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Busy Carter made time to pursue reform

BY TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — On Ash Carter's first week as defense secretary two years ago, he launched the Force of the Future Initiative that he thought would define his term: scores of changes to make military service more attractive to the next generation of warfighters.

His goal was to broaden the Pentagon's appeal and make the military more in line with what he thought necessary to fight future wars: less traditional infantry, more high-tech hackers.

But Carter's focus on reform was quickly challenged by increased small-scale engagements with terrorists in the Middle East, friction with global powers and budgetary struggles in Washington.

"He was someone who was profiled as a reformer who ended up with a lot of operations responsibility," said David Adesnik, policy director at the Foreign Policy Initiative, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank in Washington.

During his term, the U.S. has faced Russian aggression, the largest military reinforcement of Europe in decades and the increased pace of operations against the Islamic State group. The train-and-advise strategy has helped Iraqi and Syrian fighters gain ground, said Larry Korb, a senior defense fellow at the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington.

Carter is "leaving at a point of momentum" in the battle against the Islamic State militants, he said. "I do think he should take credit for that."

However, the Asia Pacific area remains "the single most consequential region for America's future," Carter told the Reagan Defense Forum in California in December. There

is the potential nuclear threat posed by North Korea, and the economic and military rise in the region, particularly by China. The United States will have 60 percent of its naval assets in the Asia Pacific by 2020. During Carter's tenure, new agreements were set with Singapore, the Philippines, Japan and others to meet that goal.

Carter's focus on reform had to take place in the context of the continuing war on terror, Adesnik said.

"It's very rare the Pentagon can focus only on reform. Certainly since 9/11, there hasn't been time to focus," he said. "There aren't too many breaks for America as a global leader."

A lifetime in defense

When Carter took office in 2015, he had more than 30 years of experience working for or advising the Pentagon, including three separate stints as a deputy or assistant secretary of defense. He also had years of involvement serving on select boards set up to address defense challenges such as reforming the Pentagon's acquisition policies or to advise its nuclear weapons policy.

That deep bureaucratic experience provided extensive expertise that could lead to lengthy memos and speeches as defense secretary, but did not always translate well at the podium during interviews. Carter could discuss at length how the Pentagon was able to speed the acquisition of thousands of armored vehicles to better protect troops in Afghanistan. But he seemed less at ease discussing the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

There is a less bureaucratic side to Carter, and it's often visible when he's with troops. He makes a point to shake hands with every servicemember he

meets, posing for photos and giving out challenge coins.

"I get a chance to look you right in the eye and congratulate you and thank you," he said in June at a troop event at Fort Knox, Ky., making time to talk to each soldier, one by one.

He was the first defense secretary to join Facebook, according to the Defense Department. His first post: a photo of him shaking hands with a Marine on a MV-22 Osprey.

Institutional change

Carter believes the military should challenge itself to be better — "to think outside of the five-sided box." He has made dozens of recommendations to help the military recruit and retain its best. None, however, has brought as much attention to the Pentagon as Carter's controversial decision in December 2015 to open all positions to women.

"They'll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat," Carter announced in a news briefing at the Pentagon. "They'll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, Air Force parajumpers and everything else that was previously open only to men."

His views split with many people, including then-Marines Commandant Gen. Joseph Dunford, who favored keeping certain infantry and artillery positions closed to women.

Carter "stood up to the Marines on women in combat," Korb said. "The interesting thing will be what [defense secretary nominee retired Marine Gen. James] Mattis is going to do about that."

Mattis told the Senate on Thursday that he has no plans to reverse the decision if he is confirmed.

At his final news conference, Carter said the full integration of women should remain.

Force of the Future

Carter launched his Force of the Future Initiative in March 2015. His six-pronged effort calls for improving the promotion system, adding family benefits such as maternity and paternity leaves, introducing professional sabbaticals for servicemembers and bringing in outsiders as officers in high-tech fields. In November, Carter announced a plan to expand recruiting and broaden the appeal of ROTC programs on college campuses.

Another aspect of his initiative is the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental. Its goal is to advance technological innovation in the military by working with the private sector and cultivating talent. It aims to get cutting-edge technology into the hands of troops.

Not everyone is a fan of Force of the Future.

"This initiative has been an outrageous waste of official time," Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said in February, noting the budget challenges and ongoing operations facing the department.

McCain, Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, argued the continued budget pressure on the military imposed by the automatic spending cuts known as sequestration and the pace of operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan made it an inappropriate time to focus on the reforms.

Carter defended his emphasis on reform during a time of war and financial constraints.

"Well, we need to do these things at the same time," he said. "We need to carry out operations in the present, we need to prepare for future operations."

Coalition airstrikes assist Turkish-led offensive in Syria

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S.-led anti-Islamic State group coalition struck militants near al-Bab, Syria, in recent days, backing a Turkish-led offensive from which American officials had initially withheld their support, a top coalition spokesman said Tuesday.

Four coalition airstrikes Monday and Tuesday destroyed Islamic State tactical units, an armored personnel carrier and an excavator near the key northern Syrian town, where Turkish troops and their Syrian rebel force partners have faced stiff resistance, said U.S. Air Force Col. John Dorrian, the Baghdad-based spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve. The strikes were the first the coalition has provided in support of its NATO ally Turkey since the operation was first announced in September.

