

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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President shares world view with Shanahan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — On his first working day in charge of the Pentagon, Patrick Shanahan got a taste of President Donald Trump's scattershot way of looking at the world.

As Shanahan sat to Trump's left during a Cabinet meeting at the White House, the president denounced U.S. allies as free-loaders, expressed disgust with U.S. war-fighting strategy in Afghanistan, mused about his own potential to be a great general, dismissed Syria as "sand and death," spoke encouragingly of a second North Korea summit and falsely claimed he had fired former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

It was a very public reminder of the challenges that Shanahan, as acting defense secretary, faces as he navigates the complex terrain that led to the early end of his predecessor's tenure.

At one point, Trump turned to Shanahan with an unusual demand.

The commander in chief said audits of Pentagon war spending must be "private" — an apparent reference to reports produced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Trump asserted that the reports give away too much information and should not be publicly released, although the law that created that watchdog's office says its reports must be made public.

Trump did not explain his complaint about Mattis' approach to the war. But Trump hinted that he had irreconcilable differences with Mattis on what Trump views as an unfair defense relationship with allies such as NATO. Trump suggested that Shanahan, who took over as acting defense secretary when Mattis ended his tenure Monday, agrees with

him on that.

"We have some great allies, but a lot of our allies were taking advantage of our taxpayers and our country," Trump said. "We can't let that happen, and Pat Shanahan agrees with that and he's agreed with that for a long time. And that was very important to me."

In his Cabinet meeting remarks with reporters present, Trump said he was in no rush to get U.S. troops out of Syria but did not clarify a timetable. Mattis and other Trump advisers tried unsuccessfully to persuade Trump to stay in Syria long enough to ensure that Islamic State, which has largely been defeated on the battlefield, cannot regroup. Nor did the president clarify plans in Afghanistan, where he has ordered a troop reduction on an unspecified timetable.

At a morning meeting at the Pentagon with the military ser-

vice secretaries and other top civilian officials, Shanahan said he was focused on the defense strategy developed during Mattis' tenure. It emphasizes the importance of great power competition with Russia and China after America's many years of fighting insurgent wars in the Middle East.

In that context, Shanahan said the Pentagon leaders should remember, "China, China, China," according to one official, who was not authorized to publicly discuss internal defense meetings and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Separately, Shanahan's spokesman, Lt. Col. Joe Buccino, said that as part of Shanahan's ethics agreement he had stepped aside himself "for the duration of his service" at the Pentagon from "matters in which the Boeing Company is a party." Shanahan had worked for Boeing for 31 years.

Afghans blast Trump's praise of 1979 Soviet invasion

The Washington Post

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan officials on Thursday blasted President Donald Trump's praise of the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation, which he described as a fight against terrorism, breaking with decades of Republican anti-communist beliefs.

In Trump's revisionist history of Afghanistan, "the reason Russia was in Afghanistan was because terrorists were going into Russia," he said during a Cabinet meeting Wednesday. "They were right to be there. The problem is, it was a tough fight."

It was a surprising break from U.S. conservatives dating back to President Ronald Rea-

gan, who saw the invasion as an attempt to spread communism and aided insurgent forces fighting Soviet troops.

The comments raised eyebrows with officials in Afghanistan at a time when Kabul has been frustrated with Trump's sudden announcement of a plan to withdraw up to half of U.S. troops as peace talks with Taliban insurgents continue without Afghan government involvement.

A statement from President Ashraf Ghani's office described the battle against the Soviets as a "national uprising for gaining freedom" and noted that the Soviet invasion was condemned by the United Nations and the U.S. at the time.

"All presidents of America

not only denounced this invasion but remained supporters of this holy jihad of the Afghans," read the statement, which added that the government would be seeking clarity from the United States.

Saleh Mohammad Saleh, a lawmaker representing Konar province, also noted that the United States funded the rebels fighting the Soviets. To now hear Trump justifying the invasion was "really strange," he said.

"Our war against the Soviets was righteous. The international community stood by us. We gave more than enough sacrifices," Saleh told The Washington Post. "This man proves to be more mad than people think."

He also criticized the plan to pull out at least half the 14,000 U.S. troops in the country as bad for Afghanistan's stability, especially in the midst of peace negotiations.

Sayed Ikramuddin Masoomi, a lawmaker representing Takhar province who also fought the Soviets, said their occupation "was crystal clear and was specifically for supporting [Moscow's] puppet communists in Afghanistan."

Trump's invitation for Russia and India to join the fight against the Taliban — along with Pakistan, where the militants have enjoyed safe haven — further complicated matters, Masoomi told The Washington Post.

New leadership works to better Laughlin AFB

By ROSE THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Following an Air Force investigation that led to the firing of three commanders, new leadership at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas said they are working to make all personnel feel accepted and respected.

Col. Lee Gentile, who took over the 47th Flying Training Wing following the Oct. 31 firing of the previous commander, Col. Charles Velino, said leaders are working to “create a culture shift” at the Del Rio, Texas, base.

Absent and unsafe leadership and poor oversight of alcohol consumption at unit-sponsored events were cited as part of the training wing’s troubling recent history, according to a newly released report by

the Air Force’s Air Education and Training Command. The 47th training wing’s root issue for officer misconduct was described in the Dec. 20 report as “leadership improperly assessing the environment and missing opportunities to establish a culture of dignity and respect.”

