

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Troops' mission on border is extended

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Active-duty U.S. troops, expected to conclude their support mission on the Mexican border this month, will remain through September on a mobile surveillance and detection mission, Defense Department officials announced late Monday.

Homeland Security officials requested the extension Dec. 27 and it was approved by acting Secretary of Defense Pat Shanahan. In addition to the new mission, troops will begin placing concertina wire between

ports of entry and continue to provide aviation support.

Monday's announcement did not include the number of troops needed to conduct this mission or when new deployments will begin. It also did not include cost estimates.

A Pentagon official said Tuesday they are in the process of determining force size and composition.

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

Cathy Wilkinson, public affairs director for U.S. Army North, said last week.

Servicemembers from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines arrived at the border Oct. 31 and were expected to leave by the end of January.

About 600 troops are in Texas, 650 are in Arizona and 1,100 in California. The force deployed to the border peaked at 5,900 servicemembers in mid-November.

Military engineers have already placed coiled razor wire along about 70 miles at ports of entry, U.S. Northern Command

said in late December. It has oversight of the joint military mission.

Military helicopter pilots have flown more than 740 hours. Military police units have conducted more than 10,000 hours of unit training and combined rehearsals with Border Patrol in all three states.

About 2,270 National Guard members are also serving along the border in four states to support the Border Patrol in a separate mission. Early estimates of the cost of those combined support efforts were around \$72 million.

Troop pay cap among CBO ideas to cut deficit

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Congressional budget analysts have 121 ideas for reducing the ballooning U.S. deficit, and 16 of them target Pentagon programs, ranging from long-term pay caps for servicemembers and higher Tricare premiums to spending less on weapons systems.

The Congressional Budget Office in December released a report detailing options for deficit reduction between 2019 and 2028, and the choices seem endless. However, the CBO didn't address the political viability of increasing taxes, cuts to popular programs like Social Security and Medicare or drastic cuts to a Defense Department budget that eats up almost half of discretionary spending.

"To put the federal budget on a sustainable long-term path, lawmakers would need to make significant policy changes — allowing revenues to rise more than they would under current law, reducing spending for large benefit programs to amounts

below those currently projected, or adopting some combination of those approaches," CBO analysts wrote.

The Pentagon's 2019 base budget amounted to \$616 billion, the highest amount since 2010, the CBO reported. This year's budget deficit is estimated at just under \$1 trillion, according to federal data.

The DOD's future spending plan anticipates base-budget levels will average about \$650 billion per year through 2023, the CBO said. One CBO suggestion was to reduce the budget over three years so that funding in 2022 would be 10 percent less.

An across-the-board reduction would mean focusing efforts on crucial parts of national security, like countering China and Russia by relying on conventional and nuclear deterrence while scaling back or eliminating the Army's presence in some countries, the CBO report said.

Measures targeting personnel programs included the following:

- Cap basic pay for troops, which could save \$18 billion from 2020 through 2028.

- Reduce health care costs by raising various Tricare fees, which could provide up to \$12 billion in savings between 2021 and 2028. In 2017, the DOD spent about \$50 billion for health care for active-duty troops, eligible family members and retirees.

- Reduce Basic Allowance for Housing to cover 80 percent of rental and utility costs, which would save about \$15 billion from 2019 to 2028. About 60 percent of servicemembers live in privatized or local housing, which cost the DOD about \$20 billion in BAH expenses in 2017.

Billions can also be saved by scaling back on major weapons systems, the CBO said. For example, canceling the future purchase of F-35 fighters to instead buy F-16s and F/A-18s would save \$16 billion from 2020 through 2028.

Other options involve slowing the pace for developing future replacement aircraft carriers and scaling back the Navy's

2019 shipbuilding plan, which proposes buying 110 ships over the next 10 years. Cutting that purchase to 71 ships would mean a \$75 billion reduction by 2028.

The CBO also found a large savings by reducing nuclear weapons stocks, shrinking the size of the Air Force's bomber fleet and retiring the F-22.

Still, there is little indication of any political consensus on the potential military cutback ideas, all of which would generate serious resistance from the Pentagon and respective military services.

