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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Mattis won't oppose women in combat

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis told the Senate on Thursday that he has no plans to review policies allowing women to serve in combat roles if he is confirmed as defense secretary.

Mattis, 66, was grilled by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee during a confirmation hearing about his past comments that questioned whether integrated military service could be successful. The retired general said Thursday that he would follow the Pentagon policy changes made in December 2015 that allow women into combat occupational specialties, after years of front-line duty in other positions.

"I have no plan to oppose women in any aspect of our military," Mattis said.

President-elect Donald Trump, who picked Mattis last month as his defense secretary, has suggested he might press the Pentagon to abandon combat integration after his repeated criticism of "political correctness" harming the military.

The Armed Services Committee on Thursday voted to give Mattis, who retired

in 2013, a rare exemption from a law that requires any defense secretary to be out of the military for at least seven years. The full Senate was expected to vote this month on his confirmation and clear the way for Mattis to take over the Pentagon when Trump takes office Jan. 20.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., questioned Mattis about his 2015 comment that mixing men and women in combat could create sexual desires and has not been successful at any time in history.

"Have you changed your view on this issue?" said Gillibrand, who had threatened to oppose the needed waiver that will allow Mattis to be confirmed.

Mattis said he was retired and was not planning to return to government service when he made the comments, and that he would follow policy changes that have been made if confirmed.

"If someone brings me a problem I will look at it, but I am not coming in looking for problems," he said.

Meanwhile, Mattis said he supports the "strongest possible relationship" with the NATO alliance. That appeared to distance him from Trump, who has suggested the

agreement with European allies might be outdated and the United States might not come to the aid of member states if they do not contribute enough money to defense.

"NATO, from my perspective, and I served once as the NATO alliance supreme allied commander, is the most successful military alliance in modern world history, maybe ever," Mattis said.

The general could be the first career military officer to lead the Pentagon in about 70 years if he is approved this month by the full Senate.

Mattis, who is known for his intellect, colorful quotes and willingness to speak truth to power, had a four-decade career in the Marine Corps leading infantry troops in multiple wars and last served as commander of U.S. Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East.

But Mattis' recent military service requires Congress pass an exemption to law designed to ensure civilians maintain control of the armed forces. The issue of civilian control has roiled some Democrats, who fear a waiver could erode what is a bedrock principle of U.S. government.

State nominee Tillerson: Deny China access to islands

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

China should not be allowed access to artificial islands it has built atop disputed reefs in the South China Sea, secretary of state nominee Rex Tillerson said Wednesday.

Tillerson's remarks during a confirmation hearing by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee came after he was asked whether the incoming administration should take a more aggressive stance on China's actions in the sea, where about \$5 trillion in trade transits annually, including more than \$1.2 trillion in U.S. commerce.

In the past few years, China has topped reefs in the sea with more than 3,000 acres of landfill and added radar, artillery and long runways capable of hosting bombers and other aircraft, according to Pentagon

reports and satellite imagery.

China claims nearly 90 percent of the South China Sea, despite competing claims from other nations and an international court ruling last year that invalidated several of Beijing's arguments.

"We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island building stops, and, second, your access to those islands is also not going to be allowed," Tillerson said.

He did not elaborate on how the U.S. could block Chinese ships and aircraft from the islands it has constructed. Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., moved on to another question afterward.

Earlier in his testimony, Tillerson said failure on Washington's part has allowed China to grow more assertive in its claims.

The U.S. military has launched freedom-of-navigation operations challenging Chi-

na's assertions near the islands since 2015.

Although it routinely had transited the region before 2015, the U.S. hadn't undertaken any public freedom-of-navigation missions in the area during much of the prior island construction.

"In my view, building islands and then putting military assets on those islands is akin to Russia's taking of Crimea," Tillerson said. "It's taking of territory that others lay claim to. The U.S. has never taken a side of those issues."

"But what we have advocated for is, look, that's a disputed area, there are international processes for dealing with that and China should respect those international processes."

In July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled against China on nearly all major points brought by the Philippines regarding South China Sea issues.

Obama takes last Air Force One flight

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama didn't just say farewell to the nation. He said goodbye to Air Force One, too.

Obama's roundtrip to Chicago, where he delivered his farewell speech, marked the 445th time that he's flown aboard the familiar, eye-catching blue and white U.S. government airplane with the presidential insignia emblazoned on the side, according to White House press secretary Josh Earnest. The plane goes by the call sign "Air Force One" whenever the sitting president is on board.

But no more for Obama. Tuesday's flight was almost certainly the last for him before he leaves office on Jan. 20.

Obama's first Air Force One flight came a few weeks into his presidency, when he flew to Williamsburg, Va., on Feb. 5, 2009, to address a meeting of House Democrats. Since then and up until Tuesday, Air Force One flew 2,799 hours and six minutes with Obama as a passenger, or the equivalent of 116 days, Earnest said. The destinations include 56 different countries and 49 states (all but Maryland). It fits a category of its own, as the presidential jet is housed at Joint Base Andrews in suburban Maryland.

Obama spoke as recently as last week about his affection for Air Force One. For one thing, he doesn't have to take off his shoes as most commercial air travelers are required to do.