A heavily redacted copy of the report released Dec. 20 offers only a glimpse of what was going on within the unit. Nearly 60 pages of the background section are completely blacked out.

It does provide a brief description of unsafe supervision of drinking at two unit events — a piano-burning ceremony, which is not further described, and a naming ceremony, when new pilots receive their call sign nicknames.

Army, Italian law enforcement patrol following incidents

By NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — U.S. military police and Italian police are jointly patrolling local bars and nightclubs following incidents involving troops that “reflected negatively” on the Army.

The two-vehicle patrols, including a pair of Carabinieri, two military police and a translator, are conducting random, late night visits to popular night spots. The venues chosen for the patrols were determined by a review of police reports, U.S. Garrison Italy officials said in a recent statement.

“The decision to undertake this initiative was driven by a number of incidents involving U.S. personnel that reflected negatively on the Vicenza Military Community and its relationship with the city of Vicenza,” Dennis Brown, who is coordinating the patrol effort, said in the statement.

Two incidents in particular garnered local attention in recent years.

In February, a 21-year-old paratrooper with the 173rd Airborne Brigade assaulted two Italian police officers, breaking one officer’s teeth, after bouncers at the strip club where the soldier was acting out called for help.

The soldier pleaded guilty later the same morning to injury, insult and resistance to public officials and received a suspended sentence of a year in jail.

In May 2016, soldiers with the 173rd Airborne Brigade were involved in a large, bloody brawl at a disco — the worst in 20 years, according to local media — that left several injured and caused thousands of euros in damages. Twelve paratroopers received eight-month suspended sentences from a Vicenza judge, who also levied a fine to be paid to the disco owner.

Theme parks, lawn care and more: 9 military freebies

Stars and Stripes

Several business and government programs provide free or extremely low-priced products for servicemembers at home and abroad.

Here are nine in particular that offer significant value:

1. Annual passes to the national parks. Active-duty, Reserve and National Guard servicemembers for all four Pentagon services and the Coast Guard are eligible for a park pass, which also covers dependents.

2. TSA Precheck. Military and Defense Department civilians qualify for the program, which provides expedited boarding at airports without the \$85 fee. Servicemembers can enter their 10-digit DOD identification numbers into the Known Traveler Number field on their flight reservations, and

they’re set. Civilians must opt-in through their profile page on the Milconnect website.

3. American Express Platinum Card (with Global Entry credit). Active-duty servicemembers who qualify for the card get the \$550 annual fee waived. Cardholders receive a \$100 fee refund for the Global Entry program, which allows expedited entry after flying back to the United States and includes enrollment in TSA Precheck.

4. Microsoft Office. This one isn’t quite free, and the latest Microsoft office suite costs a few dollars more than it used to, but at \$14.99 for the latest edition, it’s still discounted by hundreds of dollars. The Microsoft Home Use Program is available to those with .mil addresses, and many users have an email about it somewhere in their inbox. You may need

a program code, which differs among branches; your benefits administrator can help or try an internet search. Here are some generic codes by service, which may change, that must be paired with a valid .mil address: Army, ABAD560AD0; Navy and Marines, 3ABDFFAB76; Air Force 4A82EF7B8F; Coast Guard, call Microsoft support.

5. The Washington Post. The newspaper offers free digital subscriptions to those with a valid .mil or .gov email address.

6. Waves of Honor. Any active-duty servicemember, National Guardsman or reservist and up to three dependents receive one free admission per year to either SeaWorld, Busch Gardens, or Sesame Place. Veterans discounts are also sometimes offered.

7. Premium LinkedIn. The social media site used primar-

ily for professional networking offers one-year premium accounts to active-duty servicemembers, veterans and military spouses.

8. Lawn care and snow removal. Volunteers in the U.S. will take care of lawns and landscaping for the families of deployed servicemembers at no charge. Families and volunteers are matched up by zip code.

9. Online libraries. Most servicemembers, civilians and family members are eligible to join base libraries, which offer free access to a host of services online. For example, the Army’s online library includes free access to Ancestry.com, Consumer Reports and Mango languages. The services also provide access to thousands of free books and audio books.

Negotiations over shutdown come up empty

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — No one budged at President Donald Trump's closed-door meeting with congressional leaders, so the partial government shutdown persisted over his demand for billions of dollars to build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico. They'll all try again Friday.

In public, Trump renewed his dire warnings of rapists and others at the border. But when pressed in private Wednesday by Democrats asking why he wouldn't end the shutdown, he responded at one point, "I would look foolish if I did that." A White House official, one of two people who described that exchange only on condition

of anonymity, said the president had been trying to explain that it would be foolish not to pay for border security.

In one big shift, the new Congress convenes Thursday with Democrats taking majority control of the House, and Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi said they'd quickly pass legislation to reopen the government — without funds for Trump's border wall.

"There is no amount of persuasion he can use" to get her to fund his wall, Pelosi said in an interview aired Thursday on NBC's "Today" show. She added: "We can go through the back and forth. No. How many more times can we say no?"

But the White House has rejected the

Democratic package, and Republicans who control the Senate are hesitant to take it up without Trump on board. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell called it a "total nonstarter."

Trump said ahead of his White House session with the congressional leaders that the partial shutdown will last "as long as it takes" to get the funding he wants.

"Could be a long time or could be quickly," Trump said during lengthy public comments at a Cabinet meeting, his first public appearance of the new year. Meanwhile, the shutdown dragged through a second week, closing some parks and leaving hundreds of thousands of federal employees without pay.

