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Transgender ban receives court approval

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
AND CAITLIN KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A federal appeals court on Friday ruled in favor of a controversial Trump administration ban of transgender personnel in the military, though the policy can't be implemented yet because of ongoing lawsuits.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia said a lower court judge erred in blocking the policy, also known as the "Mattis Plan," which was named for former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis who drafted its specifics. The policy originated from a proposal in 2017 by President Donald Trump.

While Friday's ruling isn't final, the three-judge panel concluded public interests outweigh the injunction to halt the policy.

"Although today's decision is not a final determination on the merits, we must recognize that the Mattis Plan plausibly relies upon the 'considered professional judgment' of 'appropriate military officials,'" the ruling states. "In light of the substantial constitutional arguments and the apparent showing that the policy accommodates at least some of Plaintiffs' interests, we think that the public interest weighs in favor of dissolving the injunction."

A White House effort to ban transgender people from military service has been mired in confusion, chaos and a web of litigation nearly two years after Trump fired off tweets that ignited the controversy, experts have said.

For now, a 2016 Pentagon policy to open the military to transgender individuals re-

mains in place, but a Trump administration effort to reverse that plan has created a chilling effect for potential recruits and heightened fears for some servicemembers, some advocates for transgender personnel have said.

On Friday, the Defense Department lauded the appeals court ruling.

"The department is pleased with the D.C. Circuit's decision. However, the department remains bound by three other court orders that require continued implementation of the [former Defense Secretary Ash] Carter policy," Pentagon spokeswoman Jessica Maxwell said. "The department will continue to adhere to those orders."

Maxwell went on to say the Defense Department is consulting with the Justice De-

partment on the next steps in the litigation. As always, the Defense Department treats all transgender servicemembers with respect and dignity, she added.

"We look forward to continuing to press our case in the courts," Maxwell said. "It is critical that the department be permitted to formulate personnel policies that it determines are necessary to ensure the most lethal and combat effective fighting force in the world."

At least four court cases have put the Trump transgender ban on hold and could extend into a fight for months or years, experts have said.

The court cases are moving forward in Washington state, California, the District of Columbia and Maryland, and a trial is slated for later this year for at least one of the cases.

DOD asked to provide more border security assistance

BY ROSE L. THAYER
AND CAITLIN KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The Defense Department received a new request for more assistance along the U.S.-Mexico border from the Department of Homeland Security, defense officials confirmed Friday.

Pentagon officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the request is for "additional capabilities to support Customs and Border Patrol on the southwest border." They would not elaborate.

An existing agreement between the two departments has about 2,350 active-duty servicemembers stationed within three states bordering Mexico to support Border Patrol agents, said Col. Cathy Wilkinson,

public affairs director for U.S. Army North. About 600 of the deployed troops are in Texas, 650 are in Arizona and 1,100 in California. The force size deployed to the border peaked at 5,900 servicemembers in mid-November.

The troops' mission to "harden" the border included military engineers building barriers across about 70 miles using coiled razor wire, according to information released in late December by U.S. Northern Command. Military police units have conducted more than 10,000 hours of unit training and combined rehearsals with Border Patrol in all three states. Military rotary wing aviators have flown more than 740 hours.

Servicemembers from the Army, Navy, Air Force and

Marines arrived on Oct. 31 and were expected to leave by the end of January. It was unclear Friday whether the new request would extend their stay beyond that deadline, officials said.

The servicemembers are assisting Border Patrol agents, who are working without pay during the now-two-week-old partial federal government shutdown. The Defense Department is funded, but Homeland Security falls under the portion of the government operating without a budget since Congress failed to pass one by Dec. 21. The shutdown has not impacted the operations of servicemembers at the border, said Navy Capt. William Speaks, a spokesman at the Pentagon.

The government shutdown hangs on a disagreement be-

tween congressional Democrats and the White House to fund President Donald Trump's campaign promise of building a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico.

A Thursday afternoon news conference with Border Patrol officials was expected to provide an update on border security. Instead, Border Patrol union members joined Trump for a White House news briefing to share support for a border wall.

The president followed his conference by sending a letter Friday to all members of Congress on the need to secure the border. The White House news release stated he also sent members a presentation from Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen that highlights the dangers at the border.

GOP shows signs of unease over shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — For the second time in three days, congressional leaders arrived at the White House on Friday for talks with President Donald Trump amid signs of growing Republican unease over the prolonged partial government shutdown.

The meeting on the 14th day of the shutdown came after House Democrats muscled through legislation to fund the government but not Trump's proposed wall at the U.S.-Mexico border. As the impasse over border funding dragged on, some GOP senators up for re-election in 2020 voiced discomfort.

But Trump dug in ahead of the meeting, writing in a letter to Congress, "Walls work. That's why rich, powerful and successful

people build them around their homes."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said even though the new Congress has convened since the last session at the White House, "the basic steps that are needed to end this unfortunate standoff really haven't changed at all."

McConnell has said measures approved by the House are non-starters without the president's support.

