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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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New nuclear-armed subs win Pentagon approval

Bloomberg

The Pentagon's top weapons buyer has approved advanced development for a fleet of 12 new nuclear-armed submarines, a potential \$128 billion project that the Navy calls its top priority.

Frank Kendall, the undersecretary for acquisition, signed the decision memo that officially moves the program forward late Wednesday. Shortly before acting, Kendall, who's departing when President Barack Obama steps down on Jan. 20, said in an interview, "I'm hoping to have it done before I leave."

The new Columbia-class submarine is part of a trillion-dollar program to modernize the U.S.'s sea-air-land nuclear triad over the next 30 years, including maintenance and support. Obama has backed the effort, to the chagrin of some arms-control advocates, and President-elect Donald Trump has seemed to signal his support.

The Navy is in contract talks with General Dynamics Corp., which will lead the program to replace aging Ohio-class submarines, with Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc. as the top subcontractor.

The projected \$128 billion acquisition cost, an estimate that factors in expected inflation, puts the new submarines behind only the \$379 billion F-35 aircraft and the \$153 billion multi-service ballistic-missile defense network among the costliest U.S. defense programs.

The final version of Kendall's memo includes the Navy's latest cost estimate for the submarine: \$13 billion in research and development and \$115 billion in procurement. He directed that the 12 submarines be produced for an average procurement cost of \$8 billion each, which doesn't include equipment such as the nuclear reactors that would power the vessels and the weapons they would carry.

Fatalities reported in Fla. airport shooting

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Multiple people died after a lone suspect opened fire Friday at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, authorities said.

The sheriff's office reported that five people were killed and eight wounded.

News stations showed video of medics taking care of a bleeding victim outside the airport. News helicopters hovering over the scene showed hundreds of people standing on the tarmac as an ambulance drove by and numerous law enforcement officers, including tactical units, rushed to the scene.

The airport suspended operations as law enforcement authorities rushed to the scene, and emergency medical workers treated at least one bleed-

ing victim on the tarmac.

Broward County Mayor Barbara Sharief told CNN authorities that a lone shooter was responsible for the attack and had been taken into custody.

"We have an active crime scene investigation involving terminal 2," she said.

Jillian Saunders, from Palm Beach, Fla., told The Associated Press in direct Twitter messages that she was watching the activity from the tarmac in a plane scheduled to fly to Los Angeles.

"Everything you see on the news is happening outside my window," she said. "I am luckily on the plane and they said we are right now the safest people at the airport."

Airport officials said on the airport's website that it was suspending flights.

Army approves dreadlocks for female soldiers

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Female soldiers now can wear their hair in dreadlocks, Army Secretary Eric Fanning announced this week alongside several other changes to the service's appearance standards.

Women who choose to wear the formerly banned dreadlocks must do so in a similar manner to the braids, cornrows and twists hairstyles that the Army approved in late 2014 after a controversy earlier that year over disallowing some styles popular among black women. Dreadlocks must appear con-

sistent in size and shape and must be evenly spaced. Additionally, they cannot exceed one half-inch in diameter and they must "present a neat, professional, and well-groomed appearance," Fanning wrote Tuesday in a memorandum.

Other changes that Fanning authorized to Army Regulation 270-1, which dictates appearance standards, included ordering commanders to allow appearance exemptions for religiously mandated beards, turbans and hijabs, and permitting soldiers to wear religious bracelets in uniform.

Fanning's decision on dreadlocks reverses the ban on the

hairstyle that was instituted in April 2014, in a sweeping appearance regulations reform that also prohibited braids, cornrows and twists.

That change sparked grumbling among troops and lawmakers who accused the Army of racial insensitivity for banning the popular hairstyles and using offensive language to describe them.

In a letter to then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in April 2014, the Congressional Black Caucus declared, "The use of words like 'unkempt' and 'matted' when referring to traditional hairstyles worn by women of color are offensive

and biased."

The Army determined such language was offensive and removed it from the regulation, after a review ordered by Hagel. In September, the Army approved female soldiers to wear braids, cornrows and twists but it maintained its ban on dreadlocks.

The appearance standard changes come in the final weeks of Fanning's tenure as Army secretary. He is expected to leave that position before Jan. 20, when Donald Trump is sworn in as president.

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Mattis, Trump team tilt over DOD posts

The Washington Post

The honeymoon seems to be ending between retired Gen. James Mattis and Donald Trump's transition team amid an increasingly acrimonious dispute over who will get top jobs in the Defense Department — and who gets to make those decisions.

With only two weeks left before Inauguration Day and days before Mattis' Senate confirmation hearing, most major Pentagon civilian positions remain unfilled. Behind the scenes, Mattis has been rejecting large numbers of candidates offered by the transition team for several top posts, two sources close to the transition said. The dispute over personnel appointments is contributing to a tenuous relationship between Mattis and the transition officials, which could set the stage for turf wars between the Pentagon and the White House in the coming Trump administration.

The Trump transition team already was considering candidates for a host of top Defense Department jobs when Trump announced Dec. 1 that he intended to nominate "Mad Dog" Mattis to lead the military. The Mattis pick was seen by Republicans around Washington as an indication that Trump would rely on senior and experienced officials to shape and implement his national security and foreign policies. Many "Never Trump" Republicans also thought this might be their way into service despite having opposed Trump in the GOP primary.