"Of all the privileges of this office, and there are many, I will miss Air Force One," Obama said at a military farewell ceremony in his honor.

By tradition, Obama is entitled to one more flight aboard a government aircraft, and that will take place moments after President-elect Donald Trump is sworn into office. It just won't be referred to as Air Force One. The White House has yet to say where the Obamas plan to fly for vacation, but the president recently told Oprah Winfrey it will be "someplace warm."

Senate military panel set to take on Trump over agenda

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The political fireworks over Donald Trump's defense agenda came quickly and early to this year's Senate Armed Services Committee — and could stick around.

As the new Republican-controlled Congress was getting itself in order during the first days of its new session, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and his committee wasted no time last week calling in top intelligence chiefs who disputed Trump by confirming Russia hacked the presidential election.

Experts who testified Tuesday backed Trump's secretary of defense pick, Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, but only after lobbing some harsh criticism at the president-elect.

"There is no question in my mind that a Secretary Mattis would be a stabilizing and moderating force preventing wildly stupid, dangerous or illegal things from happening," Eliot A. Cohen, a noted Trump

critic and a professor at Johns Hopkins University, told the committee.

The Armed Services Committee holds powerful sway over the military, helping to craft its budget and policies. And under McCain's leadership, it is moving into an unusual position — a Republican-led committee already gearing up to take on a first-term Republican president.

The committee already had Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who is among the most visible Trump critics in the GOP, as a member. A handful of new members, including "never Trump" conservative Ben Sasse, of Nebraska, and liberal firebrand Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, could also change the committee dynamic.

The panel will have plenty of opportunity to criticize and meddle in Trump's nascent agenda. On Thursday, the committee began to weigh Mattis' nomination. After the president-elect takes office, it is almost certain to continue highlighting threats from Russia despite

Trump's call for closer relations and will also play a key role in whether Congress backs his plans for a massive and expensive military buildup, including a 350-ship Navy.

McCain, along with Graham, began pushing back against Trump just weeks after the election, opposing his plan to foster a closer relationship with Russia and rebuking Trump's endorsement of torture, specifically waterboarding. The friction dates to the beginning of the election in July 2015, when Trump questioned whether McCain is a war hero because he was captured in Vietnam. McCain dropped his endorsement of Trump in October after a video emerged of the candidate bragging about grabbing women's genitals.

"Moscow's influence operations are aimed at undermining confidence in self-government, and that's an attack on who we are, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as free people," Sasse said last week in a released statement about Russian hacking. He declined comment to Stars and Stripes.

CIA pick agrees Russia behind election hacks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump's pick to run the CIA on Thursday sided with intelligence officials who have determined the Kremlin was behind election cyberattacks, and he took a tough stand against Russia, distancing himself from the president-elect, who wants to warm relations with Moscow.

Rep. Mike Pompeo, a four-term conservative Kansas Republican, spoke at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee amid a testy standoff between Trump and the spy community over Russian activities during

the presidential election.

Since winning the election, Trump repeatedly has challenged the intelligence community's assessment that Russia was behind the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and other political sites.

"It's pretty clear about what took place here about Russia involvement in efforts to hack information and to have an impact on American democracy," Pompeo said. "I'm very clear-eyed about what that intelligence report says.

"This was an aggressive action taken by the senior leaders inside Russia," Pompeo said.

On Wednesday, Trump ac-

knowledged Russia was responsible for the hacking but speculated that intelligence agencies might have leaked to news organizations details about a classified briefing with him that included unsubstantiated allegations that Russia had collected compromising sexual and financial information about him.

Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, asked Pompeo to comment on what King said were "very serious allegations" about Trump's ties with Russia.

Pompeo pledged to investigate the allegations and to "pursue the facts wherever they take us."

Navy to upgrade combat awards for 4 Marines, sailor

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Marine will receive the nation's second-highest honor for valor and four other servicemembers will be awarded the military's third-highest combat decoration during a ceremony Friday to upgrade medals that they previously were awarded for actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Navy Secretary Ray Mabus approved the upgraded medals for the servicemembers — four Marines and one sailor — following a yearlong review of combat valor decorations ordered in January 2016 by Defense Secretary Ash Carter, the Marines announced Wednesday.

When the review was announced, Carter called it a “cautionary measure” to ensure troops were properly recognized for their battlefield bravery after concerns were raised by another review by Military Decorations and Awards program.

During the ceremony Friday at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Marine veteran Sgt. Michael Mendoza will receive the Navy Cross. The other former servicemembers — Marines Sgt. Nicholas Brandau, Master Sgt. Steven Davis, Lance Cpl. Edward Huth and Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Atkinson — will receive the Silver Star.

“It is appropriate that today we recognize these individuals for their outstanding actions in the face of incredible danger,” Mabus said in a prepared statement. “By honoring these five men, we honor the rest of you who fought beside them, and

those who are still in the fight.”

Mendoza initially was awarded a Silver Star in February 2005 for his actions while serving as an assistance reconnaissance team leader in Anbar Province, Iraq, in April 2004. While on a patrol, his unit was ambushed and the vehicle he was riding in was disabled by a rocket-propelled grenade, according to his award citation provided by the Marines.