The CBO emphasized it was not making any recommendations, but rather laying out options for lawmakers.

"As a collection, the options are intended to reflect a range of possibilities, not a ranking of priorities or an exhaustive list," the CBO wrote. "The inclusion or exclusion of any particular option does not imply that CBO endorses it or opposes it, and the report makes no recommendations."

More than 500K troops have enrolled in retirement system

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON— More than 500,000 servicemembers are now enrolled in the Defense Department's new Blended Retirement System, the largest change to the military's retirement benefit since World War II, according to the Pentagon.

More than 400,000 servicemembers opted in before the enrollment deadline Dec. 31, the Pentagon announced Monday, and another roughly 150,000 new servicemembers have been automatically enrolled since the new system became available Jan. 1, 2018.

Active-duty servicemembers had more than 33 percent of its eligible population who opted in to the retirement plan by Dec. 31, and the Reserve had 11.7 percent, according to Pentagon enrollment numbers.

Defense Department personnel were given training on the new retirement benefits and encouraged to talk with their family as well as seek out financial counseling before making a decision on whether to stick with the old retirement plan or sign up for the new one.

The Blended Retirement System combines automatic and matching contributions to a servicemember's Thrift Savings Plan, continuation pay and monthly pay upon retirement, according to

the Defense Department.

The Defense Department has already contributed more than \$300 million in the past year to Thrift Savings Plan accounts of servicemembers enrolled in the new retirement plan, according to the Pentagon.

"We see [Blended Retirement System] as an important change that will set America's servicemembers on the path toward greater financial flexibility, responsibility and security," said James Stewart, the acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

The new system will allow servicemembers to have government-provided retirement benefits regardless of whether they serve four years or 20 years, Jeri Busch, director of the Department of Defense's Military Compensation Policy, told reporters in November.

People who joined the military on or before Dec. 31, 2017, and did not opt in to the new retirement system had the old retirement system, which requires servicemembers to serve for 20 years before they are eligible for benefits.

Only 19 percent of active-duty servicemembers and 14 percent of the Reserve force serve for at least 20 years to qualify for the old retirement benefit, according to the Blended Retirement System website. Under the new system, 85 percent of servicemembers will get retirement benefits after they serve at least two years.

Indian helo lands on US ship for first time

BY WYATT OLSON
Star and Stripes

An Indian Navy helicopter landed on the deck of a U.S. Navy ship recently for the first time, marking another step in warming relations between the armed forces of the two nations, the Navy said.

The UH-3H helicopter landed on the USS Anchorage, an amphibious transport dock ship carrying personnel with 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the service said in a statement.

The Anchorage was training at sea with the Indian Navy guided-missile destroyer INS Rajput Dec. 22-26 after a port visit to Visakhapatnam on the Bay of Bengal.

The cross-deck landing Dec. 26 was the first made since the two navies entered into the Helicopter Operations from Ships Other Than Aircraft Carriers, or HOSTAC, agreement more than a year ago.

HOSTAC is a military international standardization program intended to promote safe cross-deck helicopter operation. It is used globally by more than 50 navies and coast guards.

The training also included embarking Indian landing craft on the Anchorage, the Navy said.

As China's military presence has expanded in the Indian Ocean in recent years, the U.S. and India have found common cause in cooperating militarily.

The U.S. and Indian navies "have a shared interest in the security and stability of this region," Anchorage commander Capt. Dennis Jacko said in the statement.

"This exercise strengthened our combined capability with a partner that is very important to us" in the Indo-Pacific, he said.

Soldier saves crash victim with pen

Stars and Stripes

A Fort Bliss soldier used a ballpoint pen and his New Orleans Saints hoodie to save a man who was seriously injured in a crash in West Texas.

Sgt. Trey Troney, 20, was driving on Interstate 20 near Sweetwater on Dec. 22 when he came across a serious crash involving two tractor-trailers and a pickup, according to an Army statement. The driver of the pickup, Jeff Udger, had a bleeding head injury, cracked ribs and a collapsed lung.

Troney said he pulled over to the crash site and noticed Udger was trapped in his truck. At first, Udger was alert enough to be

able to joke about Troney using his "Salute to Service" Saints hoodie to help stop the bleeding, Troney said in the statement.