Initially, both Mattis and the Trump team intended to engage in a collaborative process whereby Mattis would be given significant influence and participation in selecting top Pentagon appointees.

But the arrangement started going south only two weeks later when Mattis learned from the news media that Trump

The dispute over personnel appointments is contributing to a tenuous relationship between Mattis and the transition officials, which could set the stage for turf wars between the Pentagon and the White House in the coming Trump administration.

had selected Vincent Viola, a billionaire Army veteran, to be secretary of the Army, one source close to the transition said.

"Mattis was furious," said the source. "It made him suspicious of the transition team, and things devolved from there."

Service secretaries represent potential alternate power centers inside the Defense Department, and Mattis as defense secretary has an interest in having secretaries who are loyal to him and don't have independent relationships with the White House.

Mattis also is pushing for the Trump transition team to allow "Never Trump" Republicans to serve in the Pentagon, but so far the Trump team is refusing.

One position that is a source of tension is undersecretary of defense for intelligence, a powerful post that oversees all Defense Department intelligence agencies, which include the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Retired Gen. Michael T. Flynn, President-elect Trump's national security adviser-designate, was DIA director until he was sacked by Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. following a dispute with then-Undersecretary for Defense for Intelligence Michael G. Vickers.

Mattis has rejected all of the names the Trump team has offered to be the top intelligence official in the department, another transition source said. Mattis also is unlikely to accept Trump's top Pentagon transition landing team of-

ficial, Mira Ricardel, as a top official. She was rumored to be in line to be undersecretary of defense for policy, a hugely influential job.

"Let's put it this way, he's being very picky about the options presented to him," said the source, who was not authorized to talk about internal deliberations.

Transition sources also said that David McCormick, a hedge fund manager and former Army officer, is still Trump's likely pick to be deputy defense secretary, the No. 2 job under Mattis.

The personnel dispute could be the first sign of tension between Mattis and Flynn. As a four-star general and head of Central Command, Mattis outranked Flynn when Flynn was DIA director, a three-star position. If confirmed, Mattis would be a Cabinet member and a member of the president's National Security Council, but Flynn has a close relationship with Trump and the duty of coordinating between all the national security agencies.

The Trump transition team did not respond to a request for comment.

Meanwhile, Flynn is busily filling up the National Security Council staff with military and intelligence officers he knows personally. For example, as the Nelson Report first reported, Flynn intends to make Matthew Pottinger the senior director for Asia on the NSC staff.

Pottinger, a former Wall Street Journal reporter in China, joined the Marines in 2005. While deployed in Af-

ghanistan as an intelligence officer, he worked closely with Flynn and co-authored a memo on how to fix intelligence operations in Afghanistan that later was released by a Washington think tank in 2010.

Flynn also has been meeting foreign officials, especially from Europe, with Sebastian Gorka, a professor and vice president of the Institute of World Politics, who was born in Britain to parents who fled Hungary. What position Gorka will have in Flynn's NSC staff is unclear. Both Pottinger and Gorka are well-respected but their new prominence has raised concerns that Flynn is placing too much emphasis on military officials and military experts, in effect militarizing the NSC staff.

K.T. McFarland, who is set to be Flynn's top deputy, is pushing for more civilian and policy-focused NSC staff appointments, transition sources said.

Several Washington foreign policy experts who are in touch with the Trump transition team said that overall, there's no uniformity in the way each department is being handled and no real understanding of how much autonomy each Cabinet member will have in running his or her agency.

Many expect the agencies to have more power than usual because the Trump team is planning to slash the NSC staff from more 400 people to about 150 personnel. Then again, national security officials outside the White House may find it difficult to exert influence with a president who often alters major policies by tweet.

Some chaos and turf battles are to be expected in any presidential transition, but the Trump team is off to a bad start. Trump often touts his talent in selecting good people. If he wants to keep those people happy, he should work to settle their disputes and address their grievances before they get out of hand.

B-52 engine falls off in flight in North Dakota

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An engine from a B-52 fell off during a training flight near Minot Air Force Base, N.D., the Air Force confirmed Thursday.

The incident occurred Wednesday. The pilot declared an in-flight emergency after discovering that one of the eight engines had fallen from the aircraft. “There were no weapons on board,” according to an Air Force statement.

The pilot was able to land safely with no injuries to the five crewmembers, the Air Force said, and the incident is under investigation.

The Air Force has 76 B-52s in inventory, and as of December, 73 percent of those aircraft were mission capable, the Air Force said. The Cold War-era bomber continues to be used heavily in the fight against the Islamic State group, even though all of the remaining aircraft are more than 50 years old. The airframe went through a modernization program to update its weapons, communications and navigational systems during the past decade and is expected to remain in service through 2040.

The Air Force said that engine debris was found in an unpopulated area 25 nautical miles north-east of Minot Air Force Base.

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US military weighs wider use of space, cyberweapons

USA Today

GRAND FORKS AIR FORCE BASE, N.D. — Military chiefs are prepared to give President-elect Donald Trump the options he wants to intensify the fight against the Islamic State group, including the possibility of granting commanders greater leeway to use secret cyberwarfare and space weapons, the top Air Force leader said.

