

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## DOD: Military suicides up slightly in '14

*The Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Suicides among members of the active-duty military rose slightly in 2014, led by increases in the number of sailors and airmen who took their own lives, new Defense Department figures show.

There were fewer suicides by Army soldiers and Marines, the two services that have seen the most combat in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade.

According to preliminary Pentagon data, there were 288 confirmed and suspected suicides by active-duty personnel in 2014, compared with 286 in 2013. Both totals represent a sharp drop from the 2012 number of 352.

The data was obtained by The Associated Press.

Over time the numbers may change, particularly if deaths that were initially believed to be suicides are found to be otherwise.

The number of suicides by members of the active-duty National Guard and Reserve decreased a bit last year after going up slightly in 2013. Those totals are included in the overall 2014 numbers.

A year ago, officials were a bit heartened to see the number of suicides in 2013 drop by more than 15 percent from 2012, but they have consistently warned that this is a very difficult problem to address.

All of the services have beefed up programs to identify and reach out to troops who may have problems, encouraging servicemembers to come forward if they need help and

urging others to recognize and react to any signs of trouble in their unit colleagues.

"We are working to better understand the trends and what they mean, but it's probably too early to know exactly why the numbers have risen," said Cmdr. Chris Servello, a Navy spokesman. "Across the force we continue to educate sailors about warning signs, when and how to intervene and that it's OK to ask for help."

Analysis by Pentagon officials has shown that more often suicides involve young, white men, usually married, using a non-military-issued gun.

Many times the victims had reported family or relationship stress.

Military leaders have tried to create programs aimed at reducing stress and teaching

troops about coping mechanisms and other tools to deal with daily pressures.

According to the data, the number of Navy suicides increased from 43 in 2013 to 58 in 2014; Air Force suicides increased from 52 to 60. Marine suicides declined from 45 in 2013 to 35 in 2014, and Army suicides decreased from 146 in 2013 to 135 in 2014.

According to the latest numbers available, the military suicide rate is sharply higher than the civilian rate.

The civilian rate for 2012 was almost 13 suicides per 100,000 people. The military suicide rate for 2012 was 21.8 per 100,000.

Military suicides hit a record high in 2012, at 352, but had begun a somewhat steady rise in 2006.

## First woman to serve on fast-attack sub reports for duty

BY STEVEN BEARDSLEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

The first woman to serve aboard a Navy fast-attack submarine has reported to the USS Minnesota. She is one of six officers expected to join fast-attack crews in the months ahead.

Two more women will report to the Minnesota by the end of January, with three more slated to join the USS Virginia in the spring, said Lt. Cmdr. Tommy Crosby, a spokesman for the Navy's Submarine Force Atlantic.

Integration of Virginia-class submarines comes three years into the Navy's effort to gradually bring female officers and enlisted into its undersea service. Female officers first came aboard Ohio-class submarines in late 2011. As of last sum-

mer, more than 60 women were serving in 14 submarines.

Submarines were one of the few remaining areas of military service off-limits to women when the Navy lifted its prohibition in 2010. Three years later, the Pentagon removed the militarywide ban on women in combat units and required gender integration plans from each of the services.

The Navy's 10 Virginia-class fast-attack submarines are armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles and designed to conduct surveillance, seek out and destroy other submarines and carry Special Operations forces. They are smaller and have tighter quarters than Ohio-class submarines, the designation for ballistic-missile and guided-missile boats. Fifteen

officers typically make up the wardroom in both classes.

The plan to bring the six female officers aboard Virginia-class submarines was announced in 2013 by Vice Adm. Michael Connor, commander of Navy submarine forces. Two of the women were to be supply officers, with the other four nuclear trained. Submarine officers must go through an intensive 18-month training.

The service says it will open positions for enlisted women on some Ohio-class submarines next year and for several Virginia-class subs in 2020. All future submarines will be designed for integrated crews, the Navy has said.

