knew what it meant when he fell off his 31-foot boat while fishing alone nine miles from land.

He swam to Palm Beach, covering a dis-

tance of 27 miles before ringing the doorbell of an oceanfront home for help at 4:30 a.m. Thursday.

He said he was taking his boat for servicing and decided to do a little fishing along the way. He had caught a large fish and was tending to the rod when a large wave hit, flipping Konrad into the ocean.

His boat was on autopilot and headed east. There were no other boats in sight. Konrad wasn't wearing a life preserver.

Konrad quickly decided to swim toward shore.

His boat was found near Grand Bahama Island on Deadman's Reef

## Miller leads US skiers in return to Cup training

WENGEN, Switzerland — Bode Miller returned to the World Cup circuit on Tuesday as the fastest American skier in a downhill training run on the classic Lauberhorn slope.

Miller, who underwent back surgery in November, finished with the best time of the in-form United States team which has won the past two men's downhills.

Travis Ganong was 0.34 behind Miller, and Steven Wyman did not finish.

## Reed rallies to win tournament in a playoff

KAPALUA, Hawaii — Patrick Reed holed an 80-yard shot for eagle and made two birdies over his last four holes Monday. The last birdie was on the 18th hole in a playoff to beat Jimmy Walker in the Hyundai Tournament of Champions.

Reed was four shots behind with four holes to play when he put together his big rally and closed with a 6-under 67.

Walker had a chance to win in regulation but missed his birdie putt from 18 feet and shot 69.



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# Ohio St. wins inaugural CFP title

*The Associated Press*

Ohio State was done when Braxton Miller got hurt in August.

Ohio State was done when it lost at home to Virginia Tech in September.

Ohio State was done when J.T. Barrett got hurt in November.

A funny thing happened: Every time the Buckeyes looked done, they kept getting better. And in the new era of college football, that was enough to earn a chance to win a championship.

They took advantage of an opportunity they never would have had in the BCS, shrugging off questions about if they belonged among college football's final four. Cardale Jones, Ezekiel Elliott and the Buckeyes won the first College Football Playoff national championship, upsetting Marcus Mariota and Oregon 42-20 on Monday night in Arlington, Texas.

Behind their bullish backup quarterback Jones and the relentless running of Elliott, the Buckeyes (14-1) completed a remarkable in-season turnaround with a dominating performance against the Ducks (13-2).

"Late August, around camp, everybody counted us out when our Heisman Trophy quarterback went down, and then when

the first college football playoff rankings came out we were like No. 16 or 17," Jones said. "Long story short, we weren't supposed to be here."

Ohio State began the first major college football playoff as the fourth and final seed, and was an underdog against both top-seeded Alabama and second-seeded Oregon. Plenty of people thought TCU or Baylor should have had the Buckeyes' spot.

No question about it now: Ohio State is the truest champion big-time football has ever crowned, showered by golden confetti as its band played the school's unofficial anthem, "Hang on Sloopy," after the clock hit 0:00.

"This will go down as one of the great stories in college football history," coach Urban Meyer said.

The Buckeyes overcame two injured Heisman contenders and one awful 35-21 loss to Virginia Tech to win their first national title since the 2002 BCS championship. In the BCS, the early slip to the Hokies could have pretty much eliminated the Buckeyes from the championship race.

Before the BCS's 16-year stint, it was up to The Associated Press and coaches' polls to sort out which team was best,

with a little help from the bowls. The Buckeyes have three of those championships, too.

Now they can add college football's newest championship trophy to the display cases at Woody Hayes Athletic Center back in Columbus.

Meyer now has three titles, adding this one for his home state team to the two he won for Florida. He matches Alabama's Nick Saban as the only coaches to win national championship at two schools. It's taken just three seasons for Meyer to put the Buckeyes — and the Big Ten — back on top, with a team that looks built to last.

Elliott, a sophomore, was the offensive MVP and ran for 246 yards and four touchdowns on a career-high 36 carries. In the last three games — the Big Ten championship against Wisconsin, the Sugar Bowl semifinal against Alabama and the final against Oregon — Elliott had 696 yards rushing.

Jones, who took over in the Michigan game for the injured Barrett (who had taken over at the start of the season for the injured Miller), passed for 242 yards and a touchdown and ran for a score in his third career start. The third-year sophomore proved he could keep up with Mariota — at least on this night.

# Broncos, coach Fox part ways

*The Associated Press*

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — If Peyton Manning decides to return to the Broncos next season, he'll have a new coaching staff to work with in Denver.

GM John Elway is looking for a new coach after agreeing to part ways with John Fox following the Broncos' second stunning home playoff loss in three years as heavy favorites.

Manning said after Denver's 24-13 loss to Indianapolis on Sunday that he was unsure about returning for an 18th NFL season and fourth in Denver but agreed to delay that decision.

Elway and Fox didn't hesitate to move on without one another.

Fox won the AFC West all four of his years in Denver, but each of those seasons ended in ugly fashion in the playoffs. Fox might already have something in the works with another franchise — he didn't shoot down a pregame report Sunday night that he could be available if the Broncos lost.

"It became clear that it was best for both the Denver Broncos and Coach Fox to move on and make this change," Elway said in a statement.

So Fox is out after going 49-22 in Denver, including the playoffs, following a 78-74 record in nine years with the Carolina Panthers, counting the postseason.