New, diverse House elects Pelosi speaker

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The 116th Congress gaveled into session Thursday swathed in history, returning Nancy Pelosi to the House speaker's office and ushering in a diverse class of Democratic freshmen ready to confront President Donald Trump in a new era of divided government.

Pelosi was elected speaker 220-192, with 15 Democrats rejecting her. She vowed, in prepared remarks, "to restore integrity to government so that people can have confidence that government works for the public interest, not the special interests."

The new Congress is like none other. There are more women than ever before, and a new generation of Muslims, Latinos, Native Americans and blacks in the House is creating what academics call a reflective democracy, more aligned with the popula-

tion of the United States.

The Republican side in the House is still made up mostly of white men, and in the Senate Republicans bolstered their ranks in the majority.

In a nod to the moment, Pelosi, the first female speaker, was broadly pledging to make Congress work for all Americans — addressing kitchen table issues at a time of deep economic churn — even as her party is ready to challenge Trump with investigations and subpoena powers that threaten the White House agenda. It's the first new Congress to convene amid a partial government shutdown, now in its 13th day over Trump's demands for money for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

"This House will be for the people," Pelosi was to say in remarks after winning the gavel, according to excerpts released ahead of time, "to lower health costs and

prescription drugs prices, and protect people with pre-existing conditions; to increase paychecks by rebuilding America with green and modern infrastructure — from sea to shining sea."

The day was unfolding as one of both celebration and impatience. Newly elected lawmakers arrived, often with friends and families in tow, to take the oath of office and pose for ceremonial photos. The Democrats planned to quickly pass legislation to re-open the government, but without the funding Trump is demanding for his promised border wall.

Vice President Mike Pence swore in newly elected senators, but Senate Republicans under Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had no plans to consider the House bills to fund the government unless Trump agrees to sign them into law. That ensures the shutdown will continue.

Sanders contrite as 2016 aides face harassment allegations

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and his chief lieutenants are offering contrition as some of his 2016 campaign staffers face allegations of sexual harassment that threaten to derail a second White House bid before it begins.

Hours after a New York Times report detailed allegations of unwanted sexual advances and pay inequity on his first campaign, Sanders apologized late Wednesday "to any woman who felt that she was not treated appropriately."

"Of course, if I run again, we will do bet-

ter next time," Sanders told CNN.

Yet there were immediate signs that the allegations, which did not directly involve Sanders, could hurt the self-described democratic socialist's 2020 ambitions in the midst of the #MeToo era. In the wake of the report, some Democratic activists and operatives complained about the aggressive culture during the first campaign when male staffers and supporters were sometimes labeled "Bernie bros."

"I'm not the least bit surprised," National Organization for Women President Toni Van Pelt said, noting she was forced to block Sanders' supporters from her social

media feed in 2016. "To me, it was really clear this was the way they were running the campaign."

She blamed Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump, at least in part, on Sanders and his supporters.

"It wasn't just Trump, it wasn't just the Russians; it was also the sexist people that ran his campaign," Van Pelt said.

The timing could not be worse for Sanders, who is gearing up for a second presidential bid. His senior adviser said last month that Sanders would run a "much bigger" operation and would start out as a front-runner if he ultimately decided to run.

Man held in Russia visited often

Associated Press

DETROIT — As a staff sergeant with the Marines in Iraq, Paul Whelan enjoyed fine cigars and showed an affinity for Russia — even spending two weeks of military leave in Moscow and St. Petersburg instead of at home in the U.S. with family and friends.

The 48-year-old Detroit-area man had an account on a Russian social media site, where he posted festive notes on the country's national holidays.

Now, he's under arrest there on espionage allegations.

Whelan has visited Russia since at least 2007 and was there again for a friend's wedding, showing other guests around, said his twin brother, David Whelan. He was due to return home on Jan. 6, the brother said.

U.S. officials are seeking answers about Paul Whelan's arrest on spying charges. The Russian Federal Security Service, or FSB, said Whelan was caught "during an espionage operation," but gave no details.

U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman Jr. visited Whelan on Wednesday in Moscow's Lefortovo Prison, the State Department said.

"Ambassador Huntsman

expressed his support for Mr. Whelan and offered the embassy's assistance," it said.

He also spoke by phone with Whelan's family, the statement added, but did not disclose any details "due to privacy considerations for Mr. Whelan and his family."

According to what appears to be Paul Whelan's profile on the popular Russian social media platform VKontakte, he posted "God save President Trump" — flanked by flag emojis. A 2010 post referred to then-President Barack Obama as a "moron."

David Whelan disputes Russia's allegation that his brother is a spy.

Former CIA agent John Sipher agrees, saying Paul Whelan's spotty military career would keep U.S. intelligence from hiring him for sensitive operations.

Whelan was part of "The Rest and Recuperation Leave Program," which authorized 15 days of leave to servicemembers on yearlong deployments to Iraq, according to another 2007 story on the website. The military paid for the travel, and most servicemembers chose to return home but others could travel abroad.

During his military career, Whelan received awards that included the Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation and Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, but he ran afoul of the military and was convicted in 2008 on larceny-related charges at a special court-martial. Whelan saw his rank stripped, was demoted to private and discharged for bad conduct.

He went on to start Kingsmead Arsenal, an online firearms business, from his Novi, Mich., home and worked for Troy, Mich.-based temporary staffing firm Kelly Services until 2017.