“We’ve heard him loud and clear that he’s going to be looking for options,” Gen. David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, told USA Today.

Goldfein said the recommendations could center on permitting field commanders more flexibility to deploy an array of weapons against the militants, who are waging a terrorism campaign beyond their bases in Iraq and Syria.

“If we want to be more agile, then the reality is we are going to have to push decision authority down to some lower levels in certain areas,” Goldfein said during a December trip to this air base. “The big question that we’ve got to wrestle with ... is the authorities to operate in cyber and space.”

Capabilities in those two areas are among the military’s most closely held secrets, and their use now generally requires approval at the highest levels of government.

The military has the ability to use cyberweapons to shut down terrorist websites and to disrupt communications, but it is cautious about authorizing such actions because of unanticipated effects beyond its intended targets, such as disrupting legitimate websites and servers.

Last May, Defense Secretary Ash Carter urged the military space community to “join the fight” against the Islamic State, though he declined to describe how. The Air Force controls satellites for GPS and communications.

Cyberwarfare capabilities are already in use

against the Islamic State, also called ISIL or ISIS. “We’re ... using cyber tools to disrupt ISIL’s ability to operate and communicate over the virtual battlefield,” Carter said in February.

Delegating authority to generals in the field would allow for a faster response to opportunities that arise from striking militant leaders or their operations or disrupting or shutting down their communications.

The discussion about ramping up the war against the Islamic State will likely go beyond cyberoperations and space. During his campaign, Trump said he would give military commanders 30 days from taking office to come up with a plan for soundly defeating the Islamic State.

Goldfein did not go into detail about the new options. Marine Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said it is important to keep such advice to the president confidential.

President Obama’s strategy has centered on backing ground forces in Iraq and Syria in order to destroy the militant’s so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The administration has supplied the ground forces with weapons and ammunition and has supported them with airstrikes and advisers.

Analysts say it is unlikely Trump would approve the deployment of large numbers of U.S. conventional ground forces in the Middle East or expand bombing if that puts civilians at risk — despite his get-tough rhetoric during the campaign, when he vowed to “bomb the sh-t out of” militant-controlled oil fields.

The U.S.-led coalition air campaign is extremely precise and among the most tightly controlled military operations in history.

“There might be some who say let’s just unleash this military and let them just go,” Goldfein said. “If that unleashing results in us backing away from our values, then the longer term consequences ... will outweigh any short-term value.”

Bill would ease gun restrictions for military spouses

By NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Legislation introduced Thursday would make it easier for military spouses to purchase guns wherever their active-duty husbands or wives are permanently stationed.

Rep. Blake Farenthold, R-Texas, introduced the bill, titled “Protect Our Military

Families’ 2nd Amendment Rights Act.”

Active-duty servicemembers are exempt from gun-control laws that mandate U.S. citizens purchase firearms in the states where they live. Farenthold’s measure would grant spouses the same exemption. Laws now do not extend to husbands and wives, who first must establish residency in a state before purchasing a gun.

“A lot of military spouses don’t want to change their driver’s license or home of record for two years,” said Elizabeth Peace, Farenthold’s communications director. “Military spouses still have Second Amendment rights, and this should’ve been done when military members were given the exemption. It’s unfortunate it took a while for people to think of the spouses.”

Identical legislation was introduced in 2015. It stalled after being referred to subcommittee.

At the time, former Virginia Rep. Scott Rigell, a Republican who introduced it, said he did so in response to threats to the military community from the Islamic State group.

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Western storm draws skiers, leaves deadly conditions

Associated Press

DENVER — Skiers in the West are flocking to the mountains after a storm dropped a deep layer of snow during a week that has proven to be both joyous and deadly.

At Deer Valley in Utah, Emily Summers said her boss kicked her and her co-workers out of the office Thursday and told them to hit the slopes and to take advantage of a winter that comes once a decade.

“This is the snow we dream of,” said Summers, a spokeswoman for the resort.

The storms pounded parts of California, Utah, Colorado and other states as they made their way east, creating difficult driving conditions and closing roads. Small avalanches and white-outs were reported in some areas.

Ski resorts in the West used their social media accounts to spread the news of the snow and to lure skiers who have been anxiously waiting to hit the slopes.

But some encountered problems, and the storm proved deadly.

A skier was rescued Wednesday after dangling from a Colorado chairlift after his backpack got caught. Luckily, a professional slackliner — a type of tightrope walker known for acrobatic tricks — climbed the lift tower and slid across the cable to reach him.

On Thursday, one of two missing skiers found in the central Colorado mountains died while being treated for hypothermia.

The storm also brought heavy snow and strong winds that raised the avalanche danger in much of Colorado’s high country.

US Intercepts: Top Russian officials laud Trump victory

The Washington Post

Senior officials in the Russian government celebrated Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton as a geopolitical win for Moscow, according to U.S. officials who said that American intelligence agencies intercepted communications in the aftermath of the election in which Russian officials congratulated themselves on the outcome.

The ebullient reaction among high-ranking Russian officials — including some who U.S. officials believe had knowledge of the country’s cyberoperations campaign to interfere in the U.S. election — contributed to the U.S. intelligence community’s assessment that Moscow’s efforts were aimed at least in part at helping Trump win the White House.