The coalition had backed a

Turkish offensive early last year that cleared Islamic State fighters from land across Syria's northern border with Turkey. But with tensions mounting between the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Turkey in recent months, the coalition initially declined to back the current Turkish offensive, which U.S. officials described as an independent military operation. Turkey views the bulk of the SDF, Kurdish fighters known as YPG, as a terrorist organization, alleging it is closely tied to the Kurdish PKK, a group the United States has designated as terrorists.

Russia, which has mostly backed Syrian President Bashar Assad, has provided some air support to the Turkish campaign in the past month, but the offensive has not been able to wrest al-Bab from the Islamic State group. Several dozen Turkish soldiers and their allied local fighters have been killed in the clashes.

In recent weeks, Turkey and the OIR coalition appear to have ironed out some of their differences. The coalition began flying regular intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance flights over al-Bab last month. On Tuesday, Dorrian said he expected the coalition to provide more airstrikes in support of the Turkish operation.

"We do expect to continue doing these types of strikes in the days ahead," he said.

Dorrian said the coalition developed the targets alongside Turkish commanders, who are working together in joint headquarters. He said he expected the Turks to eventually defeat the Islamic State group in al-Bab.

What remains unclear is what role, if any, the Turkish military and its partners will have on the eventual assault to retake the Islamic State group's de facto capital of Raqqa, some 80 miles southeast of al-Bab.

Air Force cites PTSD in base shooting

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — U.S. Air Force investigators have determined that post-traumatic stress disorder and the unraveling of a distinguished military career led an airman to fatally shoot his commander last year at a San Antonio base before killing himself, according to Air Force documents.

The April shooting at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland prompted a lockdown and officials to abruptly end a military training parade with thousands of spectators.

Investigators determined Tech. Sgt. Steven Bellino confronted Lt. Col. William Schroeder before the two struggled and Schroeder was shot multiple times. Both men were veterans of U.S. Special Operations Command.

Air Force documents given to the San Antonio Express-News by Bellino's family show he participated in an elite pararescue program with Schroeder but did not complete it.

Investigators believe Bellino, 41, resented the outcome following a military career that included repeated tours in Afghanistan and Iraq and time as an Army Ranger and Green Beret. He also served as an FBI agent and was a CIA contractor before enlisting in the Air Force and attempting to join the elite unit.

"I do not like this world, and I do not want to be a part of it any longer," Bellino wrote in August 2015, the month he quit the pararescue program, went home to Ohio and was charged with being absent without leave. "I've searched for many years to find a home consistent with my ethics and such a place does not exist."

His comments came in a note that investigators found in a flash drive, and they were written about the time his PTSD symptoms appeared to intensify.

Official: Nigeria mistakenly bombs refugee camp; more than 100 killed

Associated Press

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria — A Nigerian air force fighter jet on a mission against Boko Haram extremists mistakenly bombed a refugee camp Tuesday, killing more than 100 refugees and wounding aid workers, a Borno State official said. An International Committee of the Red Cross worker said 20 volunteers with the aid group had been killed.

The state government official, who was helping to coordinate the evacuation of wounded from the remote area by helicopters, spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to

speak to reporters.

Military commander Maj. Gen. Lucky Irabor confirmed the accidental bombardment in northeast Rann, near the border with Cameroon. This is believed to be the first time Nigeria's military has admitted to making such a mistake.

Among the wounded were two soldiers and Nigerians working for Doctors Without Borders and the ICRC, Irabor said. An ICRC employee told the AP that 20 Red Cross volunteers were among the dead. He also spoke on condition of anonymity.

Doctors Without Borders said its team based in Rann had counted 50 bodies and treated

120 wounded.

Irabor said he ordered the mission based on information that Boko Haram insurgents were gathering, along with geographic coordinates. It was too early to say if a tactical error was made, he said. The general, who is the theater commander for counterinsurgency operations in northeast Nigeria, said the air force would not deliberately target civilians but that there will be an investigation.

Some of the nearly 300 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014 and freed last year have said three of their classmates were killed by air force bombardments, according to the girls' parents.

Istanbul gunman captured

Associated Press

ISTANBUL — Turkish police captured the gunman who carried out the deadly New Year's nightclub attack in Istanbul, with officials saying Tuesday that he's an Uzbekistan national who trained in Afghanistan and confessed to the massacre.

The man was being questioned by police, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told reporters in Ankara. Yildirim expressed hope that the interrogation would unveil the "forces" behind the attack, which killed 39 people and has already been claimed by the Islamic State group.

Hundreds of people were gathered at the swanky Reina

nightclub to celebrate the end of a tumultuous 2016 only to become the first victims of 2017. The gunman shot a police officer and a civilian outside the establishment before storming the club.

Most of the dead in the attack were foreign nationals, mainly from the Middle East.

"The vile terrorist who attacked the place of entertainment on New Year's Eve and led to the loss of so many lives has been captured," Yildirim said.

The premier wouldn't provide further details on the arrest or the investigation, saying authorities would provide specifics "in time."