The Navy's integration plans call for women to make up 20 percent of the enlisted crews on

already integrated Ohio-class submarines by 2020.

The Navy has described the integration process as smooth, although a recent episode aboard the Ohio-class USS Wyoming raises questions about that. The Navy investigated 12 petty officers for sharing and watching a video of a female officer showering aboard the submarine, according to the Navy Times. One of the petty officers made the recording and passed it along, according to the report.

Connor has said two more fast-attack subs will be integrated next fiscal year, this time in the Pacific. The Minnesota and the Virginia are ported in Groton, Conn.

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# Navy helps patrol area around Scotland base

BY STEVEN BEARDSLEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Navy contributed maritime patrol aircraft for operations with the Royal Navy off Scotland's coast last month in what British and American media have described as a hunt for a foreign submarine.

Two P-3C Orion patrol aircraft were dispatched to the United Kingdom for operations between Nov. 27 and Dec. 7 and again between Dec. 31 and Jan. 8, said Cmdr. Philip Rosi, a spokesman for U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa. Each time, aircraft were based at RAF Lossiemouth in northern Scotland, he said. They have since returned to the U.S. naval air base at Sigonella, Sicily.

The aircraft are part of the maritime patrol squadron VP-

4 out of Hawaii, which is on a routine deployment to the Sicily base, Rosi said.

Neither Rosi nor a spokesman for the British Defense Ministry would speak to the nature of the operations. Citing unnamed sources, the British newspaper *The Independent* reported that British and American patrols were searching for a Russian vessel last week and that Russian submarines have been making frequent "visits" off the northern and western coasts of Scotland. Of concern is the area around Gare Loch, the newspaper said, home to the Faslane naval base and the U.K. nuclear-armed submarine force.

The magazine *Aviation Week* reported a month earlier that Canadian and French maritime patrol craft joined British

surface ships during a search for a foreign submarine off the western coast of Scotland in late November and early December.

Ben Barry, a military analyst with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, said that a foreign submarine in the area searched would cause alarm, though he didn't know the details behind the recent patrols. "Any country that's got ballistic missile submarines that's going to operate from a specific base is going to be very sensitive to the idea that they are being (observed by) an adversary and tracked," he said.

The U.S. says the Russian military has become more provocative in foreign waters and airspace since last year's escalation of tensions with the West over the seizure of Crimea from

Ukraine. Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert, U.S. chief of naval operations, said last year that Russia has been just as active undersea as it has in the air.

Sweden's military searched its waters in October after purported sightings of a foreign vessel. It later produced evidence of what it said was a submarine, including photos of a periscope and undersea tracks. Although officials never publicly blamed Russia, they left little doubt where their suspicions lay.

The British government has faced local criticism over the request for allied help in the search. The U.K. military axed its maritime patrol program in 2010 after a review aimed at paring military spending.

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## Judge: Paris won't delay Tsarnaev trial

BOSTON — Jury selection will continue in Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's trial after a federal judge on Wednesday rejected the Boston Marathon bombing suspect's bid to suspend it because of the Paris terror attacks.

Individual questioning of prospective jurors begins Thursday.

Tsarnaev's lawyers argued in a motion filed Tuesday that the French terror attacks had placed the marathon bombings "at the center of a grim global drama." They said delaying jury selection would allow some time "for the extraordinary prejudice flowing from these events — and the comparison of those events to those at issue in this case — to diminish."

Judge George O'Toole Jr. denied the motion Wednesday, writing that his review of jury questionnaires filled out last week "has so far confirmed, rather than undermined, my judgment that a fair and impartial jury can and will be chosen to determine the issues in this case."

From The Associated Press

## Kyle's widow moved by actor's portrayal

*The Dallas Morning News*

Taya Kyle fretted over the idea of someone playing her late husband, Chris Kyle, a larger-than-life character who became the most prolific sniper in American history before his tragic death two years ago near Fort Worth, Texas.

How could a two-hour Hollywood movie come close to squaring myth and reality — the war hero with the husband and father who struggled to find his role back home?