Other key pieces of information gathered by U.S. spy agencies include the identification of “actors” involved in delivering stolen Democratic emails to the WikiLeaks website, and disparities in the levels of effort Russian intelligence entities devoted to penetrating and exploiting sensitive information stored on Democratic and Republican campaign networks.

Those and other data points are at the heart of an unprecedented intelligence report being circulated in Washington this week that details the evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign and catalogues other cyberoperations by Moscow against U.S. election systems during the past nine years.

The classified document, which officials said is over 50 pages, was delivered to President Barack Obama on Thursday, and it is expected to be presented to Trump

in New York on Friday by the nation’s top spy officials, including Director of National Intelligence James Clapper Jr. and CIA Director John Brennan.

Given the president-elect’s skepticism about the intelligence community — particularly its conclusions about Russia — the Trump Tower briefing has taken on the tenor of a showdown between the president-elect and the intelligence agencies he has disparaged.

“The Russians felt pretty good about what happened on Nov. 8 and they also felt pretty good about what they did,” a senior U.S. official said.

U.S. officials declined to say whether the intercepted communications were cited in the classified version of the report commissioned by Obama, and they emphasized that while the messages were seen as strong indicators of Moscow’s intent and clear preference for Trump, they were not regarded as conclusive evidence of Russian intelligence agencies’ efforts to achieve that outcome.

“There are a variety of different exhibits that make the case, different factors that have provided the intelligence community with high confidence” that Russia sought in part to help elect Trump, said a second senior U.S. official who has reviewed intelligence findings on Russia’s cyber operations.

Officials emphasized that “signals intelligence,” as such communication is known, is treated by analysts with caution because statements can be taken out of context and sophisticated adversaries including the Kremlin are adept at spreading disinformation.

Some US ambassadors directed to quit by Jan. 20

The Washington Post

Ambassadors in some of the most desirable foreign capitals such as London and Paris have been told they must end their service immediately on Jan. 20, with “no exceptions,” State Department officials confirmed Thursday.

The unusually stern and specific directive to “political” ambassadors — often presidential donors and friends — came at the behest of the incoming

Trump administration, two officials said. It appears to forbid any extensions for family circumstances such as allowing children to finish the school year, a customary allowance in past administrations.

President Barack Obama’s administration directed what it calls non-career ambassadors to submit their resignations effective with the close of the Obama presidency on Jan. 20, and ambassadors have complied, three officials said.

Such orders are standard procedure. But the Dec. 23 directive first reported by The New York Times contained the additional admonition that the resignations would be blanket and final.

During previous transitions, a small number of political ambassadors either would ask or would be asked to stay on briefly, after submitting their pro forma resignations, for personal or professional reasons.

Trump transition officials

did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the order or whether it was intended to break with precedent.

Since it typically takes months to select and confirm ambassadors from outside the State Department, the top spots in key foreign capitals in Europe, Asia and the Mideast could be empty this spring. Career State Department officials stand in when there is no ambassador.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Daredevil injured jumping from hotel

CA LAGUNA BEACH — An Orange County man known for jumping off landmarks in YouTube videos has been placed under investigation after reportedly injuring himself when jumping from a Laguna Beach hotel.

The Orange County Register reported that Anthony Booth Armer, 28, was hospitalized after injuring his feet at the Pacific Edge Hotel.

Laguna Beach Police Sgt. Tim Kleise said police were notified of the incident Thursday when a hotel manager called about someone trespassing.

In a YouTube video, Armer is seen jumping off a rooftop and striking a pool edge with his feet before falling in the water.

Man faces charges for beating debtor

ID BOISE — An Ada County magistrate has found probable cause to prosecute a Boise man who is accused of abducting a man who owed him money, beating him and leaving him on the side of the road in freezing temperatures wearing nothing but socks.

The Idaho Statesman reported that Magistrate James Cawthon found probable cause to prosecute Clifford Cole, 46, for aggravated battery, robbery and first-degree kidnapping.

Cole is accused of abducting a 29-year-old victim over a \$155 drug debt on Dec. 16, beating the man with a handgun and leaving the victim naked in the cold.

Woman gives birth during oil change

PA DORMONT — Some auto shops offer 10-minute oil changes. That would

have been about seven minutes too long for a Pennsylvania woman who gave birth while her husband's pickup was getting an oil change at a dealership.

Amanda Sherman and her husband, Adam, told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review that Amanda gave birth when she went to the restroom at a Nissan dealership in suburban Pittsburgh on Monday.

Amanda Sherman said another customer, who was a registered nurse, and the dealership's staff helped her, while a 911 dispatcher talked Adam through tying off the baby's umbilical cord with his bootlace.

An ambulance took Amanda and 7-pound-12-ounce Heather Lynn, her third child, to a Pittsburgh hospital.

Police: Lottery loser keeps phoning in threats

PA HARRISBURG — Police said a Philadelphia woman repeatedly aired her frustration at failing to win a jackpot by making obscene and violent threats against Pennsylvania Lottery headquarters.

Lower Swatara Township Police said Wednesday they filed 53 charges against Towanda Shields, 47, whom they accused of making dozens of calls over the past eight months.

Detective Robert Appleby said Shields recently said someone would die at the retail store where she buys tickets. He said she's also told lottery employees she had searched for them online and knew where they lived.

He Shields defended her right to make the calls on free-speech grounds.