Moments later, in separate remarks, Istanbul governor Vasip

Sahin said the suspect is an Uzbekistan national who trained in Afghanistan. He is believed to have entered Turkey in January 2016. Sahin identified him as Abdulkadir Masharipov, saying he was born in 1983. Turkish media have reported the suspect's first name as Abdulgadir.

Sahin said the man, captured late Monday, confessed to carrying out the massacre and that his fingerprints matched those of the attacker. He can be held for up to 30 days under Turkey's state of emergency, which was introduced after a failed coup attempt in July, before he is charged and formally arrested. It could take prosecutors several months to prepare for a trial.

Report: US abortions at lowest level since 1974

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Even as the election outcome intensifies America's abortion debate, a comprehensive new survey finds the annual number of abortions in the U.S. has dropped to well under 1 million, the lowest level since 1974.

The report, which counted 926,200 abortions in 2014, was released Tuesday by the Guttmacher Institute, a research group which supports abortion rights. It is the only entity that strives to count all abortions in the U.S.; the latest federal survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lacks data from California, Maryland and New Hampshire.

The total from 2014 represented a drop of 12.5 percent from Guttmacher's previous survey, which tallied 1.06 million abortions in 2011. The decrease was spread nationwide; in only six states did abortions increase over the three-year span.

According to the report, the abortion rate was 14.6 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44, the lowest rate since abortion was legalized nationally in 1973 by the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. Following that ruling, the number of abortions in the U.S. rose steadily — reaching a peak of 1.6 million in 1990 — before starting a decline.

The report's authors, Guttmacher researchers Rachel Jones and Jenna Jerman, said the latest phase of the decline was likely the result of the increased availability of affordable, long-lasting contraceptives that have reduced unintended pregnancies, and the surge of abortion restrictions in many states that have forced some clinics to close and hindered many women's access to the procedure.

The highest abortion rates were in the District of Columbia, New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Florida. The lowest rates were in Wyoming, Mississippi and South Dakota, states that had only one abortion clinic operating in 2014.

Orlando gunman's wife faces charges

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The widow of the Orlando, Fla., nightclub gunman has been charged with helping her husband in the months leading up to the June massacre that left 49 people dead, according to an indictment unsealed Tuesday.

Noor Salman, 30, was due in federal court in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, following her arrest a day earlier on the Florida charges.

The two-count indictment accuses her of knowingly aiding and abetting her husband, Omar Mateen, in providing material support and resources to the Islamic State group between April and June of last year. It also says she knowingly misled police and the FBI after the June 12 attack at the Pulse nightclub. The charging document does not give additional details on Salman's actions.

Salman is from the San Francisco Bay area, and in the

aftermath of the Orlando attack that also left her husband dead, she returned here with their son, whose name she has since sought to change. She was repeatedly questioned by FBI investigators over whether she had any knowledge of her husband's plans.

Her attorney, Linda Moreno, said after her arrest that she "had no foreknowledge nor could she predict what Omar Mateen intended to do that tragic night."

CBO underlines risks in GOP health law repeal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Premiums and the number of uninsured would soar under a Republican bill Congress passed last year scuttling President Barack Obama's health care overhaul, lawmakers' nonpartisan budget analyst estimated Tuesday in a report underlining the GOP's risks in its fresh push to dismantle and replace the health law.

The Congressional Budget Office report wrote that under the 2016 repeal bill, premiums for policies bought from online

marketplaces established by Obama's law would rise up to 25 percent a year after enactment of the GOP measure. They would about double by 2026.

There would also be 18 million more uninsured people a year after enactment and 32 million more by 2026, the report projected.

The numbers served as a flashing yellow light for this year's effort by President-elect Donald Trump and congressional Republicans to annul Obama's law and — in a more complex challenge — institute

their own alternative. While Republicans have produced several outlines for how they would recraft Obama's 2010 statute, they've never united behind one plan despite years of trying, and there are many unknowns.

The report also became immediate political fodder for both sides in what is expected to be one of this year's premier battles in Congress. The analyzed bill did not replace Obama's law with a GOP alternative, which Republicans have insisted will be an integral part of their health care drive this year.

More House Dems to skip inauguration

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More than 40 House Democrats plan to boycott President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration on Friday, casting the Republican businessman as a threat to democracy.

Reps. Steve Cohen of Tennessee, Jerrold Nadler of New York and Don Beyer of Virginia on Monday joined a growing list of lawmakers who will not attend Trump's swearing-in at the U.S. Capitol. The number who initially said they would skip the event has increased after Trump lashed out at Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., on Saturday for challenging his legitimacy to be

the next president.

Trump struck again Tuesday morning with a tweet that challenged Lewis' claim that Trump's inauguration would be the first he will have missed since coming to Congress in 1987. "WRONG (or lie)!" Trump tweeted, saying Lewis had skipped George W. Bush's inauguration in 2001.

Lewis' press secretary did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"This president 'semi-elect' does not deserve to be president of the United States," Cohen said in a statement. "He has not exhibited the characteristics or the values that we hold dear. That Dr. (Martin Luther) King

held dear. That John Lewis holds dear. And when he questioned the integrity of my friend, colleague and civil rights icon John Lewis, that crossed the Rubicon."