In the end, it was something as small as a sniff, a subtle facial tic, that actor Bradley Co-

per does as he peers through the scope of his weapon. When Taya Kyle saw it on the screen, she nearly forgot she was looking at an actor and not her husband.

"It'd be almost like a tell in poker," she said. "In a stressful situation, Chris would do that."

Based on Chris Kyle's 2012 autobiography, "American Sniper" tells the story of how the Odessa, Texas, native went from being a rodeo cowboy to a Navy SEAL-trained sniper credited by the Navy with a record 160 kills. Kyle was honorably discharged in 2009 after 10 years of service, including

four combat tours in Iraq. He settled down in Midlothian but was killed in 2013, allegedly by a troubled Iraq War veteran Kyle was trying help. Eddie Ray Routh, a former Marine, remains in jail on a \$3 million bond awaiting trial, expected to start next month.

Before filming, Cooper and Clint Eastwood, the director who adapted Kyle's book to film, came to Texas to visit Taya in Midlothian.

"It felt like I had a couple of friends over," she said. "They were very respectful, kind and warm."

## Reclaim implicated VA managers' bonuses?

WASHINGTON — Department of Veterans Affairs executive bonuses are once more in the crosshairs on Capitol Hill.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., introduced a bill this week that would allow the VA secretary to take back performance pay from managers implicated in

last year's wait-time scandal and other wrongdoing — with no chance for an appeal.

The VA regularly paid out the bonuses to senior executives, and hundreds received them in 2012 and 2013, just before a series of revelations beginning in April showed veterans hospitals and clinics were manipulating patient scheduling records to hide long and

sometimes dangerous waits for health care. The falsely reported wait times led to higher annual bonus payments, which had ranged between about \$6,000 and \$12,000 for 292 senior executives, according to a VA inspector general audit and department data for fiscal year 2013 released by the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

From staff reports

# Miami ends Duke's home streak

The Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Suddenly, fourth-ranked Duke looks a bit lost. The defense isn't there. The three-point shots aren't falling. And its Hall of Fame coach senses a lack of confidence from his freshman-led team.

Now Mike Krzyzewski will see how his Blue Devils respond to two straight losses, the second ending the program's long winning streak at its famously hostile arena.

Angel Rodriguez scored 24 points and Miami shot 67 percent after halftime to upset No. 4 Duke 90-74 on Tuesday night, snapping the Blue Devils' 41-game home winning streak and giving them consecutive regular-season losses for the first time in nearly six years.

Duke (14-2, 2-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) hadn't lost at Cameron Indoor Stadium since March 2012 and hadn't lost consecutive regular-season games since February 2009.

**No. 1 Kentucky 86, Missouri**

**37:** Aaron Harrison scored 16 points, including five three-pointers, and the host Wildcats finally earned a conference victory in regulation by drilling the Tigers.

**No. 2 Virginia 65, Clemson**

**42:** Malcolm Brogdon scored 16 points, and the host Cavaliers took command with a 29-6 run to start the second half of a victory against the Tigers.

**No. 6 Louisville 78, Virginia**

**Tech 63:** Chris Jones had a career-high 11 assists and Terry Rozier scored 16 points as the host Cardinals easily brushed off the Hokies.

**No. 9 Kansas 67, No. 24**

**Oklahoma State 57:** Frank Mason III had 16 points and nine rebounds, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 14 points and the host Jayhawks beat the Cowboys to remain perfect in the Big 12.

**No. 16 West Virginia 86,**

**No. 18 Oklahoma 65:** Jevon Carter scored 18 points and the host

Mountaineers got their strongest performance of the season from their bench to beat the Sooners.

**No. 17 VCU 65, Rhode Island 60:** Treveon Graham scored 16

of his 26 points in the second half and visiting Virginia Commonwealth rallied for a victory over the Rams.

**Tennessee 74, No. 19**

**Arkansas 69:** Josh Richardson scored 20 points and the host Volunteers withstood a furious comeback to hang on for a victory over the Razorbacks.