Men in Trump masks duke it out in Lowe's

VA RICHMOND — Two men recently caused a stir at a Richmond Lowe's when

they boxed in the store wearing Donald Trump masks.

Henrico County Police Capt. Chris Eley told the Richmond Times-Dispatch that someone called police Saturday afternoon to report two men in Trump masks and boxing gloves engaging in a "disorderly display that scared customers."

Henrico police have provided few details about the incident. However, witness Michael Willis, 59, said he saw the men hitting each other while yelling, "Donald Trump! Donald Trump!"

In Virginia, a person over the age of 16 can be charged with a felony for wearing a mask on private property when the owner of the property hasn't given permission.

With town left plowless, residents grab shovels

ME PARSONSFIELD — Residents of a tiny hamlet knew what they had to do when the only snowplow driver in town quit after a massive storm: They grabbed shovels and got to work.

The only plow truck driver for most of Parsonsfield quit after a storm dumped 25 inches of snow on the town on Dec. 30. Local officials described the lack of a plow as an emergency for the southern Maine town of about 1,900.

But residents volunteered to help pick up the slack, and the roads were close to fully cleared by Thursday afternoon, Select Board member Tiffany Brendt said. The Maine Department of Transportation, local plowing contractors and residents of neighboring towns also chipped in, she said.

"People got together in our town and went out, plowed, salted, sanded, pushed back the banks, and went back out after the ice storm to make sure everything was good," she said.

"They just did it."

The town is also working on a new long-term plow contract so it isn't left without a snowplow driver again, Brendt said.

Man caught with cocaine under fat

TX AUSTIN — Authorities said a Texas man tried to destroy cocaine hidden under his belly fat while being taken to jail after failing a field sobriety test on New Year's Eve.

An Austin police officer pulled over Florentino Herrera, 48, after he says he saw Herrera run a stop sign and cross a solid white traffic line. Herrera was arrested after failing field sobriety tests and refusing to take a blood alcohol test.

In an affidavit, police said the squad car's camera recorded Herrera trying to destroy cocaine concealed under his stomach fat.

Stuck Clydesdale rescued from mud pit

OR ALOHA — Firefighters rescued a Clydesdale that got stuck in a large mud pit in Aloha.

Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue said the 1,800-pound horse named Windsor was found on his side Wednesday, trapped in a couple feet of mud. Windsor was hypothermic due to the sub-freezing temperature.

Firefighters pulled Windsor from the pit using a system of pulleys and ropes. Heating equipment was brought in to help warm the horse while two veterinarians tended to his medical needs.

After about 45 minutes, Windsor's temperature returned to near normal. With some assistance, he was able to get back on his feet. Firefighters say he's doing well and should fully recover.

From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

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Mack, Clowney take center stage

Associated Press

ALAMEDA, Calif. — For all the similarities between Jadeveon Clowney and Khalil Mack as the two dominant pass rushers taken in the top five of the 2014 draft, there are the stark differences as well.

Clowney burst onto the scene as the No. 1 overall high school recruit who went on to dominate the high-powered SEC and become the top pick in the draft. Mack's ascension was far slower as the overlooked two-star high school player who was forced to go to low-profile Buffalo, where he developed into an NFL prospect who seems to get better by the week.

While Clowney entered the NFL with far more hype as the No. 1 overall pick in Houston, Mack has been the far more productive pro ever since being drafted fifth by the Oakland Raiders.

He was a first-team All-Pro last year at both linebacker and defensive end, leads the NFL with 26 sacks the past two years and is a leading contender for Defensive Player of the Year.

"The guy's a walking Hall of Famer, the best in the business," teammate Bruce Irvin said. "I'm blessed to be able to suit up with him week in and week out."

Clowney and Mack will share the big stage Saturday in Houston in the wild-card opener between the Raiders (12-4) and Texans (9-7). With both teams dealing with injuries at quarterback that have forced Oakland rookie Connor Cook into his first career start and previously benched Brock

Oswieiler back for his first playoff start, the defenses could well decide this game.

Clowney has taken more time to develop into a star with the Texans as injuries limited him to four games as a rookie, his season was cut short last year by another injury that kept him out of the Texans' playoff game and he has delivered only 10½ sacks in 31 career games — fewer than Mack has had in each of the past two seasons.

But Clowney has developed into one of the top run defenders in the league and Oakland coach Jack Del Rio singled him out as the primary reason the Raiders ran for a season-low 30 yards in 20 carries in the first meeting between the two teams.

"You can say he's grown, but you could tell he has that kind of capability," Mack said. "Just watching him last year, he was amazing against the run and came up just shy of all those sacks and all those different things. With time, you can tell that he's been blossoming and he's a hell of a player."

Clowney's lack of pass-rush production, especially compared to Mack, led some skeptics to question whether the Texans erred in which pass rusher they took first overall even though his 16 tackles for losses on run plays are one off the league lead this season.

For Clowney, it's only served as motivation.

"All the criticism kind of built me up," he said. "It really helped me off the field with pushing and getting better. Just to come back and prove to them that what they were saying was wrong. It kind of helped me."

Mack followed up last year's breakthrough season when he had 15 sacks, including five in one game in Denver against Oswieiler, with perhaps an even better year.