"Any viable compromise will need to carry the endorsement of the president before it receives a vote," he said.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, who is close to Trump, said he spoke to the president Thursday about a potential compromise package that would include border wall money and some way to provide legal standing for the young immigrants here

illegally but working or attending school under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

"He's open-minded to this," Graham said in an interview, but he added the president "hasn't committed."

House speaker Nancy Pelosi has already said she opposes trading DACA for the wall, and it's unclear if other Democrats and Republicans would be willing to engage in immigration negotiations.

As progress has stalled, some Republican senators want action. Cory Gardner, of Colorado, said Congress should pass bipartisan bills to fund government "while we continue to fight for more border security money." And Susan Collins, of Maine, said her "goal is to get government reopened as quickly as possible."

Dem makes profane impeachment pitch

The Washington Post

Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., made history Thursday afternoon for being the first Palestinian-American woman sworn into Congress.

Hours later, she made headlines for simply swearing at a Washington bar.

At a reception Thursday night for the progressive group MoveOn.org, Tlaib vowed that the new Democratic-controlled House would be focusing on ousting President Donald Trump from office.

"Don't you ever, ever, let anybody take away your roots, your culture, who you are. Ever," Tlaib told the crowd in the packed space. "Because when you (hang onto those things), people love you and you win. And when your son looks at you and says, 'Mama, look, you won. Bullies don't win.'

"And I said, 'Baby, they don't,' because we're gonna go in there and we're gonna impeach the motherf-----."

The crowd inside the State Room bar, near the Capitol, responded to Tlaib's remarks with applause, cheers and shouts of approval, according to a widely shared video taken by immigration activist Nestor

Ruiz.

Tlaib's comments were also soon met with outrage from the right. In a pair of tweets, former Trump special assistant Boris Epshteyn called Tlaib's comments "disgusting" and "sad."

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders blasted the remarks as proof Democrats had "no solutions for America" and suggested Tlaib was simply trying to boost her own political career.

"Look, you're not going to impeach this president when he's had two of the most successful years that any president has had in modern history," Sanders said Friday morning on "Fox & Friends." "The only reason they want to come after this president is because they know they can't beat him."

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., criticized Tlaib's word choice.

"Look at the brand-new elected congresswoman and her language of what she says to her son in a rally that she thought was private last night," McCarthy said on Fox. "Their whole focus here is to try and attack this president when we're trying to move America

forward."

It's not clear if Tlaib thought the MoveOn reception was private. Several journalists were in attendance and multiple activists were filming her. Representatives for MoveOn did not respond to a request for comment.

Regardless, the congresswoman seemed to shrug off judgments about her speech the following morning.

"I will always speak truth to power," Tlaib tweeted Friday, adding the hashtag #unapologeticallyMe.

In a subsequent tweet, she added: "This is not just about Donald Trump. This is about all of us. In the face of this constitutional crisis, we must rise."

Some of her new Democratic colleagues played down Tlaib's comments Friday morning.

"Well, passions are running high. Let's just leave it at that, OK?" Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-Ill., said on CNN, before echoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., in saying lawmakers needed to let special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election play out.

Democrats looking at vote reforms

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats are unveiling a comprehensive elections and ethics reform package that targets what they call a "culture of corruption in Washington" and aims to reduce the role of money in politics.

The bill, among the first to be considered as Democrats take control of the House after eight years, would make it easier for citizens to register and vote, tighten election security and require presidents to disclose their tax returns.

Dubbed the "For the People Act," the legislation marks an effort by Democrats to set a tone of good government as they take the majority following historic gains in the mid-term elections.

Rep. John Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat who is leading the reform effort, said the bill demonstrates that Democrats are "responding directly to the American people and what they want to see in our democracy," as shown by the election results.

USAA agrees to repay \$12M to members

By WILLIAM HOWARD
Stars and Stripes

More than 66,000 USAA members affected by the financial services and insurance company's failure to stop electronic payment transfers may receive a \$181.59 check following a settlement with federal regulators.

USAA, to which membership is open exclusively to the military community and eligible family members, agreed to pay \$12 million in restitution and a \$3.5 million civil fine by mid-January, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau announced Thursday.

USAA violated the Electronic Fund Transfer Act and an associated regulation by failing

to properly honor consumers' stop-payment requests on pre-authorized electronic fund transfers, as well as failing to start or complete error resolution investigations, according to a consent order signed by the bureau Wednesday.

"On numerous occasions, USAA representatives refused to investigate errors because they concerned payday loans," the consent order stated.

USAA had a separate procedure for members who wanted errors investigated when they involved payment stops to payday lenders, who often charge high short-term interest rates. They warned members that if the payment was authorized, they could lose their membership, according to the consent

order.

USAA also ran afoul of the Consumer Financial Protection Act of 2010 by reopening closed deposit accounts in certain circumstances without providing timely notice, according to a bureau statement. The consent order requires USAA within 60 days to submit a comprehensive compliance plan designed to ensure that the bank's stop-payment, error resolution and deposit account reopening practices comply with federal law.

More than 5,100 USAA members incurred fees totaling about \$270,000 from their accounts being reopened. They were reimbursed in 2017, according to the bureau.