Whelan testified in a 2013 deposition in a federal court case involving Kelly Services that he worked as senior manager of global security and investigations for the company.

He was hired in 2017 by Auburn Hills, Mich.-based Borg-Warner and currently is the auto parts supplier's global security director.

"He is responsible for overseeing security at our facilities in Auburn Hills, Mich., and at other company locations around the world," company spokeswoman Kathy Graham said Tuesday in a statement.

China: History made, landing on 'dark' side of the moon

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's burgeoning space program achieved a first on Thursday: a landing on the so-called dark side of the moon.

Three nations — the United States, the former Soviet Union and more recently China — have sent spacecraft to the near side of the moon, which faces Earth, but this landing is the first-ever on the far side.

The China National Space Administration said the 10:26 a.m. touchdown of the Chang'e 4 craft has "opened up a new chapter in human lunar exploration."

A photo taken at 11:40 a.m. and sent back by Chang'e 4 shows a small crater and a barren surface that appears to be illuminated by a light from the lunar explorer. Its name comes from that of a Chinese goddess who, according to legend, has lived on the moon for millennia.

The landing highlights China's growing ambitions to rival the U.S., Russia and Europe in space and, more broadly, to cement the nation's position as a regional and global power.

"The space dream is part of the dream to make China stronger," President Xi Jinping said in 2013, shortly after becoming China's leader.

In year-end wrap-ups, Chinese media and officials hailed the Dec. 8 launch of Chang'e 4 as one of the nation's major achievements in 2018. The landing on Thursday was announced to the public by state broadcaster CCTV at the top of the noon news.

"On the whole, China's space technology still lags behind the West, but with the landing on the far side of the moon, we have raced to the front," said Hou Xiyun, a professor at Nanjing University's school of astronomy and space science.

He added that China has Mars, Jupiter and asteroids in its sights. "There's no doubt that our nation will go farther and farther."

5 face death penalty in Khashoggi killing

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia announced on Thursday it will seek the death penalty against five suspects in the slaying of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, a killing that has seen members of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's entourage implicated in the writer's assassination.

Prosecutors announced that 11 suspects in the slaying attended their first court hearing with lawyers, but the statement did not name those in court. It also did not explain why seven other suspects arrested over the Oct. 2 killing at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul did not immediately face formal

charges. The kingdom previously announced 18 people had been arrested.

The state-run Saudi Press Agency and state television gave few details about the hearing.

"The Public Prosecutor demanded imposing proper punishments against the defendants and is seeking capital punishment for five of the defendants for their direct involvement in the murder," a statement from prosecutors said, without elaborating.

The suspects requested copies of the indictments they faced, as well as asked for more time to prepare for their case, prosecutors said.

While vague on details about the case, prosecutors made a

point to express concerns about Turkey. They alleged that Turkish officials did not answer two formal requests made for evidence in the case.

"To date, the Saudi Public Prosecutor has not received any response, and the Public Prosecution is still awaiting their response," the statement said.

Officials in Ankara could not be immediately reached for comment. Turkish officials have previously said they shared evidence with Saudi Arabia and other nations over Khashoggi's killing.

Turkey also has demanded Saudi Arabia extradite those 18 suspects to be tried there for Khashoggi's killing.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Men accused in theft of \$500K in tequila

FL TAMPA — Sheriff's deputies in Florida have recovered a half-million dollars in stolen Patron tequila.

Hillsborough sheriff's spokesman Danny Alvarez said in a news release that on Sunday night, a truck driver hauling the load of tequila had stopped for dinner at the Tampa Truck Stop when he noticed the trailer was no longer attached to his truck.

Deputies found the semi-trailer at a nearby intersection, where they watched four men transferring the cases of tequila to another box truck. They arrested three men at the scene and a fourth a short time later.

Alvarez said the load of tequila was worth \$507,105.

Police 'mourn' loss of doughnut truck in fire

KY LEXINGTON — Police found humor after an empty doughnut truck caught fire.

WKYT-TV reported no one was injured when the Krispy Kreme driver stopped Monday after noticing smoke in the cab of his truck following a delivery in Morehead. The fire was extinguished quickly; the cause remains undetermined.

Lexington police posted photos on social media of the blackened side of the truck and officers jokingly mourning the truck's loss. The post was accompanied by the comment, "No words."

Group raises \$59,000 to save gas station

GA PERRY — Preservationists have raised \$59,000 to help save a historic gas station from being demol-

ished in rural Georgia.

The Telegraph of Macon reported the historical society in Perry met a December deadline to present the city a check to cover half the cost of saving the Depression-era service station.

Perry's City Council plans to vote this month to approve a company's bid to stabilize the small brick building.

Video shows coyotes chasing pit bull

NH LITCHFIELD — A dog owner said his 55-pound pit bull went nose-to-nose with a pair of coyotes and the encounter was captured on his backyard security camera.

Doug Anderson said he let his two dogs out about 8 a.m. Monday before he heard his pit bull Harlee "come running in screaming crying." WMUR-TV reported Anderson went outside and looked straight into the faces of two coyotes.

Anderson said the coyotes were on the back edge of his property "kind of hanging around."

Man aiming at target hits neighbor at table

FL NAPLES — Investigators said a man shooting at a target in his backyard hit a neighbor who was sitting at her dinner table.