Cohen said the hope and change associated with President Barack Obama taking office eight years ago have been replaced by "fear and dread."

Trump and other Republicans have dismissed the boycott and complaints, saying Democrats are sore losers who need to accept the results of the election and move on. Democrats control 194 House seats.

While many Democrats were furious with the outcome of the drawn-out 2000 election in

which Bush defeated Al Gore after recounts and a Supreme Court ruling, they generally attended Bush's inauguration as the nation's 43rd president. The House is out of session most of this week and roll call votes are not anticipated, so other lawmakers in both parties may skip the trip.

Obama repeatedly faced questions during the 2008 campaign about the widely debunked claim that he was not a U.S. citizen and that his birth certificate was a fake. Trump, in fact, perpetuated that notion for many years before a brief statement last year that Obama was a citizen. Republicans attended Obama's two inaugurations.

Surprisingly, inauguration to be relatively low key

The Washington Post

President Barack Obama's first inaugural festivities stretched over five days. Donald Trump is spending barely three on his.

Bill Clinton hit 14 official balls on the day he was sworn in. Trump plans appearances at three.

And while other presidents have staged parades that lasted more than four hours, Trump's trip along Pennsylvania Avenue is expected to clock in at 90 minutes — making it among

the shortest on record.

In a word, the 45th president's inaugural activities will be "workmanlike," said Boris Epshteyn, communications director for the Presidential Inaugural Committee, a pop-up staff of about 350 people scrambling to put together the proceedings from the second floor of a nondescript government building just south of the Mall.

The notion of a relatively low-key inaugural bereft of many A-list entertainers may come as a surprise, given the president-elect's flair for showmanship

and his credentials as a reality TV star. But Epshteyn said Trump settled on a less flashy approach, including keeping the ticket prices for the inaugural balls at \$50 apiece so that working-class Americans who helped fuel Trump's surprise victory can take part.

Also, organizers are expecting an unusually high number of protesters, given how divisive Trump's victory over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was. And as of Monday afternoon, nearly three dozen Democratic lawmakers had said they

plan to skip the festivities, after revelations of Russia's alleged interference in the election and Trump's rebuke of civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., on Saturday.

"These inaugurations tend to reflect the character, personality and aspirations of the person preparing to occupy 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue," said Timothy Naftali, a presidential historian at New York University. "It would be un-Trumpian for there not to be some spectacle."

GOP prepares plans to roll back Endangered Species Act

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — In control of Congress and soon the White House, Republicans are readying plans to roll back the influence of the Endangered Species Act, one of the government's most powerful conservation tools, after decades of complaints that it hinders drilling, logging and other activities.

Over the past eight years, GOP lawmakers sponsored dozens of measures aimed at curtailing the landmark law or putting species such as gray

wolves and sage grouse out of its reach. Almost all were blocked by Democrats and the White House or lawsuits from environmentalists.

Now, with the ascension of President-elect Donald Trump, Republicans see an opportunity to advance broad changes to a law they contend has been exploited by wildlife advocates to block economic development.

"It has never been used for the rehabilitation of species. It's been used for control of the land," said House Natural Re-

sources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop. "We've missed the entire purpose of the Endangered Species Act. It has been hijacked."

Bishop said he "would love to invalidate" the law and would need other lawmakers' cooperation.

The 1973 act was ushered though Congress nearly unanimously, in part to stave off extinction of the national symbol, the bald eagle. Eagle populations have since rebounded, and the birds were taken off the

threatened and endangered list in 2007.

In the eagles' place, another emblematic species — the wolf — has emerged as a prime example of what critics say is wrong with the current law: seemingly endless litigation that offers federal protection for species long after government biologists conclude that they have recovered. Wolf attacks on livestock have provoked hostility against the law, which keeps the animals off-limits to hunting in most states.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Boy driving drunken woman crashes car

MI LUDINGTON — Authorities say a 14-year-old boy crashed a car in western Michigan as he drove with an intoxicated woman in the backseat.

The Ludington Daily News reported the crash happened Saturday near Ludington and no one was injured.

MLive.com reported the boy was among several people under age 16 who gathered at the woman's home in Mason County's Branch Township. Sheriff Kim Cole said there wasn't anyone to drive them home except the woman, who appeared drunk.

Cole said the boy, who isn't related to the woman, drove the other teens home as the woman drank more alcohol in the backseat.

The 46-year-old woman is expected to face charges. The teen wasn't cited and had no alcohol in his system.

School district using food truck to feed kids

DE DOVER — A Delaware school district is using a food truck to help make sure students have enough to eat on days they aren't in class.

The News Journal reported the Capital School District's truck hit the street for the first time Monday. In a trial run that's intended to gauge interest, the truck was to make stops at two housing developments, offering a soup and sandwich meal.

Students were out of school Monday for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

District officials hope the truck will help fill a gap left by the Food Bank of Delaware cutting its free lunch programs in

the Dover area.

Man pleads guilty to stealing tree tops

MN ST. PAUL — A Grand Rapids man pleaded guilty to cutting thousands of tree tops from black spruce in the Chippewa National Forest.