**Butler 79, No. 21 Seton Hall**

**75 (OT):** Roosevelt Jones scored a season-high 23 points, Kellen Dunham added 21 and the visiting Bulldogs knocked off the Pirates.

**No. 23 Northern Iowa 63,**

**Bradley 52:** Seth Tuttle scored 15 points and sank four late free throws to help the visiting Panthers beat the Braves.

# Williams lifts T'wolves past Pacers

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Mo Williams scored a career-high 52 points, most in the NBA this season, and the Minnesota Timberwolves snapped a 15-game losing streak with a 110-101 victory over the Indiana Pacers on Tuesday night.

Williams made six three-pointers, including one that gave Minnesota a 102-96 lead. Andrew Wiggins added 20 points and Gorgui Dieng had 10 for the Timberwolves (6-31), who won for the first time since beating Portland 90-82 on Dec. 10.

C.J. Miles had 22 points and C.J. Watson added 17 for the Pacers (15-25), who have lost three of four.

Williams surpassed the 46 points scored

this season by both Carmelo Anthony and Pau Gasol, which had been tops in the NBA.

**Suns 107, Cavaliers 100:** LeBron James scored 33 points in his return from a two-week layoff but it wasn't enough to prevent Cleveland from slumping to their sixth straight loss, to host Phoenix

**Wizards 101, Spurs 93:** John Wall broke yet another personal 0-for-forever streak, this one against an entire team, scoring 25 points with eight assists in Washington's win that gave him his first taste of success against the reigning NBA champs.

**Hawks 105, 76ers 87:** Al Horford had his first career triple-double, scoring 21 points with

10 rebounds and 10 assists to lead Atlanta to its ninth straight win.

**Mavericks 108, Kings 104**

**(OT):** Monta Ellis scored six of his 28 points in overtime and added 10 assists, and visiting Dallas beat Sacramento.

**Warriors 116, Jazz 105:**

Stephen Curry scored 27 points and ignited a decisive third-quarter run to lead Golden State over host Utah.

**Heat 78, Lakers 75:** Mario Chalmers scored nine of his 19 points in the fourth quarter, Hassan Whiteside added 15 and Miami completed a Staples Center sweep.

Kobe Bryant scored 12 points on 3-for-19 shooting in his return to the Lakers.

# Perreault powers Jets past Panthers

The Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Mathieu Perreault scored four goals as the Winnipeg Jets cruised to an 8-2 victory over the Florida Panthers on Tuesday night.

Dustin Byfuglien added two goals and an assist and Jay Harrison and Evander Kane also scored for the Jets, who gave coach Paul Maurice his 500th win as a head coach.

Perreault scored four goals for the first time in his career and tied the franchise record for most goals in a game.

**Islanders 3, Rangers 0:** Frans Nielsen's short-handed tally capped his team's three-goal second period, Jaroslav Halak made 27 saves in his fourth shutout of the season, and Long Island's team cooled

off the host Rangers.

**Sharks 3, Coyotes 2:** Brenden Dillon scored his first goal of the season in the third period and Antti Niemi stopped 27 shots to lift San Jose past host Arizona.

**Stars 5, Senators 4:** John Klingberg scored two goals in a four-goal second period when host Dallas rallied from two down and beat Ottawa.

**Penguins 7, Wild 2:** David Perron scored twice and added an assist to lead host Pittsburgh past reeling Minnesota.

**Red Wings 3, Sabres 1:** Petr Mrazek made 25 saves in his first start in place of injured starting goalie Jimmy Howard, and visiting Detroit beat Buffalo.

**Hurricanes 3, Avalanche 2 (SO):** Victor Rask and Elias Lindholm

scored shootout goals, while Anton Khudobin stoned both opponents' shots as host Carolina stymied Colorado's comeback.

**Bruins 4, Lightning 3:** Rookie David Pastrnak scored twice for the second straight game and Milan Lucic had a goal and an assist as Boston topped visiting Tampa Bay.