While his sacks were down with only 11, Mack led the NFL with 96 quarterback pressures, according to Pro Football Focus, sealed a pair of victories over Carolina and Buffalo with strip sacks that he recovered and returned an interception against Cam Newton for a touchdown.

He did all that as well as developing into the emotional leader of the defense following Charles Woodson's retirement with his mantra of "By any means" becoming a team slogan.

"Khalil is never surprising," defensive coordinator Ken Norton Jr. said. "The kid is amazing. He's fast. He's strong. He's that basketball player that fills out the stat sheet. Everybody just sees the sacks, but he's in meetings early. He's a leader. He's a guy that the young guys can really lean on to teach. He's always improving. He practices hard. He's the player that everyone loves to coach."

And the player no offense wants to face. "He's a stud," Oswieiler said. "He's one of the best pass rushers this game has to offer, and there are a lot of good ones out there. He's right at the top of the list. What he's able to do is truly special. He's a very strong player, he's a very athletic player, he's fast, he can bull rush you, he can speed rush you, he has a very high motor, he never takes a single play off."

Seahawks missing defensive leader Thomas

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Until a month ago, the Seattle Seahawks never knew what it was like without Earl Thomas on the field.

Now they're finding out how much Thomas means to everything they try to do defensively.

"Earl's a unique player. He's an extraordinary player, he's proven that," coach Pete Carroll said. "No matter what position a guy plays, you miss that unique quality."

Since Thomas was injured in Seattle's Week 13 win over Carolina, the Seahawks have become vulnerable to the pass.

In the final four games of the regular season, the opponent

passer rating against the Seahawks was 105.0. In the first 12 games, it was 77.9. And while that final four-game stretch included stellar games by Aaron Rodgers and Carson Palmer in a pair of Seattle losses, it also included performances by Jared Goff, Case Keenum and Colin Kaepernick that didn't lead to wins against Seattle but were better than most expected.

Now come the pass-happy Detroit Lions in the NFC wild-card round on Saturday.

"I wouldn't say vulnerable, you know, they're a heck of a defense," Detroit quarterback Matthew Stafford said. "They do a great job. Obviously, Earl brings a mentality to them. He's an extremely aggressive player.

Trusts his eyes probably more than any safety I've ever seen and you know, the young guy they've got filling in for him doesn't as much, but I mean they've got a great defense."

Steven Terrell has been the one asked to step in for Thomas, even if there is no way to properly replace one of the best free safeties in the NFL. It's the most Terrell has played in his brief NFL career. Before this season, Terrell had one career defensive tackle in his two seasons with the Seahawks.

"Just the experience, learning through the good, the bad, the indifferent, whatever. It's just getting better and seeing where I'm at," Terrell said. "You kind of see where you're

at in the preseason but playing this year in the regular season it's been a good opportunity."

The challenge for Seattle may not be so much this week, but what lies ahead should it get past the Lions. Detroit averages 37 pass attempts per game but only 7.3 yards per attempt. But a Seattle victory sets up a matchup with Atlanta and the third-best pass game in the NFL.

That's down the road. The Seahawks have enough to worry about with Detroit.

"Earl is Earl, and now it's Steve's opportunity," Seattle cornerback DeShawn Shead said. "And Steve is a great player as well but you can't ask Steve to be Earl. Steve is Steve and he does a great job."

Clemson receivers excited to face Tide

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — Clemson co-offensive coordinator Jeff Scott walked over to receiver Deon Cain shortly before the Tigers left the locker room to face Ohio State with a smile and a simple message: “Welcome to the playoffs.”

It has been a long, fretful national title game journey for both Cain and Mike Williams, two of Clemson’s most dynamic receivers. Williams had to watch the 45-40 loss to Alabama last January from the sidelines after a frightening neck injury in the first quarter of the season-opener knocked him out for the year.

For Cain, it was his own

mistake that cost him. He was sent home along with two other players — suspended for breaking team rules — two days before Clemson’s 37-17 win over Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl. Cain also missed the national championship loss.

Now, both are back and eager to make an impact against No. 1 Alabama (14-0) on Monday.

“They’re very excited,” teammate and fellow receiver Artavis Scott said. “Who wouldn’t be when you’re playing for a national title?”

Williams was a 1,000-yard receiver clearly marked as Clemson’s main target in 2015 when he collided with the goal post stanchion making a touch-

down catch against Wofford. Williams lay still for several, uncomfortable minutes until he was strapped to a backboard and taken off the field on a cart.

The diagnosis was serious — a neck fracture — but Williams’ made a strong recovery and an even stronger return in 2016 with team highs of 90 catches, 1,267 yards receiving and 10 touchdown grabs.

“I’ve gotten better in all parts of my game,” Williams said. “Running routes, blocking, reading defenses, that was my goal.”

Williams thought he had nothing more than a bruise until he felt his body tingling

and go numb. There was no surgery and Williams said the same day it happened doctors told him he’d be able to play again. But it was difficult for him to watch games and not be able to participate.

“We were winning all the time so I just thought, ‘Good job,’” the 6-foot-3 Williams said. “But we lost the national championship game and I thought, ‘What if I were out there?’”

It’s a question Cain wondered, too.

“I put this program on a pedestal because they’ve done a lot to help me,” he said. “I just wasn’t mature enough to see the opportunity they were giving me.”