Brandau's Bronze Star with “V” device for valor was upgraded to a Silver Star for his actions during more than 20 firefights with enemy forces during a six-day patrol in June 2012 in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, according to the award citation. His squad was attacked with machine-gun and mortar fire almost immediately after being dropped into a remote village.

Davis, a Marine section leader at the time, will receive the Silver Star for actions in Fallujah, Iraq, in November 2004, according to his award-upgrade citation. Davis' unit was providing security for casualty evacuations when a convoy was attacked.

Huth will have his Bronze Star with “V” device for valor upgraded to the Silver Star for his actions in Marjah, Afghanistan, in July 2010, according to his award citation. When his squad was attacked, Huth provided effective machine-gun fire and continued to engage the enemy even after he was shot in his right arm.

Atkinson, a hospital corpsman, will receive the Silver Star for repeatedly braving enemy fire to aid wounded Marines during a battle in April 2003 in Iraq, according to his award citation.

Carrier Ford could be delivered in April

(Newport News, Va.) Daily Press

The Navy has made “significant progress” on the aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford and the first-in-class ship could be delivered in April, a Navy spokeswoman said Wednesday.

The Navy has scheduled sea trials in March and April, said Capt. Thurraya Kent. Delivery to the Navy would take place in April, pending the results of sea trials.

The ship has faced numerous technological hurdles that have led to delays and cost overruns. Its original delivery date was September 2015.

But overall, the ship is now 99 percent complete, while testing on electronics, propulsion and hull mechanical and electrical systems is also more than 90 percent finished, Kent said.

The ship is pierside at Newport News Shipbuilding, the only shipyard that builds nuclear-powered aircraft carriers for the Navy. The shipyard is a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries.

The \$12.9 billion ship, packed with new technology, has had an on-again, off-again delivery schedule. The Navy, the shipyard and major subcontractors have worked to overcome problems with electromagnetic catapults designed to launch aircraft from the flight deck, as well as new arresting gear that would allow them to land safely.

New weapons elevators and radar systems also has caught the attention of Pentagon weapons testers.

Finally, a troublesome electrical issue surfaced in June and continued throughout the year.

In September, the Navy backed away from a planned November delivery date and declined to predict when it would be delivered.

US brigade enters Poland

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

ZAGAN, Poland — Soon after U.S. Army Col. Christopher Norrie crossed the border into Poland on Thursday with a long convoy of infantrymen, he was swarmed.

Dozens of local reporters, who had gathered at a Polish base in Zagan, fired off questions. Could Norrie's forces deter Russia? Were there enough soldiers? Are tensions with Russia getting worse?

Norrie, who commands the 3rd Brigade Armored Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, said his unit, renowned for its “lethality,” had come to defend.

“I have no doubt we will credibly deter any threat in the area,” he said, not mentioning Russia by name. “It doesn't take long to put it [my unit] together and get ready to fight.”

The 3rd Brigade has nearly finished its move into Poland, where about 3,500 troops will assemble before fanning out in the weeks ahead for missions across NATO's eastern flank. Their arrival comes at a time of anxiety in Poland and the Baltics about Europe's security, as tensions between the West and Russia reach a post-Cold War low.

The unit was accompanied by a full set of tanks and artillery — more than 2,500 military ve-

hicles will be operating up and down Eastern Europe.

Some of the troops arrived in Poland by air, while others came by road, carrying gear in a convoy from the German port in Bremerhaven. On Thursday, troops with the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, finished their four-day haul across Germany and into Poland, where they will stay before heading for Romania.

The nine-month deployment is the latest effort in the ongoing Operation Atlantic Resolve mission, which seeks to reassure anxious allies and to send a signal of deterrence to what U.S. officials call a more assertive and unpredictable Russia.

Manning on short list for commutation

BY KEVIN TAMPONE
Syracuse (N.Y.) Media Group

Chelsea Manning, the former U.S. Army soldier imprisoned for passing government documents to WikiLeaks, is on President Barack Obama's short list for possible commutation, according to NBC News.

NBC's report cited a source in the Justice Department.

A decision could come soon

for Manning, who tried to commit suicide and went on a hunger strike last year to demand better treatment in prison.

Manning, 28, is serving a 35-year sentence in the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. She pleaded guilty in 2013 to 10 charges related to theft and espionage.

Manning stole more than 750,000 pages of classified and unclassified military docu-

ments, including videos of airstrikes, war logs and diplomatic cables. She then passed them to WikiLeaks.

Manning, previously known as Bradley, revealed she was transgender in 2013.

Manning's supporters believe her harsh sentence is related in part to NSA contractor Edward Snowden, who leaked far more sensitive materials to WikiLeaks, according to NBC.

Manning's aunt, Deborah Manning, told NBC she believes her niece served as a scapegoat for Snowden.

Snowden fled before he could be arrested. He eventually ended up in Russia and has been there since.

He has also asked Obama for clemency and tweeted his support of Manning.

Calif. residents rescued from flooding as major storms finally recede

Associated Press

HOLLISTER, Calif. — Rescue workers used boats and firetrucks to evacuate dozens of Northern California residents from their flooded homes Wednesday as a drought-busting series of storms began to move out of the region after days of heavy rain and snow that toppled trees and created havoc as far north as Portland, Ore.