Joseph Edminster, 70, pleaded guilty last week in U.S. District Court to one count of theft of government property.

Prosecutors said he admitted to cutting more than 2,700 tree tops from the forest from October 2008 to October 2014. He then admitted to selling the tree tops to wholesalers for use as Christmas decorations. The wholesalers then sold them to retailers in Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois.

It's estimated Edminster stole more than \$24,000 worth of spruce tops from federal land since 2008.

Mayors' photo display features a mistake

OH TOLEDO — A new display featuring photos of the former mayors from Ohio's fourth-largest city uncovered a new discovery.

It turns out that a photo thought to be of Toledo's first mayor is actually a photo of his son.

The Blade newspaper in Toledo reported the mistake was discovered after family members of the first mayor and local historians began doing some digging.

They found that a photo believed to be John Berdan, who was elected the first mayor of Toledo in 1837, is actually of his son who also was named John Berdan.

One local historian said she's never been able to find a photo of Toledo's first mayor and says

it's unlikely one exists.

That's because John Berdan died in 1841 just after the first photographic process was introduced.

Restaurant owner buys zoo's Fiberglas figures

FL TAMPA — A nostalgic Tampa restaurant owner spent nearly \$30,000 to preserve his most cherished childhood memories by buying nearly every Fiberglas figure left from the Lowry Park Zoo's old Fairyland.

The Tampa Bay Times reported Richard Gonzmart, owner of the Columbia Restaurants, bought the figures Saturday.

Gonzmart purchased 11 fairy-tale scenes from the park that dazzled children when it opened in the 1950s. The only lot he didn't buy was a group of miscellaneous figures and pieces that didn't make up a complete scene or fairy tale.

He hopes the city will let him put them along the Riverwalk once they're restored.

Sub accused of racist remarks won't return

IA CLIVE — West Des Moines Community Schools officials say they will no longer employ a substitute teacher accused of making racist comments to students at Clive Learning Academy.

Des Moines television station KCCI reported that the parents of a 10-year-old boy say he came home from the school saying his substitute teacher had told the class she does not like black people.

The station said other parents heard similar accounts and complained to the school's principal.

The district, which declined to name the substitute teacher,

said in a statement that the woman will no longer be allowed to work at the school.

Mom, dad, son share exact same birthday

MS BALDWIN — Luke and Hillary Gardner never have a problem remembering each other's birthday. They were born the same day. So was their infant son, 27 years later this past December.

Experts say the odds of that are about one in 133,000.

Luke Gardner, an assistant pastor at a Baptist church in northeast Mississippi, said he and his wife weren't even aiming for a December birthday for son Cade Lee Gardner. It just happened.

Man who killed intruder faces unrelated charges

FL HIALEAH — A home-invasion robbery by four intruders that ended with a suspect shot and killed led to charges against the homeowner. But not for the death.

The Miami Herald reported police said Michael Mora is in trouble for what was found inside: a marijuana growhouse with about 202 pounds of weed.

Mora, 37, faces no charges for the shooting death of South Miami-Dade resident Lhosdanny Brena Colarte, 25. For now, Mora's charged only with growing marijuana and trafficking marijuana.

Mora has served two Florida prison terms, one for robbery with a deadly weapon. So possession of a firearm as a convicted felon might result to further charges in Saturday's deadly shooting.

From wire reports

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Ryan joins elite QB crowd for playoffs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Matt Ryan is keeping some special company these days.

Well, maybe it's Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers and Ben Roethlisberger who should be looking up to Ryan. The Atlanta passer is, after all, the All-Pro quarterback.

When the conference championship games commence Sunday, three of the most accomplished QBs of this millennium will be in action. Brady is seeking a seventh trip to the Super Bowl in his 17 NFL seasons, and an unprecedented fifth ring. Roethlisberger has gone three times, winning twice. Rodgers won in his only trip to the big game, and probably has been the league's best all-around quarterback in the last half-dozen seasons.

Then there is Matty Ice, who tended to melt in the most pressurized games. Not this season, in which he led the NFL in passing and tore up Seattle on Saturday. He also gets a home game against Rodgers and the Packers this weekend.

"We've got to praise Matt for what he's done this whole year," said right tackle Ryan Schraeder, one of the league's most improved players in 2016. "He's done a lot for us this year as a team. And it's pretty cool to be a part of it. He's had a hell of a year, and we're just happy to be able to block for him."

While Brady, Big Ben and A-Rod have little left to show before likely heading to Canton, Ryan will be front and center on the

proving ground. Dismissing him as a lightweight in this company would be unwise.

Indeed, in one way, he might have an edge on the other QBs still alive. Green Bay's banged-up, undermanned secondary was torched in the second half by the Cowboys' Dak Prescott. It isn't going to be all that much healthier or deeper in Atlanta.

And while Dallas has some very good receivers, it doesn't have All-Pro Julio Jones. He figures to be a matchup nightmare for the Packers.

That said, reaching this point in the postseason brings a kind of pressure unmatched in anything Ryan has faced. In his only NFC title game, four years ago at home against San Francisco, the Falcons came up short.

Then again, the Matt Ryan we have seen this season is light years removed from someone who can't cope with stressful situations.