"USAA has been proactively addressing these issues for more than a year, and most are resolved. Last year, we began providing restitution payments to some affected members and improved our procedures," USAA said in a statement Friday. "None of the issues reflect an intention to take advantage of our members. In fact, we believed our processes would help resolve matters faster. We take responsibility for this situation."

USAA is a federally chartered savings association headquartered in San Antonio. It reported 12.4 million members and a net worth of more than of \$30 billion in a 2017 company fact sheet.

Military releases pay chart for 2019

By BRIAN FERGUSON
Stars and Stripes

The newly released 2019 pay chart for active-duty and reserve components reflects a 2.6 percent basic pay raise approved last year by Congress, a hike servicemembers will begin seeing in their Jan. 15 paychecks.

The Defense Finance and Accounting Service has released the chart on its website at <https://www.dfas.mil/militarymembers.html>.

Under the new rates, for example, an active-duty E-7 with 18 years of service will receive \$4,745.40 of base pay per month, compared to \$4,625.10 in 2018.

The average allowance for off-base housing rose by 2.55 percent, slightly less than a proposed 2.9 percent hike from an earlier Pentagon budget proposal. The allowance varies based on location and other factors.

The food allowance for ser-

vicemembers living off base did not increase in 2019.

The overall raise "clearly signals that Congress wants military pay to be competitive," Mark Cancian, a senior adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, told Stars and Stripes following passage of the hike in August.

The Labor Department reported the cost of living rose 2.9 percent for the year ending in June 2018.

Servicemembers could also see higher per diem reimbursements in cases where they travel more than 30 days.

Military personnel have received at least a 1 percent raise each year since 2007, according to Pentagon figures.

Defense Department civilians had been in line to receive a 1.9 percent raise following passage of a Senate bill, but on Dec. 28, President Donald Trump ordered a pay freeze for federal government workers.

British army updates its pitch for Gen Z, millennials

The Washington Post

The British army is reviving a World War I-era slogan — "Your Country Needs You" — with new faces and messaging targeting millennials and Gen Z.

Dear "snowflakes," the army needs you "and your compassion." All the "selfie addicts" out there? The military values you "and your confidence," too. And it's asking "phone zombies" to bring their "focus" to war zones.

"Big gamers" are wanted for their "drive" and "Me Me Me Millennials" for their "self-belief."

The posters are accompanied by promotional videos that show young people in mundane jobs or acting out the stereotypes that older generations hold about those in their late teens and 20s. The videos then cut to scenes of those same young people using their focus or compassion to benefit the army. On social media, the purpose behind this recruitment strategy was put simply: "The Army spots potential. Even if

others don't."

"The Army sees people differently and we are proud to look beyond the stereotypes and spot the potential in young people, from compassion to self-belief," Maj. Gen. Paul Nanson said in a statement. "We understand the drive they have to succeed and recognise their need for a bigger sense of purpose in a job where they can do something meaningful."

In a news release announcing the new recruiting campaign, which launched on Thursday, the British army said the "Your Army Needs You" message is the third installment of the "This is Belonging" series — an effort to paint to the army as inclusive and welcoming. The first campaign, in 2017, focused on "the emotional benefit of the strong bonds experienced in the Army," according to the release. In 2018, the army emphasized the importance of diversity in the military.

The targeted campaign has led to an increase in army job applications.

SEAL to plead not guilty to murder charge

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A decorated Navy SEAL is facing charges of premeditated murder and numerous other offenses in connection with the fatal stabbing of a teenage Islamic State prisoner under his care in Iraq in 2017, along with the shooting of unarmed Iraqi civilians.

Special Operations Chief Edward Gallagher planned to plead not guilty to all the charges Friday during an arraignment hearing at Naval Base San Diego, his attorney Phil Stackhouse said.

The case stands out because of the seriousness of the allegations against an elite special warfare operator and that the prosecution's case includes the accounts of fellow Navy SEALs, an extremely tight-knit group even by military standards.

Stackhouse said his client is being falsely accused by disgruntled SEALs who wanted to get rid of a demanding platoon leader.

Gallagher was awarded the Bronze Star twice.

Navy prosecutors have painted a picture of a highly trained fighter and medic going off the rails on his eighth deployment — indiscriminately shooting at Iraqi civilians — and stabbing to death a captured ISIS fighter estimated to be 15 years old, and then posing with the corpse at his re-en-

listment ceremony.

If convicted, the 19-year Navy veteran faces life in prison.

At a two-day preliminary hearing at the Navy base in November, investigators said Gallagher stabbed the teen in the neck and body with a knife after he was handed over to the SEALs in the Iraqi city of Mosul to be treated for wounds sustained by the Iraqi Army and its prisoners during an airstrike in May 2017.

Naval Criminal Investigative Service Special Agent Joe Warpinski told the court that a SEAL medic told him he believed he had just stabilized the teen when Gallagher “walked up without saying anything at all” and started stabbing him. Afterward, prosecutors say he took photos of himself with the corpse, holding up his knife in one hand and the teen's head in the other. He also posed with the body during his re-enlistment ceremony captured in the footage, Warpinski said.