Reports of the flooding started about 2 a.m. Wednesday as water from a quickly rising creek in the small rural town of Hollister deluged homes on a two-lane stretch of road called Lovers Lane.

Torrents of rain gushed down the street even after rescuers finished evacuating residents more than seven hours later. Some homes had mudlines about 5 feet high, marking how far the water rose. The water by that time was receding but still waist-deep in places.

"It's just a lot of water," said Kevin O'Neill, emergency services manager for San Benito County. "Fields that look like lakes. The ground just can't soak it up. Vehicles that are partly submerged, homes have water damage."

Hollister resident Richard Sanchez said he didn't evacuate because he wanted to look

after his animals after seeing his yard flood.

"My yard is just an ocean," Sanchez said. "I decided to stay because I have animals. I wasn't being hardheaded. I just wanted to make sure they were safe."

Forecasters said precipitation would continue through Thursday, but the brunt of the back-to-back systems fueled by an "atmospheric river" weather phenomenon had passed after delivering the heaviest rain in a decade to parts of Northern California and Nevada.

The massive rain and snowfall that prompted a rare blizzard warning in parts of the Sierra Nevada mountains is helping much of Northern California recover from a six-year drought. The series of storms also has added 39 billion gallons of water to Lake Tahoe since Jan. 1.

Stormy weather extended north, where Portland and southwestern Washington were slammed with a surprising foot of snow, unusual for an area that normally sees rain. Crater Lake National Park in Oregon closed Tuesday and into Wednesday with more than 8 feet of snow on the ground.

Senate takes first step toward repeal of health care law

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate has passed a measure to take the first step forward on dismantling the Affordable Care Act, responding to pressure to move quickly even as Republicans and President-elect Donald Trump grapple with how to replace it.

The nearly party-line 51-48 vote early Thursday came on a nonbinding, Republican-backed budget measure that eases the way for action on subsequent repeal legislation as soon as next month.

The House is slated to vote on the measure Friday, though some Republicans there have misgivings about setting the repeal effort in motion without a better idea of the replacement plan.

Trump oozed confidence at a news conference on Wednesday, promising his incoming administration soon would reveal a plan both to repeal so-called Obamacare and to replace it with legislation to "get health care taken care of in this country."

"We're going to do repeal-and-replace, very complicated stuff," Trump told reporters, adding that both elements would pass virtually at the same time. That promise, however, will be

almost impossible to achieve in the complicated web of Congress, where GOP leaders must navigate complex Senate rules, united Democratic opposition and substantive policy disagreements among Republicans.

Passage of Thursday's measure would permit follow-up legislation to escape the threat of a filibuster by Senate Democrats. Republicans are not close to agreement among themselves on what any Obamacare replacement would look like, however.

Republicans plan to get legislation voiding Obama's law and replacing parts of it to Trump by the end of February, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said Wednesday on "The Hugh Hewitt Show," a conservative radio program. Other Republicans have said they expect the process to take longer.

The 2010 law extended health insurance to some 20 million Americans, prevented insurers from denying coverage for pre-existing conditions and steered billions of dollars to states for the Medicaid health program for the poor. Republicans fought the effort tooth and nail, and voter opposition to Obamacare helped carry the party to impressive wins in 2010, 2014, and last year.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Loud street preacher targeted by ordinance

MO SPRINGFIELD — Springfield has approved a new noise ordinance over the objections of an attorney for a street preacher who was arrested after delivering loud sermons downtown.

The Springfield News-Leader reported that backers said the rules approved Monday won't restrict what people say, only their volume.

Street preacher Aaron Brummitt was charged with multiple municipal ordinance violations in 2013 after a complaint about his amplifying equipment in public spaces. He reached an agreement in 2014 to have his charges deferred. But police have continued to hear complaints since then.

Brummitt's attorney, Dee Wampler, argued in December that the council was "messing with religious speech."

Hamster could become mascot for Amherst

MA AMHERST — Students and alumni at Amherst College could soon be rooting for the Hamsters.

Hamsters was among the most popular nicknames submitted to a committee put together to come up with a new athletic mascot for the Massachusetts school.

Trustees dropped Lord Jeffs last year in part because 18th-century British Gen. Jeffery Amherst suggested giving smallpox-infected blankets to Native Americans. The committee has winnowed a list of nearly 600 unique suggestions to 30 semifinalists.

Many people noted that Hamster is an anagram for Amherst. Other semifinalists include Moose, Aces, Dinosaurs, Irradiants, Fighting Poets and Mammoths.

Baby blue penguin is born at aquarium

NJ CAMDEN — A baby blue penguin has been born at an aquarium in New Jersey.

Officials with Adventure Aquarium in Camden announced Monday that the first chick to be spawned from its little blue penguin colony hatched last month.

The aquarium said the chick was born inside a nesting box on Dec. 3 under the watchful eye of staff members. Early gender tests have shown that the chick is female.

The progeny of Sheila and Goose has grown from 1.23 ounces to more than 2 pounds. That's about the same size as many of the adult penguins in the colony, which now consists of nine birds — three females and six males.

Coyote sightings cause stir among residents

GA ROSWELL — Coyote sightings in Roswell and other parts of metro Atlanta continue to cause a stir among some residents.

The latest sighting was Monday morning. Dan Uhlmeier, a resident of the North Point subdivision in Roswell, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution he spotted the animal in his snow-dusted backyard.