Collier County sheriff's officials said on Facebook that the shooting occurred Sunday in Golden Gates Estates, which is near Naples on the Gulf Coast.

Juan Arreguin, 41, was charged with one count of shooting a missile into an occupied dwelling and discharging a firearm in public.

Sheriff's officials said his neighbor, a 21-year-old woman, had injuries to her right arm and right side.

Man shot, wounded on consecutive days

NJ PLEASANTVILLE — Authorities said a man was shot and wounded in separate incidents that occurred on consecutive days in the same city, but he wasn't seriously injured in either shooting.

Pleasantville police said the first shooting occurred early Sunday afternoon, when Mark Fuller, 19, was hit once in the back with what authorities described as a "projectile of some type." The Atlantic City man was treated at a hospital and released.

Fuller was wounded again on Monday, when he was shot in the buttocks. He was again treated at a hospital and released.

Some arrests have been made in connection with the shootings. Possible motives for either incident have not been disclosed.

Driver dies as car falls 30 feet off ledge

NY MOUNT VERNON — The driver of a car that fell about 30 feet off a ledge near a suburban New York train station has died.

The Journal News reported that the accident happened late Saturday afternoon near the Mount Vernon East Metro-North station.

Mount Vernon Mayor Richard Thomas said on Facebook that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority should fortify the fence along the tracks to prevent another accident.

The MTA said in a statement that it is working with Mount Vernon police to investigate the death. Spokeswoman Nancy Gamerman said the investigation will inform decisions about safety improvements already planned.

Child hurt falling into rhino exhibit at zoo

FL MELBOURNE — A zoo where a toddler stumbled into a rhinoceros enclosure is suspending exhibits offering "premium" animal experiences while officials review safety protocol.

The Brevard Zoo announced the suspension of the Rhino Encounters exhibit and similar displays in a statement Wednesday.

The 2-year-old girl was taken to a hospital for treatment Tuesday after she stumbled through steel poles separating the rhinos and spectators.

Officials at the zoo on Florida's Space Coast say a rhino's snout touched the girl before she was retrieved in a matter of seconds from the exhibit.

The girl's father said in a statement Wednesday that his daughter is doing well.

Man charged in fatal crossbow shooting

MI NORTON SHORES — A 20-year-old man has been charged in the fatal crossbow shooting of an acquaintance outside a western Michigan home.

Nyoky Steven Bull, of Grant, was arraigned Dec. 28 on an open murder charge and ordered jailed.

Marcus Olmstead, 20, was shot with a crossbow bolt Dec. 26 outside his Norton Shores home, northwest of Grand Rapids. His twin brother found him in the driveway. Emergency workers tried to revive Olmstead but he died at the scene.

The prosecutor's office said Bull's girlfriend's Instagram account was used to "lure" Olmstead outside.

From wire reports

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Defenses look to leave mark on postseason

Associated Press

From Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain in the 1970s to Chicago's Monsters of the Midway in the '80s to Seattle's Legion of Boom more recently, dominant defenses have often been the story of the NFL postseason.

High-powered offenses might generate the highlights, the fantasy points and victories in the regular season. But more often than not the top defenses have managed to hold those dynamic offenses in check when the weather turns colder and the games get more important in the postseason.

Yet, after one of the most prolific offensive regular seasons in NFL history, the question is can defenses still lead the way to a championship?

"I have no idea," said San Francisco cornerback Richard Sherman, a key member of Seattle's 2013 championship defense.

"I don't think the league really wants that or cares to have that thing again," Sherman continued. "They care more about offensive football, so that's what they'll get. To have a special defensive group to play that well for so long would be very difficult to do because of the style of defense and rules."

Playing defense in the NFL perhaps has never been harder, with the intimidating hits on receivers and quarterbacks now outlawed, even the most minor downfield contact resulting in penalties, and quarterbacks more accurate and efficient than ever

while running the new spread offenses.

This year featured the highest passer rating (92.9), most yards per play (5.6) and second-most points per game (46.7) in NFL history. It seems like playing great defense is almost impossible.

"You can't use it as an excuse because they still let us hit, OK?" said Dallas Cowboys defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli, an assistant on the 2002 Tampa Bay team that won a Super Bowl behind its defense.

"I've always believed in the speed of the defense. And that's the hitting. They've got holes. We've got to hit the holes. We've got to hit them."

The story of this NFL season has been the offenses, with the highlight being a 54-51 win for the Los Angeles Rams over the Kansas City Chiefs back in November.

That's been part of a season that had first-year starter Patrick Mahomes throwing for 50 TD passes and more than 5,000 yards for Kansas City, Drew Brees setting more records at age 39 in New Orleans, Tom Brady maintaining his winning ways in his 40s for New England, and Sean McVay's offense tormenting opposing teams all year long for the Rams.

But those teams that feature four of the five most efficient offenses in the league, according to Football Outsiders, and defenses that have been far less consistent will get the opening weekend of the postseason off.

With Khalil Mack and Akiem Hicks wreaking havoc up front and Eddie Jackson and Kyle Fuller providing big plays from the secondary, the Chicago Bears appear to have the defense best equipped for a long postseason run, starting with Sunday's home game against defending champion Philadelphia.

"Dominant, that's it," Hicks said. "We are aggressive. We like to hit. ... And hopefully we can get to another level for these playoffs."