Elway thanked Fox for helping "establish a positive, winning culture for this team" and said he "deserves a lot of credit for the Broncos' turnaround," but added "there is still work to be done" to win a Super Bowl.

Fox characterized his meeting with Elway as productive and honest and the two "mutually agreed that the timing was right for this decision."

"Although we came up short of our ultimate goal, I am proud of our team's many accomplishments during these last four years," Fox said in a statement. "It was an honor to coach the Denver Broncos, a first-class franchise with great fans and a winning tradition."

"I am eager to continue my coaching career and look forward to the opportunities that lie ahead," Fox added.

# Oregon falls one game short — again

*The Associated Press*

ARLINGTON, Texas — Oregon had cut the biggest deficit of the season to a single point and was in position to grab the national championship that eluded the Ducks four years ago.

They fell short — again. Ohio State's Ezekiel Elliott scored four touchdowns, three in the second half after the Oregon rally, and the Buckeyes won the first College Football Playoff national championship with a 42-20 victory Monday night.

The message from coach Mark Helfrich in the \$1.2 billion home of the Dallas Cowboys was the same one Chip Kelly offered when the Ducks couldn't secure the school's first crown at the NFL home of the Arizona Cardinals to wrap up the 2010 season.

One of these days ... "Everything is in place from a support standpoint and facilities standpoint and

infrastructure standpoint, talent, our coaching staff is outstanding, and the leadership is outstanding," Helfrich said. "That's kind of all the ingredients."

Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Mariota passed for 333 yards and two touchdowns, but the Ducks' warp-speed spread offense missed too many red-zone opportunities and couldn't unleash its running game against linebacker Darron Lee and an Ohio State front seven stacked with future NFL draft picks.

"We fought through a lot of stuff," Mariota said. "We ended up short tonight, but that shouldn't take away from what we were able to do this year."

Even with four Ohio State turnovers, the Ducks were held to their lowest point total of the season, four touchdowns below their average coming in.

Oregon has done just about everything as it blossomed into a national power over the last two decades, but it will likely continue the search for its first national

championship without Mariota. Barring a major surprise, the junior is likely to turn pro — though he wouldn't talk about his upcoming draft decision after the game.

Ohio State third-stringer Cardale Jones, who took over three games ago for the injured J.T. Barrett (who had taken over at the start of the season for the injured Braxton Miller), passed for 242 yards and a touchdown and ran for score. The 250-pound third-year sophomore proved he could keep up with Mariota — at least on this night.

And the Ducks simply couldn't slow Elliott, who had his third straight 200-yard game with 246 yards on 36 carries.

"He just runs hard, can break a lot of tackles," said defensive end Arik Armstead, who had a fumble recovery when Oregon was cutting a 14-point deficit to one. "We try to get as many bodies on him as we can."

# Looking for edge, Packers to head west earlier than usual

*The Associated Press*

GREEN BAY, Wis. — The Packers will get a head start out West to prepare for the NFC title game against the Seattle Seahawks.

Green Bay plans to leave for Seattle on Friday, one day ahead of when the team would usually fly out for Sunday road games.

This is no ordinary road game. The winner goes to the Super Bowl.

Coach Mike McCarthy is hoping this trip to CenturyLink Field has a different outcome than the previous one in September — a 36-16 loss in the league opener to the Seahawks.

"You learn from past experiences," McCarthy said Monday. "We evaluate every schedule, every practice. We're always looking to try to get better."

Just like quarterback Aaron Rodgers, whom McCarthy said felt well a day after

the 26-21 win over Dallas that clinched the Packers' first trip to the NFC championship game since their most recent run to the Super Bowl title after the 2010 season.

Dealing with a lingering left calf injury, Rodgers once again proved Sunday that he's better than most healthy quarterbacks in the league even if he's less than 100 percent. He finished 24 of 35 for 316 yards and three touchdowns.

Rodgers said the calf felt better as the game progressed. A practice plan for Rodgers will be determined on Wednesday.

"I think he feels better at this time this week than he did last week," McCarthy said.

For as good as Rodgers was against the Cowboys with limited mobility, the Packers may need him to be even better against Seattle's rugged defense on the road.

Rodgers was 23 of 33 for 189 yards with a touchdown and interception in the opener against Seattle. Back then, the Packers offense was still trying to find its rhythm. Eddie Lacy got knocked out of that game with a concussion.

Things have changed dramatically. The offensive line has played well all season. Jordy Nelson and Randall Cobb are one of the top receiving tandems in the league, and Lacy has gotten stronger in December and January.

And now, rookies Davante Adams and Richard Rodgers have proven they can produce in the postseason after good games against Dallas. Fullback John Kuhn and tight end Andrew Quarless have also emerged late in the season to help diversify the attack.

"You know, this team from Week 1 has grown a lot, so we're definitely looking forward to it," said Quarless, who had four catches for 31 yards and a touch-

down against the Cowboys. "Just to see the growth and resilience of this team throughout the postseason is a positive."

The tweaks that McCarthy made to the training schedule and conditioning program have also paid off. Not counting Rodgers' lingering injury, the Packers for the most part haven't been hit by long-term or season-ending injuries to key players that seemed to slow them down in recent years.

The move to fly out on Friday fits the pattern of McCarthy trying new things to give his team an edge. The practice schedule will be normal otherwise, given that Friday is usually a day off the field. The team will then run through a practice on Saturday in Washington.

"Just the fact that we're trying to get better at everything we're doing," McCarthy said.