Uhlmeier said it's not the first coyote he's seen in the yard, which backs up to a creek. But it was the largest.

Coyote sightings have unnerved some in the area. However, Chris Mowry, an animal ecologist who coordinates the Atlanta Coyote Project, has said there's no need to be overly alarmed.

The project website has guidelines for dealing with the

animals. Tips include making trash cans and other possible food sources inaccessible and keeping pets indoors at night.

Woman leaves jail using another inmate's name

FL GREEN COVE SPRINGS — Investigators are looking into how a Florida woman managed to get out of jail using another inmate's name and release papers.

News outlets report that the Clay County Sheriff's Office said Jessica Arnott pretended to be Jessica Davis and bonded out of jail Monday.

Sheriff's office spokeswoman Angela Spears said Arnott signed Davis' release paperwork using Davis' name.

Davis' mother, who was told by jail staff that her daughter had bonded out, spotted Arnott dressed like Davis on the street and stopped her before calling police. Arnott was returned to the jail.

Bill seeks a punitive ban on Russian vodka

NH CONCORD — If one New Hampshire lawmaker has his way, it might become difficult to find Russian vodka in the state's liquor stores.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Jeff Woodburn on Monday proposed a bill that would establish a bipartisan commission to consider ways the state could respond to what he calls "Russian interference in our democracy."

The legislation suggests the state could suspend or ban the sale of Russia-made liquor at stores operated by the New Hampshire Liquor Commission and require that Old Man of the Mountain bottles contain American liquor, not Russian liquor. The bottles have images

of the Old Man of the Mountain, a granite face-like profile that crumbled to the ground nearly 15 years ago.

Congressman fights 'Death with Dignity'

DC WASHINGTON — The head of the congressional committee that oversees District of Columbia affairs says he'll block a city bill that would allow terminally ill patients to end their own lives with a doctor's help.

Media outlets report that Rep. Jason Chaffetz told reporters Monday he fundamentally disagrees with the "Death with Dignity" bill, which Mayor Muriel Bowser signed last month. It would allow patients with six months or less to live to request lethal medication from their doctors.

The bill was sent to Congress last week for a 30-day review. Chaffetz, a Utah Republican, plans to introduce a disapproval resolution this month.

Fire crews save goose stuck on frozen pond

VA ALDIE — Loudoun County fire crews rescued a goose after it became stuck on the surface of a frozen pond.

IAFF Local 3756, the county firefighter's union, says in a Facebook post that the Aldie fire department was alerted Sunday night to a report of a goose in distress on a frozen pond south of Washington Dulles International Airport. The goose was stuck on top of the pond either because of an injury or illness.

Firefighters tried several methods of retrieving the bird, but none worked until firefighters put on ice rescue suits, went into the pond and got the goose.

From wire reports

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Dallas' Lee gets first shot at playoffs

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Sean Lee's first All-Pro season will end with the first trip to the playoffs for the oft-injured Dallas linebacker.

If that sounds like a breakout year, Cowboys tight end Jason Witten would argue otherwise.

"To me, it's not like, 'Oh, we're seeing a different player than we've seen in the past,'" Witten said. "I remember the first week, his rookie year, he was tough on scout team. He's what you want your linebacker to look like."

Lee missed Dallas' only other trip to the postseason since he was drafted in 2010. That was two years ago, when the Cowboys beat Detroit in a wild-card game before losing at Green Bay in the divisional round.

The Cowboys (13-3) will meet the Packers in the same round Sunday. This time Dallas will be at home as the No. 1 seed in the NFC, and Lee will try to slow Aaron Rodgers, who has 19 touchdowns without an interception during a seven-game winning streak for Green Bay (11-6).

Lee never played in 2014

after tearing the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee in the first offseason practice. It was the third long-term injury for the former Penn State standout who slid to the second round in his draft because of another knee injury.

By the time that season ended, Lee had played in 46 games and been inactive because of injury in 36. But now he's played in 29 of the past 32. It would be 30 if Lee hadn't been held out of the regular-season finale at Philadelphia because the Cowboys had clinched the top seed.

"During a lot of injuries I've had, I said, 'Hey, I have this great opportunity ahead of me to play on this great team with these great teammates,'" Lee said. "So that was really what motivated in times I was injured."

Even though he knew he wasn't playing against the Eagles, Lee kept his helmet on. And it wasn't so much because he longed to say he played all 16 games. His career list is likely to show another "15," matching 2011 for the only other time he came close to playing a full season.

Instead, it was Lee doing what others say separates him from many players: obsessing on preparation.

"As soon as they played the Rocky theme song, I was like, 'You've got to get me in this game,'" Lee joked before explaining. "When I've had the injuries, the best thing I did was mentally I kept myself in it, situational. OK, I'm going to prepare like I'm playing this week."

Lee set a career high in tackles each of the past three seasons he played, starting with 123 in 2013 before the knee injury, and 156 last season. After sitting against the Eagles, he settled for 173 and a team-high 12 tackles for loss this season.

The 30-year-old Lee was denied a second Pro Bowl bid, but not the All-Pro nod that carries more prestige.