The Bears aren't alone. Six of those 10 most efficient defenses are playing this weekend: the Baltimore Ravens, the Houston Texans, the Los Angeles Chargers, the Cowboys and the Indianapolis Colts.

Ball-control offense and dominant defense have been a tried-and-true formula for teams like Baltimore and the Seattle Seahawks, who have combined for three Super Bowl championships and five appearances in the title game this century with that recipe.

"You either believe in something or you don't," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said. "I think just staying the course and knowing we're on to something. Believing in the history. We know what we're capable of doing. We've shown it over a lot of years. You're always adapting, but it's staying what you're true to. I think that's what is happening. We look like a team that we have seen before, and that's powerful."

Eagles back in familiar role as playoff underbirds

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia Eagles are back in a familiar role with a different disguise.

The defending Super Bowl champions traded in the dog masks for ski masks, but they're still playoff underdogs for the second straight year.

Their road is much tougher this time around, however.

The Eagles (9-7) are trying to become only the third No. 6 seed to win it all, joining the 2005 Pittsburgh Steelers and 2010 Green Bay Packers. Philadelphia starts its quest Sunday against the Chicago Bears (12-4).

Last year, the Eagles had the luxury of a first-round bye and two home games but few expected them to do much with backup quarterback Nick Foles.

They were the first No. 1 seed to be an underdog in their opening playoff game, a 15-10 win over the Atlanta Falcons. Lane Johnson and Chris Long donned dog masks after that game to symbolize the team's underdog status and it spread throughout the city.

The Eagles were three-point underdogs against the Vikings in the NFC championship game and won 38-7. They were 4½-point underdogs against the Patriots in the Super Bowl when Foles earned MVP honors in a 41-33 victory.

On wild-card weekend, the combined total of the spread of the other three games is 5½ points while the Bears are 6-point favorites against the Eagles.

"To be an underdog and get back to that, we had to go through a lot as a team because

we didn't start out that way this year; it was actually the opposite," Foles said Wednesday. "Then we went through some growing pains. We had to fight through it. It's brought us closer together what's happened, the ups and downs, it's made us strong mentally."

Foles began the season under center because Carson Wentz wasn't ready following knee surgery that forced him out of the lineup in December 2017. The Eagles were 1-1 when Wentz returned in Week 3 and played inconsistently for most of the season. Following a 29-23 overtime loss at Dallas in Week 14, the Eagles were 6-7 and their playoff chances were slim. Then Wentz was sidelined by a back injury.

But Foles stepped in and led Philadelphia, a 13½-point underdog, to a 30-23 win over the

Los Angeles Rams on Dec. 16. Foles set a franchise record with 471 yards passing in a 32-30 comeback win over Houston the following game and the Eagles secured a playoff berth with a 24-0 rout over Washington coupled with Chicago's win at Minnesota.

"I know how our team has really fought this last month of the season, last six weeks," coach Doug Pederson said. "And it does give you a little comfort knowing that we've kind of went through this grind and we're here now and we have to continue to grind and continue to work. But I don't think it's any easier. It's a different team again. Different set of circumstances. We have to travel; if we're fortunate to win, we have to be on the road again. It feels different. But the excitement is the same."

Top 25 roundup

Kansas holds off No. 23 OU

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — The mantra at Kansas is “faces change, expectations don’t.”

Something else that doesn’t change? Oklahoma losing in Allen Fieldhouse.

Dedric Lawson had 13 points and 15 rebounds, Kansas’ young backcourt made enough crucial plays when it mattered, and the fifth-ranked Jayhawks began pursuit of their 15th consecutive Big 12 title by holding off the No. 23 Sooners 70-63 on Wednesday night.

Devon Dotson added 16 points and fellow freshman Quentin Grimes had 14 for Kansas (12-1, 1-0), which survived a nervy final minute to win its 18th straight against Oklahoma in the Phog.

“We don’t want any games to slip away from us,” Grimes said, “especially at home.”

The last time Kansas lost its initial Big 12 game was against Oklahoma on Jan. 8, 1991.

The Sooners (11-2, 0-1) nearly turned the trick again Wednesday night, rallying just about every time the Jayhawks went on a run. And when Charlie Moore missed two free throws in the final minute, Aaron Calixte’s off-balance runner got them within 67-63 with 31 seconds to go.

Dotson made the second of two foul shots at the other end for Kansas, and when Calixte and Kristian Doolittle came up empty for Oklahoma, Dotson made two more free throws to seal the win.

“We had some opportunities,” Sooners coach Lon Kruger said, “we just didn’t finish.”

Lagerald Vick contributed 12 points for the Jayhawks, despite an off night shooting the ball. He was 2-for-7 from beyond the arc, where the Jayhawks were just 4-for-21 as a team.

Brady Manek led the Sooners with 16 points and 11 rebounds. Doolittle added 10 points and Christian James had 11, though he was just 4-for-15 from the field and 1-for-7 from beyond the arc.

“Got to take care of the ball more,” Manek said. “Thought we played better in the second half.”

The Jayhawks got off to a slow start, but Dotson’s layup midway through the first half catapulted them on a 15-0 run. Most of it was fueled by defense, where Udoka Azubuike swatted a shot and turnovers turned into easy fast-break opportunities. Dotson capped it with a three-pointer from the wing.

Oklahoma briefly nipped into the lead, but the Jayhawks closed with a 12-3 charge — Lawson scored his first two field goals after a 0-for-9 start — to take a 40-25 lead into the break.