Alford scores 24, powers No. 4 UCLA past California

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Bryce Alford scored 16 of his 24 points in a dominant first half, TJ Leaf had a double-double, and No. 4 UCLA defeated California 81-71 on Thursday night.

Leaf finished with 17 points and 11 rebounds for his seventh double-double in the Bruins’ fifth straight win over the Golden Bears at Pauley Pavilion. Alford hit five three-pointers for UCLA (15-1, 2-1 Pac-12).

Grant Mullins scored 19 points, and Ivan Rabb had 17 points and a career-high 20 rebounds for the Bears (10-5, 1-2), who went from being down by 20 with 5½ minutes left to trailing by five.

No. 5 Gonzaga 95, San Francisco 80: Nigel Williams-Goss scored a career-high 36 points, and the visiting Bulldogs used their accurate shooting all over the court to remain unbeaten.

Jordan Mathews scored 16 points for Gonzaga (15-0, 3-0 WCC).

Williams-Goss shot 12-for-15 as Gonzaga shot 61 percent, made all nine of his free throws and also had 11 rebounds and six assists for the perennial West Coast Conference favorites in their eighth straight win against USF and fifth in a row on the Dons’ home court.

No. 17 Arizona 66, Utah 56: Dusan Ristic scored 18 points and Lauri Markkanen added 11 for the host Wildcats.

Arizona (14-2, 3-0 Pac-12) used its size advantage to get the Utes into foul trouble and prevent them from getting many open looks on the perimeter.

The Wildcats held Utah (10-4, 1-1) to a long scoreless drought in the first half and 4-for-21 shooting from three-point range overall to win their 14th straight home game.

No. 19 Saint Mary’s 81, BYU 68: At Moraga, Calif., Jock Landale had 24 points and eight rebounds and the Gaels pulled away in the second half.

Calvin Hermanson scored 15 points, Emmett Naar added 15 with three three-pointers and Joe Rahon had 10 points, eight assists and five rebounds for Saint Mary’s.

The Gaels (13-1, 3-0 West Coast Conference) have won seven straight since suffering their lone loss of the season at home against UT Arlington on Dec. 8.

No. 20 Purdue 76, Ohio St. 75: Caleb Swanigan hit a free throw with 5 seconds left for the visiting Boilermakers.

Ohio State’s Trevor Thompson tied the score at 75 with a layup with 15 seconds left

but missed a subsequent free throw. Swanigan was fouled on the other end and hit his first free throw and missed the second. Micah Potter grabbed the rebound and got it to JaQuan Lyle but his three-point try at the buzzer was off the mark.

Swanigan and Vincent Edwards paced the Boilermakers (13-3, 2-1 Big Ten) with 16 points apiece, and Dakota Mathias added 14.

No. 25 Southern Cal 72, Stanford 56: At Los Angeles, Jordan McLaughlin scored 15 points and Chimezie Metu added 14 for the Trojans.

Southern California (15-1, 2-1 Pac-12) rebounded from its first loss of the season at Oregon on Saturday by holding the Cardinal to 36 percent shooting, and 21 turnovers in a ragged affair.

De’Anthony Melton added 12 points for Southern California, which won despite shooting 42 percent, and committing 18 turnovers. The Trojans had 10 steals, 5 blocks, and scored 25 points off Stanford turnovers.

Service academies

Lafayette 79, Army 74: At easton, Pa., Matt Klinewski and Nick Lindner combined for 41 points to lead the Leopards past the Black Knights.

Klinewski was 9-for-16 from the floor for 21 points. Linder nailed 5 of 9 from beyond the arc for 20 points. Paulius Zalys and Hunter Janacek added 10 points apiece for Lafayette (6-8, 2-1 Patriot League).

Army (6-9, 0-3) has lost three straight and five of its last six games.

Funk led the Black Knights with 13 points. Jordan Fox added 10 with 10 boards.

Boston University 71, Navy 53: At Annapolis, Md., Justin Alston scored 14 points, Will Goff and Cedric Hankerson scored 12 apiece and the Terriers defense swarmed the Midshipmen in Patriot League play.

BU (8-7, 3-0) recorded 19 steals — two shy of the school record set in 1989 — among Navy’s 27 turnovers. Kyle Foreman grabbed a career-best five steals to go with six assists and seven points as BU won its first road game of the season.

The Patriot League record for steals in a game is 23.

Alston was 6-for-8 shooting, Goff and Hankerson each made four three-point baskets as BU made 12 three-pointers.

Shawn Anderson led Navy (5-10, 0-3) with 10 points, the only Midshipman to reach double figures.

Capitals halt Blue Jackets' streak at 16

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — John Tortorella broke from his usual routine after the Columbus Blue Jackets' streak-breaking clunker on Thursday night.

He felt he had to.

Tortorella walked into the visiting locker room and told his players he was proud of them, even after the Jackets lost 5-0 to the Washington Capitals, ending a 16-game winning streak. Columbus fell one victory shy of the NHL record set by the 1992-93 Pittsburgh Penguins as everything that carried them on this captivating run fell apart.

Sergei Bobrovsky allowed five goals on 23 shots, the

league-leading power play was held off the scoreboard and Columbus lost for the first time since Nov. 26. Tortorella wasn't happy about the game but wasn't upset about the streak coming to an end, either.