"It's good to see that recognition and the people kind of see it in the reflection because he has a lot of tackles," Witten said. "That doesn't define what Sean brings to this football team. I think it's so much bigger than that."

Dez Bryant's famous catch

that wasn't is what most remember from the Cowboys' 26-21 loss to the Packers two years ago. What most don't remember is Rodgers' offense keeping the ball for the final 4:06 after that play to preserve the win.

Owner and general manager Jerry Jones certainly does, particularly because Lee was on the sideline — and on injured reserve.

"I remember watching Rodgers take it down the field against us two years ago and wishing we had Sean Lee out there," Jones said. "And I knew he was sitting over there pretty healthy. Now, I don't know if he was ready to defend Rodgers. But it would have been probably good to have him in the game."

This time Lee will be, after waiting seven seasons to experience the postseason.

"The anxiety level is low, but the excitement level is high," Lee said. "I've missed a lot of football. I'm blessed to be healthy. I'm excited to be on this team and have this opportunity."

Witten and others are excited for him.

Osweiler faced with task of pulling off historic upset

Associated Press

Before this weekend, just five NFL playoff games since 1966 have featured a team favored by at least 15 points. Just one of those underdogs won the game (Google "Joe Namath" if you need more information on that).

Odds makers don't think Brock Osweiler should guarantee the 16-point underdog Houston Texans can beat Tom Brady and the Patriots in New England. In fact, even if Brady were not playing, the Patriots would be favored by nearly two touchdowns.

"Normally, he is worth six to seven points to the spread, depending on the opponent," said Scott Cooley, spokesman for BookMaker, an offshore book

and casino. "But in this situation it changes a bit because the Patriots have a very capable backup in Jimmy Garoppolo, who we've seen perform well in meaningful games. If Brady wasn't playing this weekend, we would make the Patriots 12- to 13-point favorites."

The Patriots (14-2) beat the Texans 27-0 in Week 3 with third-string quarterback Jacoby Brissett leading the way.

Brady, of course, will be under center against the Texans and he's playing some of his best football. He's taking nothing for granted because coach Bill Belichick wouldn't have it another way.

"There is nothing easy about this game for our offense," Brady said on WEEI radio in

Boston.

Pro Football Reference lists 59 double-digit favorites in playoff games since the Super Bowl began in January 1967.

The favorites are 33-25-1 against the spread and 47-12 straight up.

The five biggest point spreads in the playoffs since 1966:

19 points: 49ers vs. Chargers in 1995 Super Bowl. Steve Young threw six touchdown passes, including three to Jerry Rice, to lead San Francisco to a 49-26 victory and its fifth Vince Lombardi Trophy.

18 points: Colts vs. Jets in 1969 Super Bowl. Namath guaranteed a win for the underdog Jets and delivered. Broadway Joe threw for 206 yards, Matt Snell had 121 yards rushing and

a TD and Jim Turner kicked three field goals in New York's 16-7 victory over Baltimore.

16½ points: Vikings vs. Cardinals in 1999 NFC divisional round. Randall Cunningham tossed three TD passes, including one to rookie Randy Moss, to lead the Vikings to a 41-21 win.

15½ points: 49ers vs. Bears in 1995 NFC divisional round. William Floyd ran for three TDs and San Francisco routed Chicago 44-15.

15 points: Cowboys vs. Falcons in 1978 NFC divisional round. Danny White replaced Roger Staubach after he sustained a concussion and led the Cowboys to a 27-20 win, but not a cover.

Creighton puts away Butler

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Maurice Watson Jr. says he and his Creighton teammates followed the script perfectly against Butler, putting the Bulldogs away early by playing a blistering first half.

"We start every game saying we want to come out and cook every team," Watson said after the eighth-ranked Bluejays beat the No. 12 Bulldogs 75-64 on Wednesday night. "We have that fire in us and that pride, turning us into dogs. That's what you've got to be when you want to be the top team in a conference like the Big East."

Watson scored 21 points as Creighton (16-1, 4-1 Big East) matched its best 17-game record in program history. The Bluejays, who shot 55 percent, were too much for Butler (14-3, 3-2) with its star Kelan Martin still struggling with his shot.

Watson made nine of 14 shots and had seven assists but committed a season-high eight turnovers. Khyri Thomas added 14 points and 12 rebounds, and Cole Huff and Justin Patton each had 10 points.

"Our execution was good, our focus was good, our energy was good, and obviously we're scoring some baskets as a result of our defense — and that gets our crowd into the game," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said.

Butler lost for the first time in five games against Top 25 opponents, and it failed in the bid for a fourth win over a top 10 opponent. All of the losses have come on the road.

Avery Woodson led the Bulldogs with 14 points.

The Bluejays led 47-27 at halftime after shooting 60 percent.

"I think they can certainly make a Final Four, I think they can play for a national championship," Butler coach Chris Holtmann said. "I thought that as soon as I started watching them and preparing for them. There is zero ceiling for this Creighton team."

Martin continued to be

mired in a slump that has him shooting 30 percent in Big East games. He went 0-for-8 the first 20 minutes and put up an air ball from 8 feet in the lane.

No. 11 North Carolina 93, Wake Forest 87: Justin Jackson hit a huge three-pointer with 1:03 left and the visiting Tar Heels did just enough to hold off the Demon Deacons.