“I thought the first half we ran well. Probably as efficiently as we’ve run all year,” Jayhawks coach Bill Self said. “The second half was a dud. There was no transition at all the second half.”

No. 6 Nevada 72, Utah State 49: Jordan Caroline scored 15 points and host Nevada matched a school record with its 14th straight victory to begin the season.

Cody Martin and Tre’Shawn Thurman had 14 points apiece in the Mountain West Conference opener for the Wolf Pack (14-0, 1-0), one of four undefeated teams in the nation.

Sam Merrill led Utah State with 16 points.

No. 8 Michigan State 81, Northwestern 55: Nick Ward scored all 21 of his points in the first half to help host Michigan State build a big lead and beat Northwestern.

The Spartans (12-2, 3-0 Big Ten) have won seven straight this season and 10 consecutive games against the Wildcats. Northwestern (9-5, 0-3) had won three of four, losing only to No. 23 Oklahoma in overtime.

No. 11 Texas Tech 62, West Virginia 59: Jarrett Culver scored all of his 18 points in the second half, and Texas Tech overcame some early shooting troubles to beat host West Virginia in their Big 12 opener.

Matt Mooney added 14 points

and Davide Moretti had 12 for Texas Tech (12-1).

Lamont West led West Virginia (8-5, 0-1) with 22 points.

No. 15 North Carolina 77, Harvard 57: Luke Maye scored 14 points to help host North Carolina beat Harvard.

Cameron Johnson and Coby White added 13 points apiece in the Tar Heels’ final nonconference game. North Carolina led 44-39 early in the second half before pulling away with a 22-3 run. Harvard missed 11 consecutive shots from the floor as North Carolina extended its lead to 66-42 with 6:20 to play.

Nassir Little scored 12 points and Kenny Williams had 11 for the Tar Heels (10-3). Robert Baker scored 10 points for Harvard (6-6).

No. 19 Houston 74, Tulsa 56: Corey Davis Jr. scored 21 points and hit six three-pointers and host Houston remained undefeated, beating Tulsa in the American Athletic Conference opener for both teams.

Houston (14-0) extended the longest home winning streak in the nation to 27 games.

Nate Hinton had 13 points and eight rebounds, and Galen Robinson Jr. added 10 points for Houston.

Maryland 74, No. 24 Nebraska 72: Jalen Smith made a driving layup with 3.8 seconds left to break a tie, and host Maryland used a late push to get past Nebraska.

Bruno Fernando had 18 points and 17 rebounds, Anthony Cowan Jr. scored 19 points and Smith accounted for Maryland’s final seven points to finish with 15.

Maryland (11-3, 2-1 Big Ten) trailed 71-70 before Smith made a follow-shot off a three-point try by Cowan with 28 seconds left. After James Palmer converted 1 of 2 free throws for Nebraska, Smith drove the middle of the lane for his decisive layup. Following a timeout, Nebraska (11-3, 1-2) tried to work the ball up the court before Ricky Lindo Jr. knocked away a pass under the basket.

Prices for CFP title tickets fall

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Qualifying for the college football championship game never has been harder for teams other than Alabama and Clemson.

Getting into the stadium to watch the Crimson Tide and Tigers play for the title for the third time in four years has perhaps never been cheaper.

With the College Football Playoff final located thousands of miles away from the two campuses, possible fatigue for fan bases of teams that have become annual participants in the playoff and a game site in an expensive market lacking college football die-hards, prices for tickets for Monday’s championship in Santa Clara have been plummeting the past few days.

“It’s sort of a perfect storm of factors at play this year,” said Jesse Lawrence, the founder of TicketIQ, a secondary ticket market. “It’s a big ask for fans to come and that’s why we’re seeing the prices the way they are.”

Tickets for the title game are now available for just \$135 on the secondary market, according to TicketIQ, less than half of what the price was before the semifinals and well below the face value price of \$475.

StubHub had even cheaper tickets available Wednesday night, with seats priced at \$115.

The CFP picked Santa Clara as its site for this year in part out of hope of broadening college football’s fan base. The Bay Area is much more of a pro sports region and it appears that not enough locals want to brave rush-hour traffic to attend the game Monday night.

With both schools still having tickets available and the secondary market filled with relatively cheap seats, there’s a possibility of empty seats for college football’s biggest game.

The main factor is the location of the game. The two schools are an average of 2,428 miles away from the site, the longest distance since TicketIQ first began tracking the distance in 2011.

NBA roundup

Davis' big night not enough against Nets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — D'Angelo Russell had 22 points and 13 assists, and the Brooklyn Nets built up a big enough lead with a 73-point first half to withstand Anthony Davis' monstrous return to the lineup, beating the New Orleans Pelicans 126-121 on Wednesday night.

Davis finished with 34 points and a career-high 26 rebounds after a one-game absence, but there weren't enough rebounds to get in the first half, when the Nets opened a 24-point lead during their highest-scoring first half at home in 17 years.

Joe Harris added 21 points for the Nets, who had 105 points through three quarters, then got consecutive baskets by Harris when New Orleans trimmed the lead -down to seven with under 5 minutes remaining.

The Nets made nine of their first 15 three-point attempts during their highest-scoring first half at home since getting 75 against Golden State on Feb. 19, 2002. They finished with seven players in double figures, with DeMarre Carroll (19) and Spencer Dinwiddie (18) leading strong efforts off the bench.