Warpinski said when another SEAL questioned Gallagher, the chief replied that “I was working on him, and he just died.” His defense attorney also indicated to the court the teen died from injuries from the airstrike.

Warpinski, who spoke to nine members of SEAL Team 7, said he was told Gallagher would fire into crowds of Iraqis. He is

accused of shooting an elderly man carting a water jug in Mosul in June 2017, and a month later shooting a girl walking along a riverbank in the same area. Investigators told the court that he had threatened to publicly name fellow SEALs if they reported his actions.

According to Warpinski, some SEALs were so concerned about his actions that they did not tell him his sniper rifle settings were off so his shooting would be less accurate and they would fire warning shots to clear areas of civilians.

There has been speculation that the case may widen to implicate others for not reporting what they witnessed. Prosecutors have already accused Gallagher's platoon commander, Navy Lt. Jacob Portier, of not acting on the allegations. His attorney Jeremiah Sullivan said Portier was the first to report them to superiors and did so as soon as he learned of them. His arraignment hearing has not been scheduled yet.

But Navy spokesman Brian O'Rourke said the case, for now, is focusing solely on Gallagher and Portier. “There is zero interest in taking action against any witnesses at this time,” O'Rourke said.

Gallagher's attorney Stackhouse said his client looks forward to the trial to clear his name.

Falsely accused Marine awarded rank, back pay

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

A retired Marine Corps officer whose career was damaged after his unit was falsely accused in 2007 of war crimes in Afghanistan should have his rank elevated and be awarded back pay for damages, a Navy board has determined.

The Navy's Board for Correction of Naval Records determined there were extensive errors in performance reports for Maj. Fred Galvin stemming from a 2007 firefight in Afghanistan and a separate review in 2011. As a result, Galvin was passed over for promotion to lieutenant colonel.

The board, in an October ruling that was approved Wednesday by the Navy, recommended that Galvin be assigned the retired rank of lieutenant colonel and receive commensurate back pay.

The next step is for a special selection board to assemble and make a final determination on the promotion, according to the Navy board's report.

Galvin said his ultimate hope is to return to uniform after being forced into retirement in 2014.

“I would like to continue to serve,” Galvin said. “God bless the people on this (board) for standing up for us. This is a huge step forward.”

For a decade, the Marines of a special operations unit called Fox Company have been dogged by allegations of misconduct in connection with the death of civilians in Afghanistan.

In 2008, Galvin and his company were cleared of wrongdoing by a military court of inquiry. But members of the unit struggled to clear their reputations, which they say were tarnished by initial news reports of civilian carnage and a lack of subsequent support from the Marine Corps.

“These Marines didn't do anything wrong,” Galvin said in a phone interview Friday. “But nobody in uniform has ever stood up and said these Marines didn't kill civilians. Nobody in uniform ever stood up for us.”

The 2007 incident in Afghanistan involved Marines patrolling in the Bati Kot district when their six-vehicle convoy was attacked by a car bomb and then ambushed. A firefight ensued and news stories quickly surfaced that the Marines had targeted and

killed as many as 19 Afghan civilians.

“We saw no civilians killed at all,” Galvin said during a congressional hearing in 2017 focused on clearing the names of Marines.

At the time of the ambush, the U.S. military was under pressure to minimize civilian casualties as part of its campaign against the Taliban. The incident sparked a street protest, condemnation from former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and threatened to complicate the war effort.

The Marines were pulled out of the country and the Pentagon publicly apologized for the incident even though an investigation was underway.

While the Marines were later cleared, some of their careers suffered, including Galvin's.

In addition to correcting performance reviews from the 2007 incident, the Navy board also called for another correction in Galvin's record from 2011 when he was relieved of duty for questioning his commander's excessive use of ordnance during a deployment in Afghanistan. The incident resulted in a career-ending performance review.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man poses as good Samaritan, steals car

CT WATERBURY — Connecticut police said a man posing as a good Samaritan took advantage of another man who had locked his keys in his car and stole his vehicle.

The Republican-American reported that Musa Redzepi, 28, was charged Wednesday with third-degree larceny.

Police said Redzepi offered to help the victim who had locked his keys in his car at a Waterbury gas station. Investigators said Redzepi told the victim he'd watch the car while the other man went to an ATM to get cash for a tow truck.

Police said Redzepi somehow got in the vehicle and drove away. Police quickly found the car and apprehended Redzepi as he fled on foot. He was freed on a promise to appear in court.

Sheriff jails himself to assess complaints

IL ST. CHARLES — A suburban Chicago sheriff is spending time locked up in the jail he oversees to evaluate detainees' complaints about conditions there.

Kane County Sheriff Ron Hain changed into a county jail uniform Wednesday for an overnight stay at the Kane County Adult Correctional Center in St. Charles.

The Daily Herald reported that Hain said he's planning several other stays at the jail in Chicago's far west suburbs in the coming months to assess the validity of detainees' complaints.

A recent survey of the corrections staff suggested that the jail's food, clothing and temperature may need improving. Hain said he's particularly

interested in the jail's food quality and whether the cells are too cold. He said that "as sheriff and keeper of the house, it is important to experience it myself."