Jackson finished with 19 points for the North Carolina (15-3, 3-1 Atlantic Coast Conference), while Kennedy Meeks added 18 points and 11 rebounds.

UNC twice blew second-half leads when it was in control, first letting a 19-point lead slip to one and then losing much of a nine-point margin in the final 4 minutes.

But Jackson's three finally gave UNC the push it needed, with Isaiah Hicks and Kenny Williams each hitting key free throws in the final minute to keep UNC out front.

No. 14 Louisville 85, Pittsburgh 80: Quentin Snider scored 22 points, including two free throws with 25.3 seconds remaining, and Deng Adel added a free throw 8 seconds later as the host Cardinals survived Jamel Artis' career-high 43 points.

Louisville appeared in good shape with a 59-35 lead midway through the second half before Artis' 32-point second half rallied Pittsburgh within 81-76 with 45 seconds remaining. Donovan Mitchell made one of two from the line before Snider and Adel added critical free throws to provide a cushion as Louisville (14-3, 2-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) won its second straight.

Artis was 15-for-22 from the field with seven threes for Pittsburgh (12-5, 1-3).

Michigan St. 65, No. 24 Minnesota 47: Miles Bridges scored all 16 of his points in the first half, helping the host Spartans build a huge lead.

Michigan State (12-6, 4-1 Big Ten) started the night in a five-way tie atop the conference with the Minnesota (11-7, 3-2)

and moved a half-game ahead of No. 17 Purdue, Maryland and Nebraska.

Nate Mason scored 14 points and Dupree McBrayer had 11 for Minnesota, which lost its first game as a ranked team.

Colgate 79, Army 76 (OT): Sean O'Brien scored seven of his 18 points in overtime and finished with seven assists as the visiting Raiders held on to beat the Black Knights.

Francisco Amiel had 15 points, including three three-pointers, while Malcolm Regisford scored 12, on 6-for-6 shooting, with eight rebounds and two blocks for Colgate (4-14, 2-3 Patriot League).

O'Brien hit a three to open the extra period and the Raiders led the rest of the way. Tommy Funk's layup pulled Army to 70-69 with 3:08 left, but O'Brien made a layup and two free throws during an 8-2 run that gave Colgate a 78-71 lead with 23 seconds left.

John Emezie, who led Army with a career-high 20 points, hit a three from the left corner with 14.5 seconds left in regulation to cap a 13-2 run and force OT. Funk and Luke Morrison finished with 13 points apiece for the Black Knights (7-10, 1-4).

Air Force 81, Fresno State 72: Hayden Graham had 21 points, eight rebounds and six assists and the host Falcons never trailed in a win over the Bulldogs.

Trevor Lyons added 18 points, Jacob Van scored 14, and Zach Kocur and Ryan Manning had 10 points each for Air Force (9-8, 2-2 Mountain West).

Navy 75, Loyola (Md) 62: At Baltimore, Shawn Anderson had 15 points, seven rebounds and five assists, Bryce Dulin added 14 points and seven boards for the Midshipmen.

George Kiernan scored 11 for Navy (7-10, 2-3 Patriot League), which won its first game away from home this season.

Arena aims for quick adjustment for US team

Associated Press

CARSON, Calif. — Bruce Arena realizes he has very little time to get back into his groove with the U.S. national team. After all, two vital World Cup qualifiers are looming just two months away.

Luckily for Arena, he has done this job before. He's also returning to work in extremely familiar surroundings.

"I think it's a great opportunity for me personally, but it's an important time for this team," Arena said Wednesday. "Our goal is pretty clear: We need to qualify for Russia in 2018."

Arena convened the first training camp of his second stint in charge of the U.S. team at its training base south of downtown Los Angeles. The complex also is the home of the LA Galaxy, where Arena served as the coach and general manager of the MLS club for the past 8½ seasons.

Arena took over for Jurgen Klinsmann in late November, accepting the task of salvaging the Americans' World Cup qualification hopes. Two losses last year dropped the U.S. into last place in its qualifying hexagonal, albeit with eight games to go.

The transition isn't easy, and the stakes are high. But Arena seems as equipped for the task as anybody.

"I'm having the time of my life," Arena said with his usual sardonic tone. "I haven't had to move. The hotel is about a five-minute drive from my house. I've been coming here for the last eight years. I had to move about 30 yards from my past office. So life could be worse."

Although Americans on European club teams can't attend this camp, Arena held his first practice with 28 players, including several MLS stalwarts who couldn't crack the Eurocentric Klinsmann's talent pool.

The camp will end with friendly matches against Serbia on Jan. 29 and Jamaica on Feb. 3.

Ovechkin scores 1,000th career point

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nothing about Alex Ovechkin the showman surprises the Washington Capitals anymore.

That Ovechkin carried them on his back with two goals as they beat the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-2 Wednesday night for their seventh consecutive victory was hardly a shock. With the thought of recording his 1,000th point in his mind before the game, Ovechkin scored a goal 35 seconds in to reach that milestone and made it 1,001 with a power-play goal later to help snap the rival Penguins' winning streak at five.

"Every night, he plays hard, so nothing new," said longtime linemate Nicklas Backstrom, who assisted on each of Ovechkin's goals and had one of his own. "The only thing that was a little surprising was maybe 35 seconds. That's all it took. But that's typical [of] a guy like him, though."