Elfrid Payton scored 25 points for New Orleans in his second game back after missing more than a month with a broken finger.

Julius Randle had 21, and Jrue Holiday 20.

Thunder 107, Lakers 100: Paul George scored 37 points while getting booed whenever he touched the ball by Lakers fans still angry he didn't choose their team in free agency, leading Oklahoma City over host Los Angeles.

Russell Westbrook had 14 points, 16 rebounds and 10 assists despite 3-for-20 shooting, but his fellow Southern California native was the center of attention in the Thunder's only visit to the Lakers this season.

76ers 132, Suns 127: Joel Embiid, playing despite a sore left knee, matched his season high with 42 points, 30 in the first half, and grabbed 18 rebounds and visiting Philadelphia held off Phoenix.

Ben Simmons added 29 points and J.J. Redick 27 for the 76ers, who were without Jimmy Butler and Wilson Chandler, both due to an upper respiratory infection. Devin Booker scored 37 points for the Suns.

Philadelphia led by 23 at halftime and as many as 30 in the third quarter. The Suns cut it to three points before Redick finally sealed the victory with a pair of free throws with 4.3 seconds to play.

Celtics 115, Timberwolves 102: Gordon Hayward came off the bench to score a season-high 35 points in host Boston's victory over Minnesota.

Mavericks 122, Hornets 84: Luka Doncic and Dennis Smith Jr. fueled an early long-range shooting spree and Dallas beat Charlotte to end a nine-game road skid.

Heat 117, Cavaliers 92: Josh Richardson scored 24 points and Miami — playing with Dwyane Wade sidelined by an illness — rolled past host Cleveland.

Pistons 101, Grizzlies 94: Blake Griffin had 26 points, eight rebounds and seven assists and visiting Detroit beat Memphis to snap a three-game skid.

Wizards 114, Hawks 98: Bradley Beal had 24 points, Jeff Green added 22 and Thomas Bryant had 16 points and a career-high 15 rebounds in Washington's victory.

Magic 112, Bulls 84: Nikola Vucevic had 22 points and 12 rebounds before sitting out the fourth quarter, Aaron Gordon added 18 points and a career-high nine assists, and Orlando routed host Chicago.

NHL roundup

Murray stops 28 shots, leads Pens past Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Matt Murray doesn't think he's made any big changes since coming back from an injury last month. He's just focusing on details and helping the Pittsburgh Penguins pile up wins.

Murray stopped 28 shots to keep up his strong play since his return, and the Penguins beat the New York Rangers 7-2 Wednesday night for their season-high seventh straight victory.

"There's nothing really game-changing you can do. It's just about doing the little things harder and better," said Murray, who improved to 6-0 with a 1.49 goals-against average in six games since Dec. 15.

"Battling through traffic, just competing," he added. "The way the game's played nowadays, there's going to be a lot of tips and screens and weird bounces. You've just got to do your best and put yourself in the best position that you can to make the save."

Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Jake Guentzel, Kris Letang and Dominik Simon each had a goal and an assist. Zach Aston-Reese and Tanner Pearson also scored to help the Penguins win for the ninth time in 10 games. Patric Hornqvist had two assists.

"I don't think we were at our best," Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said. "We were opportunistic on some of the chances we got and Matt was there to make timely saves for us."

Pittsburgh has recovered nicely from a 10-10-5 start. The Penguins are 12-2-1 in their last 15 games.

"Early in the year we might have made mistakes to beat ourselves," said Crosby, selected an All-Star for the eighth time earlier in the day. "We're making teams earn their chances a little more. ... We're getting a lot of different guys contributing."

Ryan Strome and Pavel Buchnevich scored for the Rang-

ers, who were 2-0-2 in their previous four games and 2-0-5 in their past seven at home.

Henrik Lundqvist, picked as an All-Star for the fifth time earlier in the day, gave up six goals on 18 shots before he was pulled less than five minutes into the third period. Alexander Georgiev replaced him and finished with six saves.

Oilers 3, Coyotes 1: Connor McDavid scored two goals and assisted on another to help Edmonton beat host Arizona to end a six-game losing streak.

McDavid raised his team-leading total to 61 points (23 goals, 38 assists). He began the night fourth in the NHL in scoring, and has 12 points in the past five games.

Canucks 4, Senators 3 (OT): Elias Pettersson completed a hat trick in overtime and Vancouver held off host Ottawa.

Pettersson's second goal put Vancouver ahead 3-1 early in the third period, but Christian Wolanin and Mark Stone scored for Ottawa, with Stone tying it with 50 seconds left.

Stars 5, Devils 4: Miro Heiskanen celebrated his first All-Star nod with two goals, including a third-period tie-breaker, to lift host Dallas.

Heiskanen and Tyler Seguin each scored twice after Jamie Benn tied it at 1 in the first period. Heiskanen, a 19-year-old rookie defenseman, has nine goals.

Flames 5, Red Wings 3: Johnny Gaudreau's power-play goal with 10:23 left lifted Calgary past host Detroit.

Detroit led 2-0 after one period, but the Flames rallied to hand the Red Wings their sixth straight loss. Sean Monahan, TJ Brodie, Elias Lindholm and Michael Frolik also scored for Calgary.

Sharks 5, Avalanche 4: Joe Pavelski and Brent Burns each had a goal and three assists, Martin Jones made 31 saves and San Jose held off host Colorado.