Hospitals post sticker prices for services

ME LEWISTON — Maine hospitals are now posting sticker prices for various medical services, though experts warn the costs posted online may not reflect the actual cost.

The federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services began requiring hospitals to post prices Jan. 1. The Sun-Journal reported postings must be easy to download and read, and they must include current charges for every service and item provided by the hospital, including medications.

Consumers for Affordable Health Care Executive Director Ann Woloson said patients should make sure to research potential additional costs, and to check if insurance covers parts of the posted cost.

Girl, 17, arrested after police cruiser joyride

MI GRAND RAPIDS — Authorities said a 17-year-old girl took a police cruiser on a joyride following a traffic stop early on New Year's Day in western Michigan.

Grand Rapids police said the girl was a passenger in a minivan that was pulled over about 4:30 a.m. Tuesday following a 911 call about a large fight nearby.

Police said the driver ran away and two officers ran after him, leaving the running police cruiser unattended. The young man was arrested. The other passengers were recorded on the cruiser's dashcam video

fleeing the scene.

Police said the 17-year-old girl drove away in the cruiser, hit the minivan and ran several stop signs before stopping about a mile away. She was arrested nearby and faces charges including resisting and obstructing police.

Police: Human foot found on Jetty Island

WA EVERETT — Authorities are investigating after what appears to be a human foot was found on Jetty Island in Everett on New Year's Day.

Everett police officials said people on the beach on the south end of Jetty Island discovered a boot with a foot inside Tuesday afternoon and called 911.

The Everett Police Department confirmed the finding.

Police said the boot had been in the water for some time.

The Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office will try to establish an identity.

Robbery suspects, child drown in river

WI MILWAUKEE — Authorities said a pregnant woman, her toddler and a man all drowned when their car crashed into a Milwaukee river during a police chase.

The three who died Monday evening in the Kinnickinnic River have been identified as Shannon Nehmer, 19, Annelia Hernandez, 2, and Charles Barefield, 29, who was driving.

The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner said Thursday that they died from asphyxia due to freshwater drowning and that Nehmer was several weeks pregnant.

Police officers had initiated a traffic stop because the Chevy Trailblazer matched the description of a car used in two

armed robberies earlier that day. When the car fled, police chased it.

The robbery victims said two men and a woman were involved. Police said the third suspect is in custody.

Online date turns out to be armed robber

KS LAWRENCE — Authorities said a man was robbed after inviting a date whom he met online to his Lawrence apartment.

The Lawrence Journal-World reported that the robbery happened at about 7:10 p.m. on Dec. 28. Police Sgt. Amy Rhoads said the victim told police he met the robber on a dating website. When the man arrived, he brandished a gun and demanded the victim's bank card.

The suspect fled and used the bank card a short time later. No one was immediately arrested.

Discarded fireworks likely caused fire

AZ COTTONWOOD — Authorities said discarded fireworks apparently are to blame for a fire that damaged a residential garage and smoke damage to a home in Cottonwood.

The city Fire and Medical Department reported that the homeowner used a garden hose to extinguish most of the fire Wednesday night but that firefighters put out a smoldering fire that they found in the wall of the garage.

Officials said investigators determined that the fire started in a garbage can in the garage.

From wire reports

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Texans' Hopkins carrying receiving load

Associated Press

HOUSTON — DeAndre Hopkins had the best season of his career, carrying Houston's receivers in a year the group was decimated by injuries.

Now the self-described best receiver in the NFL will need another big performance for the Texans to get a win over the Colts in the wild-card game on Saturday.

"I feel like I'm a leader of this team, not just this offense," Hopkins said. "I was named captain, so for me to go out and play my best game is important, not just for me but for this team."

Hopkins finished the regular season with a career-high 1,572 yards receiving, which ranked second in the NFL, and his 115 receptions tied a franchise record set by Andre Johnson in 2008. His 11 touchdown receptions were fifth in the league and tied for the second most in his career after he grabbed a franchise-record 13 last season.

His performance comes in a season when the Texans lost starting receiver Will Fuller to a torn knee ligament in October, and Demaryius Thomas to an Achilles tendon injury two weeks ago. Houston got solid production from Keke Coutee midway through the season, but the rookie has missed the last five games with a hamstring injury, leaving Hopkins to carry an even bigger load than usual.

Coach Bill O'Brien is wowed by the sixth-year player nearly every day, and when asked about him this week he noted Hopkins had just made a one-handed grab in practice a few minutes earlier.

"He just has a great skill set, really smart player, excellent competitor, can re-

ally make the contested catch, he can line up inside, he can line up outside, he can do a lot of different things, and he's come up real big for us," O'Brien said. "He has 115 catches and they've all been important catches. He's a leading third-down target. ... He always impresses me."

He's so good and consistent that second-year quarterback Deshaun Watson admitted he's tempted to throw it to him on every play.

"For sure," Watson said. "Usually he's going to make a play happen regardless if you think he's open. If he's not open, he's open."