"Well, this is Cowboy country, so I don't know how I feel about you wrapping me up in a Saints hoodie," Udger told Troney.

Troney had a decompression needle among some first aid supplies in his car from his brigade's recent rotation at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, Calif. He injected the needle into Udger to relieve pressure from his chest, but found it was too small to reach where it needed to be. He found a ballpoint pen, tore out the ink and used the hollow tube to reach the collapsed lung.

Udger, who lives in Longview, said he lost consciousness and regained it as he was being wheeled into an ambulance. By that time, Troney had left.

"He kept talking to me and acted as if the situation was no pressure at all," Udger said in an email to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

Udger said via email that he's healing from the punctured lung and cracked ribs.

Troney said he later heard from Udger, who found the soldier on Facebook to thank him for saving his life. He said Udger offered to buy him a new New Orleans Saints hoodie; Troney is a self-proclaimed "Saints fan in Cowboy country."

House Dems reject invite to shutdown talks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The White House ran quickly into the limits of trying to bypass Speaker Nancy Pelosi in shutdown negotiations when rank-and-file House Democrats declined an invitation to lunch Tuesday with President Donald Trump.

The administration is trying to peel off Democratic support for Trump's demand for border wall money and negotiate directly with centrist lawmakers and some newly elected freshmen, including those in districts where Trump is popular.

Pelosi gave her blessing for lawmakers to accept the White

House invitation, but White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said "unfortunately" no Democrats accepted.

The White House did not immediately say which Democrats were invited, and several freshmen Democrats contacted by The Associated Press said they had not received an invitation. One centrist Democrat said the administration strategy was "grasping at straws."

Sanders said the president would be dining instead with nine Republicans. "The president looks forward to having a working lunch with House Republicans to solve the border

crisis and reopen the government," Sanders said.

The outreach was a shift for the White House as the shutdown is now in its 25th day, with no resolution in sight.

House Democrats announced they would cancel their district work period next week and have lawmakers remain in Washington amid the shutdown.

Pelosi had approved of lawmakers attending the meeting, telling her team that the group can see what she and others have been dealing with in trying to negotiate with Trump to end the shutdown.

Pelosi predicted that after

meeting with Trump the lawmakers will want to make a "citizen's arrest," according to the aide, who wasn't authorized to publicly discuss the meeting and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Lawmakers invited to the White House include centrist Democrats from districts where Trump is popular, including freshmen.

Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., said he attended a meeting of fellow centrist Democrats on Monday night and that a handful of members, most of whom represent districts Trump carried in 2016, were invited.

EPA referrals for criminal action hit 30-year low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency hit a 30-year low in 2018 in the number of pollution cases it referred for criminal prosecution, Justice Department data show.

EPA said in a statement that it is directing "its resources to the most significant and impactful cases."

But the 166 cases referred for prosecution in the last fiscal year is the lowest number since 1988, when Ronald Reagan was president and 151 cases were referred, according to Justice Department data obtained by the nonprofit Public Employees

for Environmental Responsibility advocacy group and released Tuesday.

"You don't get closer to the core of EPA's mission than enforcing the law," Jeff Ruch, PEER's executive director, told The Associated Press. "We're reaching levels where the enforcement program is lacking a pulse."

EPA efforts to prosecute polluters reached 592 criminal referrals under President Bill Clinton in 1998. Criminal referrals have been on a downward trajectory since then, especially under the Trump administration.

A supporter of deregulation, President Donald Trump as a candidate called for

doing away with all but "little tidbits" of the federal environmental agency.

Asked for comment, EPA spokesman John Konkus pointed to the civil settlement of about \$800 million with Fiat Chrysler over claims the automaker rigged its diesel-powered Ram and Jeep vehicles to cheat on emissions tests.

The agency said its actions in fiscal year 2018 led polluters and potential polluters to take care of 809 million pounds of waste and pollutants, a 40 percent increase from 2017.

EPA referrals resulted in 62 federal convictions in fiscal year 2018, the fewest since 1995.