**Blues 4, Oilers 2:** Vladimir Tarasenko scored his 24th goal and had an assist, defenseman Barret Jackman earned his second two-point night of the season, and host St. Louis won its fifth straight.

**Predators 5, Canucks 1:** Colin Wilson had two goals and two assists and Craig Smith added a power-play goal to lead host Nashville past Vancouver.

# Kurt Busch: Ex-girlfriend is trained assassin

The Associated Press

DOVER, Del. — Kurt Busch, the NASCAR driver known as "The Outlaw," testified Tuesday that he believes his ex-girlfriend to be a trained assassin dispatched on covert missions around the world, who he once saw in a blood-splattered evening gown.

Busch, appearing in court again over Patricia Driscoll's request for a no-contact order, continued the push of his legal team to discredit his ex as a scorned woman out to destroy his career.

"Everybody on the outside can tell me I'm crazy, but I lived on the inside and saw it firsthand," Busch said when his attorney, Rusty Hardin, questioned why he still believed Driscoll is a hired killer.

Busch said Driscoll repeatedly asserted her assassin status and claimed the work took her on missions across Central and South America and Africa. He recounted a time they were in El Paso, Texas, when Driscoll left in camouflage gear only to return later wearing a trench coat over an evening gown covered with blood.

In an interview late Tuesday, Driscoll called Busch's assertion "ludicrous," saying he took it "straight from a fictional movie script" she has been working on and that he has proofread.

Busch testified Monday that he ended his relationship with Driscoll last year because she was monopolizing his schedule and he needed to focus on racing.

Driscoll said Busch assaulted her in his motorhome at Dover International Speedway a week later, grabbing her by the throat and slamming her head into a wall three times. Busch and his attorneys have denied the allegations, which are the subject of a separate criminal investigation. A court ruling on Driscoll's request for a no-contact order is expected later this month.

## Sources: Jets hire Bowles

NEW YORK — The New York Jets are close to an agreement with Arizona Cardinals defensive coordinator Todd Bowles to make him their head coach, according to two people with knowledge of the negotiations.

Bowles told ESPN in a text that he was taking the job, but the people told The Associated Press that no agreement had been completed as of late Tuesday.

The people spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the deal had not been finalized.

A few hours after hiring Mike Maccagnan as their general manager, the Jets were closing in on signing the 51-year-old Bowles to replace Rex Ryan, who was fired, along with GM John Idzik, on Dec. 29 after six seasons.

In other NFL news:

■ Dallas coach Jason Garrett has a new five-year contract, and defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli is also coming back on a three-year deal, a person with knowledge of both agreements told The Associated Press on Tuesday.



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# Belichick: Colts QB is like an extra receiver

*The Associated Press*

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Bill Belichick put an extra receiver on the field to confuse the Baltimore Ravens.

Now the New England Patriots coach will find out how it feels.

Defending against Colts quarterback Andrew Luck is "like a sixth receiver you have to cover," Belichick said on Tuesday, an ironic choice of words in the wake of his innovative use of an ineligible receiver in the 35-31 victory over the Ravens.

"If [Luck] extends the play, then he has

the ability to create big plays. We've seen him do that multiple times throughout his career already," Belichick said. "It's another guy you have to defend in the running game, the passing game in terms of his ability to scramble and make first-down yardage on possession-type downs. And he makes good decisions, so all those things are a problem."

The Patriots advanced to their fourth consecutive conference title game on Saturday thanks in part to a series of plays in which they only sent four traditional offensive linemen onto the field. A

skill player then declared himself ineligible — but too late for the Ravens to get the matchup they wanted.

Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said he just wanted the referee to give him time to make a substitution. But by the time he got that straightened out the Patriots had marched down the field.

Now New England is facing a player who redefines his position.

And it's not going to be easy, Belichick conceded.

"Look, he's passed for a lot of yards in a lot of games," the Patriots coach said.