Hopkins has a knack for making catches at key moments, with 81 of his 115 receptions resulting in a first down or a touchdown. And an even more impressive statistic, according to Pro Football Focus, is that he does not have a single drop this season on catchable targets.

After that statistic was released, a meme featured a picture of Hopkins with a bottle of glue in one of his hands bearing a label that read: 'Hopkins' Catch-All Multi-Purpose WR, extra strong formula, no drop.' Hopkins was amused by the meme and his tweet of it received more than 68,000 likes.

But he said he's more concerned about being consistent than the fact he hasn't dropped a ball all season.

"That's my goal every day. Being consistent, not just on the football field but in life," he said. "Playing football is something I love doing, and being named as one of the best is something that I work hard for because I think everybody wants to be

the best at their position. Otherwise why would you play your position? So, to get that recognition ... that was pretty cool."

Watson didn't have to play with Hopkins long to realize he wasn't like most receivers and that his skills could help make up for some of the young quarterback's mistakes.

"I found that out last year when I was throwing to him. It's ridiculous," Watson said. "My first start in Cincinnati last year, some balls there I kind of threw high. Some stop routes. I'd come over and be like: 'Hey, it's my bad. I'm going to get it down,' and he was just like: 'No, I want it just like that. I want it high. I want it outside. I want it low,' and he just found a way to get it."

His production this season is even more impressive considering he's been hampered by minor injuries, but still started every game. While those injuries never kept him out on game day, they limited his practice time, which he acknowledges was difficult.

"It's been challenging not being able to practice with my guys like I want to, being out there, just having fun with the fellas," he said. "That's why I look forward to coming to work every day, just being around my teammates, not just going out there and making plays on Sunday."

"It's been challenging from that aspect, but it's been good," he continued. "My play has correlated to us winning games, so I feel like me personally, this is my best season. We won the division. Best record I've had since I've been here yet."

And now Hopkins and the Texans will try to build on that success as they chase their first championship.

Focus on Elliott, Carson in matchup of top rushing offenses

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Ezekiel Elliott won his second NFL rushing title in three seasons for a Dallas offense that has been defined by the ground game for several years now.

Seattle takes the league's No. 1 rushing offense into a wild-card playoff against the Cowboys on Saturday night, led by Chris Carson, but with more help from others than your average pro backfield.

While receiver Amari Cooper's impact on the Dallas passing game was dramatic following a midseason trade, and Seattle's Russell Wilson again finished among the NFL lead-

ers in touchdowns passing, both teams figure to try to control the second postseason meeting between these franchises with their running backs.

"We have a formula here," said Dallas right guard Zack Martin, who has made the Pro Bowl in all five of his seasons. "Usually if we win a game, we kind of stick to that formula. It's always a tough game against those guys. It's kind of a bone-on-bone game. We've got our work cut out for us."

Elliott finished with 1,434 yards while setting a club record for catches by a running back with 77, one more than Herschel Walker 32 years ago.

His 2,001 yards from scrimmage were second to New York Giants rookie Saquon Barkley.

The 23-year-old former Ohio State star had the first 40-touch game of his career, a 29-23 overtime win against defending Super Bowl champion Philadelphia that all but wrapped up the NFC East for the Cowboys (10-6).

With the fourth seed in the playoffs locked up, the Cowboys sat Elliott in the regular-season finale against the New York Giants.

"Knowing going into these playoffs I'm going to have probably the heaviest workload I've had all season," Elliott said, "so

great getting fresh and ready going into this last stretch of the season and ready for what they throw at me."

The Seahawks (10-6) will throw multiple backs at the Cowboys, starting with Carson. With 1,151 yards rushing, Carson became the club's first 1,000-yard rusher since Marshawn Lynch on Seattle's most recent Super Bowl qualifier in 2014.

Throw in Mike Davis (514 yards), Rashaad Penny (419) and Wilson (376), and the Seahawks have the first backfield with a 1,000-yard rusher and three with at least 300 yards since the 2001 Pittsburgh Steelers.

Rams using bye week to their advantage

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Before Jared Goff led the Los Angeles Rams into the NFL playoffs last year, his only adult experience in a postseason football game was at the 2015 Armed Forces Bowl.

Leading California past Air Force on a cold Tuesday afternoon in Fort Worth, Texas, is a little bit different than taking on the defending NFC champion Atlanta Falcons in prime time in your team's first postseason game in 13 years. Most of the Rams had no NFL playoff experience, and Goff knows it showed in their 26-13 loss.

"It was a game that I would have liked to play better," said Goff, who went 24-for-45 for 259 yards and one TD against Atlanta. "We would have all liked to play better. Ended not the way we would have liked it to. Hopefully we can use some of those experiences as a positive and move forward with them. ... That's always big when you can get in those situations and get in those moments and feel it. Whether it ends up good or bad, just being able to experience it and feel it is important."

Goff is determined to show everything he learned from that loss when the current Rams (13-3) begin another

postseason run after their bye week.

The Rams will host Chicago, Seattle or Dallas on Jan. 12, when the franchise attempts to advance to its first NFC championship game since the 2001 campaign — also the season of the Rams' last Super Bowl appearance.