Cops: Angry fan attacked girlfriend and put dog in microwave

The (Allentown, Pa.) Morning Call

Upset about the Philadelphia Eagles playoff loss on Sunday, a 31-year-old woman attacked her girlfriend inside their room at the Best Western hotel in Hanover Township, Pa., and placed the girlfriend's dog inside a microwave, according to court records.

Kirsten J. Gaskins, of Philadelphia, was charged with simple assault, harassment, cruelty to animals and possession of drug paraphernalia. She was arraigned by District Judge Robert Hawke and released on \$20,000 unsecured bail.

According to a criminal complaint:

Colonial Regional police were dispatched at 9:40 p.m. Sunday to the hotel at 300 Gateway Drive and spoke to a woman who said

she had just got into an argument and fight with her girlfriend. Police could see blood on the woman's left ear and a cut on her nose and left cheek.

The woman said she and Gaskins were staying at the hotel as a getaway, but Gaskins got drunk and began yelling at her about the Eagles' playoff loss to the New Orleans Saints.

The woman said Gaskins began to push her, and she pushed her back so she could get away.

The woman said Gaskins pushed her hard enough to knock her down, and when she was on the floor, Gaskins got on top of her and began hitting her in the face. The woman said she scratched Gaskins on the face and was able to get away.

During the argument, Gaskins told the

woman that if she left the room, she would kill her dog in the room with them.

Gaskins fled before police arrived.

While police and hotel security were talking to the woman, Gaskins returned and told the woman to get her stuff from the room because they were leaving.

Gaskins refused to talk to police. She was taken into custody on the assault charges, and police found a marijuana grinder in her jacket pocket.

Police went to the hotel room and checked the microwave and found a white Pomeranian dog inside.

The microwave was not turned on and the dog was unharmed, but the oven was too small for the dog to stand or turn around and there was limited ventilation inside.

Extremists launch attack on Kenyan hotel

Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya — Extremists launched a deadly attack on a luxury hotel in Kenya's capital Tuesday, sending people fleeing in panic as explosions and heavy gunfire reverberated through the complex. A witness said he saw five bodies at the hotel entrance alone.

Al-Shabab — the Somalia-based Islamic extremist group that carried out the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi that left 67 people dead — claimed responsibility.

"It is terrible. What I have seen is terrible," said a man who ran from the scene, Charles Njenga.

As night fell, gunfire continued more than two hours after the first shots were heard at the complex, which includes the DusitD2 hotel, along with bars, restaurants, banks and offices and is in a well-to-do neighborhood with large numbers of American, European and Indian expatriates.

It was not clear how many attackers took part.

"We are aware that armed criminals are

holing up in the hotel, and special forces are now currently flushing them out," said Kenya's national police chief, Joseph Boinnet, describing the assault as a suspected terrorist attack.

Boinnet gave no figures on the dead and wounded.

However, a Kenyan police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media said that bodies were seen in restaurants downstairs and in offices upstairs, but "there was no time to count the dead."

A witness who gave his name only as Ken said he saw five bodies at the entrance. He said that other people were shouting for help and "when we rushed back to try to rescue them, gunshots started coming from upstairs, and we had to duck because they were targeting us and we could see two guys shooting."

Kenyan hospitals appealed for blood donations even as the number of wounded remained unclear.

The violence appeared to fit the pattern of attacks al-Shabab often carries out in

Somalia's capital, with an explosion followed by a group of gunmen storming the place. Like the Westgate Mall attack, this one appeared aimed at wealthy Kenyans and foreigners living in the country.

The attack came a day after a magistrate ruled that three men must stand trial on charges they were involved in the Westgate Mall siege. A fourth suspect was freed for lack of evidence.

Tuesday's violence left blood and glass all over. Several vehicles burned, sending black smoke rising over the complex. People were rushed, some carried, from the scene. Some ducked behind cars, screaming, while others took cover behind fountains and other features at the lush complex.

Ambulances, security forces and firefighters converged along with a bomb-disposal unit, and vehicles were cordoned off for fear they contained explosives. Police said they blew up a car that had explosives inside. An unexploded grenade was also seen in a hallway at the complex.

Turkey plans to establish 'safe zone' in Syria

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Turkey's president said Tuesday that his troops will establish a 20-mile-wide "safe zone" in northern Syria, adding that Turkey would seek logistic and financial assistance from the United States and other allies to create the zone.