"The guy is a really good quarterback. He can do everything that a top quarterback needs to do," listing all of the things Luck can do with his arm, his legs and his mind.

"He's got good poise, good vision, handles the team well. He's a smart player in terms of game management and situational football," Belichick said. "So I'd say all of those things are strengths. They're all assets. He does a good job of all of it. There are a lot of things about his game that are very good and hard to defend."

## Colts hope improved defense will change results

*The Associated Press*

INDIANAPOLIS — Chuck Pagano came to Indianapolis making the case for a robust defense. Now the Colts coach has the proof he needs to demonstrate it's working.

The stats have improved, the game tapes look better and a suddenly stout defense is one of the major reasons the Colts are playing for their third AFC title Sunday at New England.

"We're playing better run defense now than we ever have," Pagano said after shutting down Denver 24-13 in an AFC divisional-round win one day earlier.

How did the Colts make such a dramatic shift in just three years? By getting bigger and stronger up front.

In 2012, Indy started the conversion by signing free agent defensive end Cory Redding, drafting rookie defensive tackle Josh Chapman, moving Robert Mathis to outside linebacker and adding inside linebacker Jerrell Freeman from the CFL.

General manager Ryan Grigson then traded a second-round pick to Miami for cornerback Vontae Davis, who has blossomed into a Pro Bowler.

In 2013, Grigson continued to follow the long-range plan by signing defensive tackle Ricky Jean Francois, safety LaRon Landry, cornerback Greg Toler and outside linebacker Erik Walden in free agency and taking outside linebacker Bjoern Werner in the first round of the draft. All five are starters.

Last summer, Grigson added three more

starters in free agency — inside linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, defensive tackle Arthur Jones and safety Mike Adams — and found a budding pass rusher in outside linebacker Jonathan Newsome, a fifth-round draft pick.

Being better still might not be good enough this weekend, though.

The AFC South champs face Tom Brady on his home turf, where he is 13-3 in the postseason and 3-0 against Indy thanks in large part to a formula the Colts haven't yet figured out.

Last year, LeGarrette Blount piled up 166 yards rushing and four touchdowns in a 43-22 divisional-round rout. In November, the Patriots got a career-high 201 yards and four more touchdowns from unheralded running back Jonas Gray in a 42-20

victory. This time might not be the same.

"I think, like most good teams do as the season progresses, they just continue to get better," Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels said. "They're very aggressive with, not only pressuring, but also man-to-man coverage. They'll get up there and play tight and jam and disrupt the passing game that way. And it's a physical group."

The Colts, of course, will focus on stopping the run first this weekend.

That mission could be complicated by Brady's efficiency and the matchup problem they'll have against tight end Rob Gronkowski.

But the Colts see this game in simpler terms. One more win in a hostile venue will give them a trip to the Super Bowl.

## Packers are prepared for Sherman this time

*The Associated Press*

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Seattle's Richard Sherman may have more to do this time against the Green Bay Packers.

The Packers didn't throw in the Pro Bowl cornerback's direction when the teams met in the season opener in September, a 36-16 win for the Seahawks.

The game plan for the rematch on Sunday in the NFC title game is still in flux. Still, the offense seems better equipped this time around to face Sherman and Seattle's swarming defense.

"I don't think anybody's intimidated. I mean he's a great player," tight end Andrew Quarless said this week. "Their secondary is definitely a great secondary. You've got to give them their respect. But you know the whole 'Legion of Boom' — we'll see."

Seattle has only improved defensively since September. But the Packers have had plenty of time, too, to get their act together.

Running back Eddie Lacy's production has increased dramatically. Jordy Nelson and Randall Cobb are one of the top receiving tandems in the league. The offensive line is providing solid blocking.

And Aaron Rodgers has proven that he's better than most healthy quarterbacks in the league, even when slowed by a left calf injury.

"I don't think it's that much different except their guys are coming through," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said. "They've grown with their season and they're at the top of their game."