Ovechkin, with his usual flair for the dramatic, scored on a pretty toe-drag and wrist shot on the game's first shift and then from his usual spot on the power play in

the second period. He's the only player to score 20 in every season since 2005-06, his rookie year.

Wanting to reach the 1,000-point plateau in front of his wife, parents and brother, Ovechkin got it done fast and called it a "pretty special moment, pretty amazing moment."

"That was a great start for him and for us," coach Barry Trotz said. "If he's going to score, he sort of had that look in his eye once he touched the puck that something good was going to happen."

Good things have been happening a lot lately for the Capitals, who ended the Columbus Blue Jackets' winning streak at 16 Thursday, celebrated Backstrom's 500th career assist Saturday and Ovechkin's 554th on Monday in Montreal that tied Maurice "Rocket" Richard.

Beating the Penguins to extend their season-best winning streak to seven on the strength of goals by Ovechkin, Backstrom, Williams an empty-netter by Lars Eller and 30 saves from Braden Holtby just kept the good vibes going for a team that is now just

one point behind Columbus for first place in the Metropolitan Division.

The Capitals trailed the Blue Jackets by nine points Dec. 28 before this eight-game point streak that has vaulted them over the Penguins and New York Rangers.

Panthers 2, Islanders 1: Jason Demers scored the tiebreaking goal early in the second period, Roberto Luongo stopped 29 shots and visiting Florida held on against New York.

Keith Yandle also scored for Florida, which won for the fourth time in six games.

Canadiens 7, Jets 4: Phillip Danault and Artturi Lehkonen each scored twice and visiting Montreal dominated Winnipeg.

Tomas Plekanec and Sven Andrighetto, with his first of the season, also had goals for the Canadiens.

Flames 3, Sharks 2: Dougie Hamilton scored at 17:41 of the third period to lead host Calgary over San Jose.

Hamilton and rookie Matthew Tkachuk each finished with a goal and an assist for the Flames.

Tensions high as Celtics knock off Wizards

Associated Press

BOSTON — Isaiah Thomas was good for three quarters and nearly unstoppable in the fourth.

Thomas scored 20 of his 38 points in the final period and the Boston Celtics pulled away late for a 117-108 win over the Washington Wizards on Wednesday night.

The Celtics won for the fifth time in six games and ended Washington's three-game winning streak. The game was physical throughout and got heated after the final buzzer as the talk continued and nearly escalated into something more.

Boston's Jae Crowder pointed a finger toward Washington's John Wall as the two squared off near the Wizards bench.

"Just two teams playing hard," said Crowder, who had 20 points.

Wall swiped at Crowder but appeared to miss, then the players were steered toward the locker rooms. Some needed more guidance than others, including Boston's Marcus

Smart, who irritated and frustrated the Wizards throughout the game. Smart continued chattering away at the Wizards as he was escorted to the Celtics' tunnel, where police lined the hallways discouraging anything more.

"It's a physical team. We're physical. Neither one of us has to be pumped," said Bradley Beal, who led Washington with 35 points.

"It was just a physical game. That's all it was."

Smart and Beal got tangled up under the Washington basket and both fell to the floor in the third quarter. Officials and teammates separated the two as they got up and exchanged words. Smart was called for a foul and Beal received a technical.

There were five technicals in all, two of them on Boston for three-second violations and the others for getting a little too physical.

Al Horford added 16 points and nine rebounds for the Celtics. Crowder scored 20 and

Terry Rozier had 11.

Otto Porter Jr. scored 20 points for Washington, and Markieff Morris finished with 14.

Boston held Wall to a season-low nine points. The star guard was playing with a jammed finger and sore wrist, but did have 10 assists for the Wizards, who fell to 19-19 a day after moving above .500 for the first time since November 2015.

"They made big plays at the end. We missed a lot of good-looking shots," Washington coach Scott Brooks said. "They got physical. They got their hands on us. We couldn't get anything done and turned the ball over a few times."

Thunder 103, Grizzlies 95: Russell Westbrook posted his 18th triple-double of the season, and host Oklahoma City defeated Memphis.

Westbrook finished with 24 points, 13 rebounds and 12 assists for the 55th triple-double of his career.

Timberwolves 119, Rockets 105: Andrew Wiggins scored 28 points, Karl-Anthony

Towns had 23 points and 18 rebounds, and Shabazz Muhammad scored 20 to help host Minnesota.

James Harden had 33 points and 12 assists for the Rockets, who had their nine-game winning streak snapped.

76ers 98, Knicks 97: T.J. McConnell hit a baseline jumper at the buzzer to give host Philadelphia a victory over New York.

Joel Embiid had 21 points and 14 rebounds, and Ersan Ilyasova added 16 points to help the 76ers rally from a 17-point deficit.

Trail Blazers 102, Cavaliers 86: CJ McCollum had 27 points and host Portland shook off fatigue caused by weather-related travel delays to beat defending NBA champion Cleveland.

Clippers 105, Magic 96: J.J. Redick had 22 points and host Los Angeles hit five three-pointers in the fourth quarter to hold off Orlando, improving to 5-0 in the new year.