"I usually don't go in the room, win or lose," Tortorella said. "All year long, I haven't been in there, but I'd be remiss, like I told them, if I didn't. That is one hell of a run by a hockey team. They should feel really good about it."

They may at some point, but not right after reigning Vezina Trophy winner Braden Holtby stopped all 29 shots, giving Columbus its second shutout defeat of the season. Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno said it

took an effort like Holtby's to upend Columbus.

Bobrovsky, who was rock solid in 14 starts during the streak, was chased and replaced by Curtis McElhinney after allowing goals to Daniel Winnik, John Carlson, Nate Schmidt, Andre Burakovsky and Justin Williams.

Wild 5, Sharks 4: Mikko Koivu scored back-to-back goals midway through the third period and visiting Minnesota beat San Jose.

Oilers 4, Bruins 3: Patrick Maroon had a hat trick and also squared off in a fight with 6-foot-9 defenseman Zdeno Chara, helping visiting Edmonton beat Boston.

Blackhawks 4, Sabres 3

(OT): Patrick Kane scored 56 seconds into overtime, Artem Anisimov had two goals and host Chicago beat Buffalo.

Red Wings 4, Kings 0: Thomas Vanek scored twice during a three-goal first period, Jared Coreau stopped 34 shots for his first career shutout and visiting Detroit beat Los Angeles.

Hurricanes 4, Blues 2: Jeff Skinner put visiting Carolina ahead in the third period and Derek Ryan scored twice to beat St. Louis.

Predators 6, Lightning 1: Colton Sissons ended a 12-game goal drought with his first career hat trick, Pekka Rinne made 27 saves and visiting Nashville beat Tampa Bay.

Nene helps Rockets hold off Westbrook, Thunder

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The Houston Rockets weren't happy to have squandered an 18-point lead, leaving them tied with Oklahoma City with just seconds left on Thursday night.

But they were proud of the plays they made at the end of the game to hang on for the win.

James Harden scored 26 points and Nene hit two free throws with 0.7 seconds remaining to lift the Rockets to their sixth straight victory, 118-116 over the Thunder.

"There's going to be some close games in the postseason where we'll have to figure ways to close them out, and it isn't always going to be us making shots and it being perfect," Harden said. "We're going to have to get stops sometimes."

Houston overcame Russell Westbrook's 49 points, though the star guard struggled down the stretch.

Harden found Nene right under the basket and he was fouled by Jerami Grant as he attempted a shot, setting up the winning free throws. Nene had a season-high 18 points for his 12th double-digit game this

season.

"I saw two defenders guarding me and I saw Nene wide open," Harden said. "No matter if it's the fourth quarter with three seconds to go or the first quarter with 10 minutes to go, I'm going to make that pass. And my teammates know that and he was prepared and ready for it."

A pair of foul shots by Harden tied it with just under two minutes remaining. The teams combined to miss seven shots after that, with Westbrook missing three in that span, before Nene's free throws.

Westbrook was a bit touchy when he was asked about his last missed three-point attempt.

"Did you see what happened? There's nothing to take you through," he said. "I missed the shot."

The Thunder attempted an alley-oop on the inbounds pass after that, but Enes Kanter couldn't finish the play and Houston held on.

Westbrook finished two points shy of his season high as Oklahoma City dropped its third straight.

Houston was clinging to a

four-point lead with about 2½ minutes remaining before Westbrook and Victor Oladipo made consecutive three-pointers to put Oklahoma City up 116-114.

The Rockets had a 14-point lead early the fourth quarter before their offense stalled, and the Thunder went on a 20-7 run to cut the lead to 107-104 with about 5½ minutes left. Westbrook was on the bench for most of that time and Oladipo scored five points during that run before Westbrook returned and capped it with four straight points.

Westbrook had 40 points entering the fourth quarter. But he wasn't getting much help from his teammates, with the rest of the Thunder managing just 43 points as Houston led 97-83 after three.

Spurs 127, Nuggets 99: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 28 points, including 11 while sparking a third-quarter spurt, and San Antonio defeated host Denver.

Hawks 99, Pelicans 94: Dennis Schroder scored 23 points and Atlanta beat host New Orleans to win its fifth straight, even as shooting

guard Kyle Korver spent the entire game on the bench amid reports he could soon be traded to Cleveland.

Pistons 115, Hornets 114: Marco Belinelli nearly pulled off one of the craftiest buzzer beaters in memory, but his bank shot was disallowed because it came too late, and Detroit held on against visiting Charlotte.

Raptors 101, Jazz 93: Kyle Lowry scored 16 of his 33 points in the fourth quarter to lead Toronto to a come-from-behind victory over visiting Utah.

Trail Blazers 118, Lakers 109: CJ McCollum had 27 points and Damian Lillard returned from a sprained ankle with 21 points and 10 assists to lead host Portland over Los Angeles.

Suns 102, Mavericks 95: Eric Bledsoe scored 26 points, including five straight to break a tie in the final two minutes of Phoenix's victory over host Dallas.

Pacers 121, Nets 109: Jeff Teague had 21 points, 15 assists and seven rebounds, and Myles Turner finished with 25 points and 15 boards as Indiana beat visiting Brooklyn for its fourth consecutive victory.