It wasn't quite that case on Sept. 4 in Seattle.

Packers coach Mike McCarthy watched video of the game on Monday morning. He liked some of what he saw. He pointed to a few pivotal plays during which the Packers could have played better.

The Packers have succeeded in the second half of the season in part by going after an opponent's strengths.

In a 26-21 win over New England in November, Rodgers threw for 368 yards, including a 45-yard catch-and-run to Nelson. He had been covered by top cornerback Darrelle Revis at the time.

In the regular-season finale, Green Bay ran for 152 yards in a victory against Detroit, a season-high by a Lions opponent.

In the NFC divisional round win over Dallas, the Packers got three touchdown passes from Rodgers — though none went to Nelson or Cobb. Instead, rookie receiver Davante Adams, and tight ends Andrew Quarless and Richard Rodgers, another rookie, had the scores in the big spots.

All three games were played at Lambeau Field. Still, the success will help boost confidence.

"I mean the more targets A-Rod has, the more I think it opens up the offense," Quarless said. It's about keeping them honest, really respecting everything that we do, and respecting all the playmakers on the field."

Adams had the biggest impact of the lesser-known Packers with seven catches for 117 yards. The production was somewhat of a surprise given Adams had a combined four catches in his previous four games combined.

## Seahawks sensed something special in 2012 draftees

*The Associated Press*

RENTON, Wash. — Within their inner circle, Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll, general manager John Schneider and staff quietly speculated that their 2012 draft class would be special, despite the critics' derision.

Outsiders were dismissive of linebacker Bobby Wagner, a former two-star recruit from tiny Utah State; undersized quarterback Russell Wilson, who had to transfer from North Carolina State to start as a senior; and Bruce Irvin, a high school dropout who had bounced around junior colleges before landing at West Virginia.

Sometimes that group of draftees — six of whom are on the Seattle active roster — reminisce about the failing grades their class received. The players have Super Bowl rings and are about to play in their second straight NFC championship game on Sunday when they host Green Bay.

Irvin, the first-round pick, was a stunner no one expected to go that early and many believed would never develop into an every-down player. Critics said second-round selection Wagner never faced elite competition in college.

And Wilson, Seattle's much disputed third-round pick... well, listing all the criticism that pick received would take too long.

"We look at that type of stuff. We look at that class, we've got seven, eight guys that are key contributors right now," Irvin said. "I don't know man, I don't know who grades that type of stuff. We're just going to continue to prove everybody wrong."

Seattle's roster has been built a variety of ways. First-round gems, like safety Earl Thomas and left tackle Russell Okung, both taken in 2010, are joined by

late-round steals including safety Kam Chancellor, picked in the fifth round the same year. A year later linebacker K.J. Wright was a fourth-round pick, followed by All-Pro cornerback Richard Sherman in the fifth and starting cornerback Byron Maxwell in the sixth.

"Everyone told us we weren't going to be any good. We've heard that a lot," Wilson said. "No matter what anybody tells you, you have to be a self-motivator. That's what we have in the 2012 class of the Seattle Seahawks. They're all self-motivators. We all believe in each other, we all believe in ourselves, and we've all kind of just pushed each other. When we first got here, I know we had a 2012 meeting and kind of told the guys I want to be the best class there's ever been here. That's kind of been our mindset."

The majority of notoriety from the 2012 class has gone to Wilson and Wagner. Wilson has started every game in his three seasons and is in line for a massive payday, while Wagner has become an elite inside linebacker and was first-team All-Pro this season despite missing five games.

But the depth found in that class is what sets them apart. Irvin is Seattle's starting strongside linebacker, proving he was more than just a pass rusher. Fourth-round pick Robert Turbin is the backup to Marshawn Lynch. Sixth-round pick Jeremy Lane has been Seattle's nickel cornerback when healthy.

And the real late-round steal of the group? Guard J.R. Sweezy, a defensive tackle in college that has developed into one of Seattle's most consistent offensive linemen.