Goff grew into a bona fide Pro Bowl quarterback this season, ranking fourth in the league with 4,688 yards passing and 32 TD passes. The Rams also evolved as a legitimate Super Bowl contender, proving last season's success was no fluke while also realizing they need January success to back up their growth.

That loss to the Falcons at the Coliseum has been cited all season as a valuable lesson for a group that had never been on such a stage. According to coach Sean McVay, it was also a wake-up call for a coaching staff that now realizes it must grind even harder to advance deep in the postseason.

"I think we were all disappointed with the result, with what an abrupt ending it was to such a great season last year," McVay said. "Such a fun season."

Those 2017 Rams were a pleasant shock, with the ar-

rival of McVay and defensive coordinator Wade Phillips immediately galvanizing a long-struggling team to a seven-game improvement from 2016. The current Rams didn't sneak up on anybody, yet they still earned two more victories to post this team's best record since 2001.

And because the football world knew the Rams were good, they featured repeatedly in high-pressure matchups with national exposure. Three of the Rams' final six games alone were in prime time — and while they went 1-2 in those games, Goff believes it will all pay off when the Rams begin their toughest work next week.

"I think just understanding the opportunity is definitely part of it," the third-year quarterback said. "Just having more big-game experience, being on prime time a handful of times this year and then having that playoff game last year and having games that are extremely meaningful late in the season. I think that all carries over into the playoffs and into that mentality that you have to have throughout the week."

The Rams kept a mellow mentality while they waited for the NFC to sort out their

opponent. They held two light practices, but otherwise used the bye week to heal from the accumulated wear of the regular season before watching the weekend's playoff games from their couches.

"I'd be watching it whether we were in or not," McVay said with a grin.

A playoff bye is another new experience for many Rams, including McVay, who never had that postseason week off in eight years as an NFL assistant. McVay leaned on Phillips and his other veteran assistants to formulate a plan for their time off.

"It certainly is something that you appreciate," McVay said. "It's a good balance of letting the players get away, and the coaches as well, but you're also staying sharp, not getting too far removed from it where you let the rust set in."

The Rams gathered no rust in December because they couldn't let up down the stretch. The Bears pushed them for the No. 2 seed in the NFC until the final game of the regular season, forcing every starter except injured Todd Gurley and safety Lamarcus Joyner to play in the finale even though the Rams wrapped up their division four weeks earlier.

Three first-time eligibles make HoF finalists list

Associated Press

First-time eligibles Tony Gonzalez, Ed Reed and Champ Bailey are among 15 modern-era finalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame's class of 2019.

They will be joined in balloting on Feb. 2 by Steve Atwater, Tony Boselli, Isaac Bruce, Don Coryell, Alan Faneca, Tom Flores, Steve Hutchinson, Edgerrin James, Ty Law, John Lynch, Kevin Mawae and Richard Seymour. Although previously eligible, Flores — who coached two Raiders teams to Super Bowl titles — and longtime defensive lineman Seymour are finalists for the first

time.

Also being considered for induction are senior committee nominee Johnny Robinson, a star safety for Dallas/Kansas City from 1960-71, and contributors finalists Gil Brandt, former personnel director for the Cowboys and now the NFL's top draft consultant, and Broncos owner Pat Bowlen.

A maximum of eight new members can be elected, five from the modern-era group. Inductions are Aug. 3 in Canton, Ohio.

Gonzalez played 17 seasons with the Chiefs and Falcons, but never made a Super Bowl.

No matter: He holds the career record for tight ends with 1,325 receptions, second overall only to Jerry Rice, and gained more than 15,127 yards while scoring 111 touchdowns. His string of 211 straight games with a catch lasted from 2000-13.

Reed spent 12 seasons with the Ravens, Texans and Jets, winning an NFL title in 2012. He's one of two players to lead the NFL in interceptions three times (2004, 2008, 2010) and was the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2004.

Bailey played 15 seasons with Washington and Denver and was a three-time All-Pro.

Considered one of the game's best cover cornerbacks, he had a career-high 10 interceptions in 2006.

Lynch, a standout safety for Tampa Bay and Denver, becomes a finalist for the sixth straight year. Coryell, who coached the high-powered offenses of the Cardinals and Chargers in the 1970s and '80s, is a five-time finalist.

In all there, are three safeties, two cornerbacks, two offensive tackles, two coaches, one guard, one center, one tight end, one running back, one wide receiver and one defensive lineman as finalists.

NHL roundup

Price, Canadiens shut out Vancouver

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Carey Price made 33 saves in his return from injury to help the Montreal Canadiens beat the Vancouver Canucks 2-0 on Thursday night.

Price picked up his second shutout of the season and 42nd overall in his first appearance after missing three games because of a lower-body injury. Jordie Benn and Jonathan Drouin scored for Montreal.

Canucks rookie Elias Pettersson left because of a lower-body injury in the second period. Named to the All-Star Game on Wednesday, Pettersson was injured after getting tangled with fellow rookie and Habs forward Jesperi Kotkaniemi. Pettersson's right knee was caught between Kotkaniemi's legs as they both fell to the ice. The Swede stayed down on the ice before getting to his feet and going to the dressing room.