His counterpart next Sunday, Rodgers, is just plain fun to watch. Forget the desperation passes he seems to have mastered — it sure looked like he might need another one in Big D — and concentrate on the creativity. Brett Favre is the measuring stick for modern day Packers QBs and always provided some sort of thrills. But he never carried the Pack on his back the way Rodgers has, especially this season.

An almost magical season, too, punctuated by Green Bay's resilience against Dallas.

"He's an incredible player, incredible talent," Packers coach Mike McCarthy said. "And to do it when it's all on the line like that, that's what great players do."

Roethlisberger isn't anywhere near as spectacular, and he sometimes seems to almost plod his way to wins. But he wins. And he's unafraid to take risks, some of which don't work, but many of which have kept the Steelers in the championship chase.

Take his third-down conversion to clinch Sunday's win at Kansas City. He had the patience and foresight to wait for his All-Pro wideout, Antonio Brown, to work his way across the field and get open.

"I'm sure that play won't make SportsCenter, won't make all the highlights," he said. "But talk to guys in the locker room and that's one of the biggest plays of the game."

Executed to perfection.

As for Brady, who has been on a mission following his four-game "Deflategate" suspension, his resume is the epitome of what all quarterbacks, all players, all athletes in any sport are seeking. And get this: Brady might have had his worst game of the season in Saturday night's victory over Houston. But the Patriots still won, handily, and are solid favorites to handle the Steelers next weekend.

So just look at the conference championships as yet another chance to watch superb quarterbacks. And, yes, right now, Ryan belongs in that company.

Serena, Djokovic win Australian openers

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — The record will show that six-time Australian Open champions Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic each had straight-set wins.

It may seem straightforward, but it was not routine. Newly engaged Williams, aiming for an Open-era record 23rd major title, and Djokovic, bidding to become the first man to win seven Australian titles, confronted former top-10 players in the first round.

And so there was no chance for the No. 2-ranked players, in the recently unaccustomed position at the foot of the draw, to feel their way into the season's first major.

Djokovic faced Fernando Verdasco, who beat Rafael Nadal in the first round last year and who had five match points in their last head-to-head encounter — only 10 days earlier.

Djokovic held off the Spanish lefthander in a 71-minute, momentum-swinging second set before winning 6-1, 7-6 (4), 6-2 on Tuesday. The first and third sets were great, he said, but the second was "a gamble."

"I'm very pleased with the first round, considering I had one of the toughest first-round draws, definitely considering his form," Djokovic said. "He's a quality player. He's a big match, big-time player."

The 33-year-old Verdasco peaked at No. 7 in the rankings in 2009, not long after he pushed

eventual champion Nadal in five sets in one of the best and latest-finishing semifinals ever at the Australian Open.

Williams, on the comeback after a stint on the sidelines following a U.S. Open semifinal loss, took a 5-0 lead in the second set against Belinda Bencic.

But Bencic has been ranked in the top 10, and was seeded 12th in Melbourne last year. She applied pressure to Williams, who made mistakes on key points — including a double-fault to give Bencic a break point, and another on her first match point — before recovering to win 6-4, 6-3.

Williams made a big statement, though, by walking into her news conference wearing a shirt with the word "Equality"

emblazoned across the front.

It was still before midnight Monday in the U.S. where the holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. was nearly over.

"It's important to spread the message," she said.

After improving her record in the first round of majors to 65-1, Williams will play Lucie Safarova, who saved nine match points before beating Yanina Wickmayer 3-6, 7-6 (7), 6-1.

Nadal, also returning from a couple of months on the sidelines following the U.S. Open with an injured left wrist, has already improved on 2016.

"I'm happy to do an interview with you — last year, I didn't have the chance!" Nadal said after a 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 win over Florian Mayer.

Back on top, Villanova tops Seton Hall

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Jay Wright went home for a short break between a pregame meal and the latest Villanova game when his wife greeted the championship coach with a breaking news update: The Wildcats were again No. 1.

Yup, just another top billing for the national champs. Ascending to No. 1 for the first time in program history last season, the ranking has become pretty routine at this point for the perennial powerhouse.

“Can you believe we’re at a point where it’s just, ‘yeah?’” Wright said.

Ho-hum, the Wildcats are No. 1.

Kris Jenkins scored 16 points and Jalen Brunson added 13 to lead the top-ranked Wildcats to a 76-46 win over Seton Hall on Monday.

The Wildcats (18-1, 6-1 Big East) looked every bit like a team that could win back-to-back national championships in their first game at No. 1 in The AP Top 25 poll following a one-week hiatus.

Villanova fell from the top spot to third in the poll following a Jan. 4 loss at Butler. But

wins over Marquette and Xavier vaulted the Wildcats over the Kansas Jayhawks and back into the top spot.

Led by four three-pointers from Jenkins, the Wildcats set a school record 47 straight wins at the Pavilion. Under Wright, Villanova has been nearly unbeatable at home for most of the last 10 years.

Seton Hall (12-6, 2-4) was just the latest to go down in front of the 177th straight sell-out crowd. Villanova’s rare blemish on its national championship season was losing to the Pirates in the Big East Tournament title game.

No. 2 Kansas 76, Iowa State 72: Frank Mason III had 16 points, Landen Lucas scored 14 and the visiting Jayhawks held off the Cyclones for their 17th straight victory.

Svi Mykhailiuk added 13 for Kansas (17-1, 6-0 Big 12), which snapped a two-game skid in Ames and opened 6-0 in the Big 12 for the 10th time.

Though it was never comfortable for Kansas, the Jayhawks led the entire second half. Iowa State star Monte Morris drilled a long three and two free throws to make it 75-72

with 14.6 seconds left. But then Devonte Graham’s free throw made it a two-possession game and Morris missed a three that would’ve made for an interesting finish.

No. 7 Creighton 72, No. 22 Xavier 67: Cole Huff got a pivotal rebound and made a pair of free throws with 16.7 seconds left, and the Bluejays wasted an 11-point lead before rallying for a road win that gave them the best start in their history.

Creighton (18-1, 5-1 Big East) scored the final six points after Xavier (13-5, 3-3) pulled ahead 67-66. The Bluejays have won five straight since an 80-70 home loss to No. 1 Villanova on Dec. 31.

Creighton suffered a significant setback when point guard Maurice Watson Jr. — the national leader with 8.8 assists per game — hurt his left knee when he hit the court hard after scoring on a layup in the first half. He was on crutches for the second half.

Coach Greg McDermott said a doctor who examined Watson at halftime thought there was no ligament damage. Watson will get an MRI when the team goes home.

No. 9 North Carolina 85, Syracuse 68: Hall of Fame coach Roy Williams earned his 800th career victory when Isaiah Hicks scored 20 points to lead the host Tar Heels past the Orange.

Kennedy Meeks added 15 points and 12 rebounds for North Carolina (17-3, 5-1 Atlantic Coast Conference), which shot 52 percent and dominated the boards. UNC never trailed after the game’s opening possession, led 42-30 at halftime and then stayed a step ahead of the hot-shooting Orange after the break.

Syracuse (11-8, 3-3) got as close as three early in the second half, but never pushed ahead. The Tar Heels ultimately ran off a 7-0 flurry in the final 5 minutes to stretch the lead back out to 15.

No. 13 Butler 88, Marquette 80: Kelan Martin scored 22 points and the host Bulldogs rallied from an 18-point deficit early in the second half to beat the Golden Eagles.

Butler (16-3, 5-2 Big East) put up 63 points after the break without a single turnover.

Markus Howard had 26 points for Marquette (12-6, 3-3).

Bagwell, Raines have good shots at getting in HoF

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Jeff Bagwell spent a career putting up huge stats, the kind that often get posted on plaques in Cooperstown. In a few days, the former Astros slugger might well hit the big number he needs to reach the Hall of Fame.

Whether he’s elected, Bagwell says he’ll feel something other than happiness or disappointment when the results are announced Wednesday.

“Honestly,” he said, “relief, both either yes or no.”

This is Bagwell’s seventh try on the ballot — he got just 41.7 percent of the votes the first time, and was up to 71.6 percent last year in selections by

members of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America. It takes 75 percent to make the Hall.

“I just want to get it over with,” the 48-year-old Bagwell said. “This is the first year I’ve kind of been keeping track of it and just kind of looking. So I’m excited about it.”

The 1994 National League MVP and four-time All-Star spent his entire career with Houston. The first baseman holds the Astros records of 449 home runs and 1,529 RBIs. In 15 seasons, he had a .408 on-base average, a .540 slugging percentage and batted .297.

If he’s elected, he’ll join longtime teammate Craig Biggio, who was elected in 2015, as the

only players to go in as Astros.

Tim Raines

The 1982 All-Star Game at Olympic Stadium was the first outside the United States, the host Montreal Expos giving the event a distinctive international flair.

As Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn looked on, center fielder Andre Dawson, catcher Gary Carter and left fielder Tim Raines were among five players wearing that tri-color hat of the hometown team.

On Wednesday, Raines is likely to join Dawson and Carter as Expos in the Hall of

Fame, expected to be voted the honor in his 10th and final year of eligibility.

“If I get in, that’s the team I deserve to go in for, regardless if they no longer have a team,” Raines said in a phone interview from his home in Phoenix on Tuesday. “That was the team I played with and I’m real comfortable with that.”

Despite falling short of the 75 percent of votes necessary for election last year, Raines was named on 69.8 percent of the ballots cast by eligible members of the Baseball Writers of America. That was up significantly from 2015, when he finished seventh in voting with 55 percent.

Warriors rout Cavs in Finals rematch

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Now, everybody can sit back for a few months and envision the possibility of another scintillating NBA Finals between Cleveland and Golden State.

LeBron James vs. Stephen Curry for the third straight time, complete with the hard-nosed play of Draymond Green, dazzling dunks from Kevin Durant and sharp shooting from Kyrie Irving.

This regular-season round went to the Warriors, who dominated from the start on Monday — and it wasn't even close. The defending champs were dismantled on the very floor where they captured the franchise's first title last June.

Curry and his superstar supporting cast certainly looked ready to trade more postseason blows with Cleveland. The two-time reigning MVP hit five three-pointers on the way to 20 points while matching his season best with 11 assists in Golden State's 126-91 rout of the Cavaliers.