Benn opened the scoring with his third goal of the season at 11:50 of the first period. Min-

utes after Pettersson's injury, Drouin burst up the wing for his 13th of the season.

Lightning 6, Kings 2: Nikita Kucherov had a goal and three assists as visiting Tampa Bay kept steamrolling along, beating Los Angeles for its seventh straight victory.

The NHL-leading Lightning have earned at least one point in 16 consecutive games — the longest streak in the league this season. They are 15-0-1 during the run.

Blues 5, Capitals 2: Alex Ovechkin scored his 30th goal of the season, but host St. Louis came back to beat Washington.

Ovechkin's first-period goal snapped a six-game drought and tied him with Mike Gartner as the only players in NHL history to begin their careers with 14 straight 30-goal seasons. Gartner scored 30 or more in his first 15 seasons.

Wild 4, Maple Leafs 3: Zach Parise broke a tie off a turnover early in the third period and visiting Minnesota rallied to beat Toronto.

Auston Matthews lost the puck to Parise, who beat goalie Michael Hutchinson high over his glove at 4:21 for his 18th goal of the season. Minnesota overcame deficits of 2-0 and 3-2.

Islanders 3, Blackhawks 2 (OT): Devon Toews scored his first NHL goal at 1:48 of overtime to lift host New York past Chicago for its fifth straight victory.

Mathew Barzal scored twice to keep up his scoring binge and help the Islanders win for the eighth time in nine games. Robin Lehner, making his third straight start, stopped 19 shots as New York moved to 3-0-1 in four games at the Nassau Coliseum this season.

Hurricanes 5, Flyers 3: Dougie Hamilton, Justin Williams and Teuvo Teravainen scored second-period goals to lead visiting Carolina past Philadelphia.

The Flyers fired coach Dave Hakstol and general manager Ron Hextall last month and the shake-up has yet to spark

any kind of sign of playoff life for a franchise that hasn't won a Stanley Cup since 1975. The Flyers lost their fifth straight game and fell to 3-5-1 under interim coach Scott Gordon.

Sabres 4, Panthers 3: Jeff Skinner scored twice and host Buffalo ended a seven-game skid against Florida.

Sam Reinhart had a goal and an assist, and Tage Thompson also scored in a game the Sabres played minus injured captain Jack Eichel. Buffalo coach Phil Housley said Eichel will miss at least one more game with an upper-body injury after he was hurt in the first period of a 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders on Monday.

Bruins 6, Flames 4: Jake DeBrusk and Brad Marchand each had two goals to lift host Boston past Calgary.

Boston has won three in a row and six of eight. The Bruins built on their win over Chicago in Tuesday's Winter Classic by beating the top team in the Western Conference.

College basketball roundup

Brazdeikis leads No. 2 Michigan to rout of Penn State

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Ignas Brazdeikis had 16 points and 11 rebounds and No. 2 Michigan returned to Big Ten play with a 68-55 victory over Penn State on Thursday night.

The Wolverines (14-0, 3-0) weren't always that dominant while playing lesser competition in December, and the first half against Penn State (7-7, 0-3) wasn't all that great, either, from an aesthetic standpoint. The teams combined for 18 turnovers in the first 20 minutes, and Michigan led 25-20.

Jordan Poole led Michigan with 17 points and has reached double figures in nine straight games. Charles Mat-

thews added 14 points for the Wolverines.

No. 18 N.C. State 87, Miami 82: Reserve Markell Johnson scored 20 points in 23 minutes and the visiting Wolfpack shot 57 percent in the second half to rally past the Hurricanes in the Atlantic Coast Conference opener for both teams.

N.C. State (13-1) won its seventh game in a row and is off to its best start since the 1973-74 team that won the national championship.

No. 21 Indiana 73, Illinois 65: Romeo Langford scored a career-high 28 points, Juwan Morgan added 14 points and 10 rebounds and the host Hoosiers beat the Illini.

Langford shot 8-for-13 from the field and 11-for-15 from the line for Indiana (12-2, 3-0).

Minnesota 59, No. 22 Wisconsin 52: Amir Coffey scored 21 points and the visiting Golden Gophers put the Badgers in an early hole before holding off a furious late rally.

Minnesota (12-2, 2-1 Big Ten) ended an eight-game losing streak in the rivalry with its first victory at Wisconsin since 2009.

Purdue 86, No. 25 Iowa 70: Carsen Edwards scored 16 of his 21 points in the first half and the host Boilermakers beat the Hawkeyes.

Matt Haarms had 14 points and Aaron Wheeler added 10

for the Boilermakers (9-5, 2-1 Big Ten). They have won three straight for the first time since starting the season 4-0.

Service academies

Navy 72, Colgate 66: George Kiernan scored 20 points, including a three-pointer to give his team the lead down the stretch, and the host Midshipmen played their first home game in a month to open Patriot League play, holding off the Raiders.

Six of the last seven Navy-Colgate contests have been decided by single digits and the Midshipmen snapped a three-game losing streak to the Raiders.