"This is high-quality basketball, at its highest level," Curry said. "These are the kinds of atmospheres that you live for. Whether you win or lose, regular season, playoffs, whatever, that you can play in that kind of environment that's always fun."

Klay Thompson scored 26 points with five threes, and Green produced his third triple-double of the season with 11 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists. He also equaled his career best with five blocks — and had another confrontation with King James in the process.

James had 20 points on 6-for-18 shooting and eight rebounds. But he and Green became the talk once more as their relationship again turned testy.

"I don't think it's a rivalry," James reiterated. "It's two great teams that have aspirations. I don't believe I've ever had a rivalry in the NBA."

The latest altercation between Green and James came with 6:55 left in the first half. Golden State led 52-35 when

James collided with Green near midcourt, resulting in a flagrant 1 foul on Golden State's emotional All-Star. Green's arm extended across the upper body of James, who went down hard and lay on the court. Green reacted by appearing to mock James for flopping.

Clippers 120, Thunder 98: J.J. Redick scored 20 points while DeAndre Jordan had 19 points and 15 rebounds as host Los Angeles overcame Chris Paul's injury to defeat Oklahoma City.

The banged-up Clippers tied a franchise record for their best start to a calendar year at 7-0. The team began 1974 with the same mark when the club was located in Buffalo.

Celtics 108, Hornets 98: Isaiah Thomas scored 17 of his 35 points in the fourth quarter as surging host Boston earned its ninth victory in 11 games.

Hawks 108, Knicks 107: Dennis Schroder scored 28 points, including a go-ahead three-pointer with 22 seconds left as Atlanta beat host New

York.

Wizards 120, Trail Blazers 101: Bradley Beal scored 25 points, John Wall had 24 and host Washington rolled to its 12th consecutive home victory.

76ers 113, Bucks 104: Joel Embiid scored 12 of his 22 points in the fourth quarter, and visiting Philadelphia won for the fourth time in five games.

Pacers 98, Pelicans 95: Jeff Teague had 16 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds, helping host Indiana win for the fifth time in six games.

Nuggets 125, Magic 112: Nikola Jokic scored a career-high 30 points, Emmanuel Mudiay dished out a career-best 13 assists and Denver followed its "home" win in London with another victory at the Pepsi Center.

Jazz 106, Suns 101: Joe Johnson scored 10 of his 15 points in the fourth quarter, including the go-ahead three-pointer with 49.8 seconds to play, as Utah made it seven in a row over host Phoenix.

Penguins snap Capitals' win streak at nine

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The goals kept coming. One after another. A dizzying three periods of shots followed by baffled goaltenders fishing pucks out of the net wondering how things got out of hand so quickly.

When Pittsburgh's Conor Sheary ended it 34 seconds into overtime to give the Penguins a chaotic 8-7 victory over the Washington Capitals, Sheary's teammates darted for the tunnel while Washington's players stood on the bench a little dumbstruck after their nine-game winning streak came to an abrupt — if highly entertaining — halt.

"I actually heard the crowd started yelling because I was just digging at it and I was kind of face down on the ice," Sheary said after getting his 13th goal of the season. "Luckily it went in."

Sheary had two goals and an assist for the Penguins, who snapped a three-game losing streak. Evgeni Malkin picked up his 11th career hat trick during a frenetic second period, and Sidney Crosby collected

his NHL-leading 27th goal to go with three assists. Bryan Rust and Nick Bonino also scored for Pittsburgh, and Matt Murray earned his seventh straight win at home despite allowing seven goals on 28 shots.

The Penguins trailed 3-0 before scoring six goals in less than 11 minutes in the second period, more goals than the Capitals had allowed in a game all season. Pittsburgh led 6-5 after two periods, and its eight goals overall were the most Washington has given up since the Penguins rolled 8-1 on Jan. 25, 2006.

"That second period is one of the craziest periods I've ever been associated with," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. "I don't even know how to assess it."

Lars Eller scored twice for Washington, and T.J. Oshie, Brett Connolly, Nicklas Backstrom, Justin Williams and Andre Burakovsky also found the net. Philipp Grubauer made eight saves after coming on in relief of Braden Holtby, who was pulled during Pittsburgh's second-period explosion.

Lightning 2, Kings 1: Brian Boyle scored the go-ahead goal late in the second period as Tampa Bay opened a six-game road trip with a victory over Los Angeles.

Oilers 3, Coyotes 1: Jujhar Khaira gave his team the lead with his first career goal as host Edmonton beat Arizona for its third straight victory.

Sharks 5, Jets 2: Joel Ward scored a short-handed goal and took a hard hit to assist on Timo Meier's goal, helping host San Jose to just its third win in eight games.

Islanders 4, Bruins 0: Nikolay Kulemin scored two of his team's three second-period goals, powering visiting New York past Boston.

Red Wings 1, Canadiens 0: Thomas Vanek scored in the second period and Jared Coreau earned his second shutout, leading host Detroit past Montreal.

Sabres 4, Stars 1: Jack Eichel scored two goals, helping host Buffalo roll past Dallas.