The announcement by Recep Tayyip Erdogan came as the United Nations' new special envoy for Syria arrived in Damascus, his first visit to the war-torn country since he took over in January.

Erdogan told his ruling party legislators in Parliament that the zone would keep

"terrorists out," protect civilians and stem the flow of refugees.

Erdogan and President Donald Trump discussed the issue in a telephone call late Monday that apparently aimed to ease tensions after the U.S. president tweeted a threat to Turkey warning of economic harm should Ankara attack U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria.

Ankara considers the Kurdish forces in Syria terrorists aligned with a Kurdish insurgency within Turkey's own borders.

Erdogan said the two leaders reached an "understanding of historical importance."

In Damascus, Geir Pedersen, the new U.N. special envoy for Syria, said he hopes

to have productive talks with Syrian officials. He spoke briefly to reporters upon his arrival at the Four Seasons hotel after driving from neighboring Lebanon. The veteran Norwegian diplomat took over from Staffan de Mistura, who stepped down for family reasons after four years and four months of peace efforts that led nowhere.

"I hope we will have very substantial and productive talks and look forward to talking to you more after my discussions," Pedersen said.

His office tweeted that he is looking forward to productive meetings in Damascus.

Wife charged in killing of Army soldier husband

Detroit Free Press

Authorities in West Michigan announced murder charges in the suspected love-triangle killing of an Army soldier.

Sgt. Tyrone Hassel III, 23, was fatally shot on New Year's Eve in St. Joseph Township.

His wife, Kemia, 22, was arraigned Monday on a charge of first-degree premeditated mur-

der while her boyfriend is in jail in Georgia awaiting extradition to Michigan to face the same charge, Berrien County Prosecutor Michael Sepic said. Both suspects are active-duty soldiers.

"The motive for the two to plot Sgt. Hassel's death may have been to continue their relationship and reap the Army's

death benefit from his murder," Sepic said.

The Hassels, who were stationed at Fort Stewart, Ga., were staying with their 1-year-old child at Tyrone Hassel III's father's house over the holidays during their leave. Sepic said the sergeant was killed after bringing his wife some food from a family party.

Sepic said authorities believe Kemia Hassel's boyfriend, Jeremy Cuellar, 24, who is also stationed at Fort Stewart, traveled to Chicago several days before the killing and then waited for instructions from his girlfriend before ambushing the victim.

The investigation included both local law enforcement and Army investigators.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cops: Woman drove drunk for 'lesson'

KY LEXINGTON — A Kentucky woman charged with drunken driving told police she did it “to teach her son a lesson.”

News outlets reported Sunita Jairam, 48, was arrested early Sunday on charges including endangering the welfare of a minor.

Her arrest citation says she told police she “drank a bunch of beer” and drove at 150 mph. It’s unclear what lesson she was trying to impart.

The son told police he tried to get out of the BMW subcompact several times, but the door was locked. News outlets didn’t list his age.

Police charge driver who crashed into jail

NJ HACKENSACK — Police said a 51-year-old South Hackensack man crashed into the administrative entrance of the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack on Friday afternoon.

The driver was hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries, and no one inside the jail was hurt.

Police said the area holding inmates was not affected.

The driver is facing charges of causing damage to the building, burglary and criminal mischief.

Boy loves his gift of a 3D printed arm

UT PRICE — A 3-year-old Utah boy and his mother are ecstatic about a new prosthetic arm that a family friend made for them on a 3D printer after extensive research, practice and more than 80 hours of printing.

Brandi Noyes, of Price, told

the Deseret News that prosthetic arms can cost up to \$12,000 even after insurance.

She found Ray Buckland, who owns a 3D printer. He usually uses it to create things like a spatula, an ice cream scooper and a handle for a broken can opener.

Buckland said everything else he’s done amounts to practice for the prosthesis project, which had a price tag of \$25 for supplies.

Event set to highlight plight of homeless

IL BLOOMINGTON — Residents of a central Illinois city can glimpse what it’s like for those whose only shelter is their car while raising money for a group that supports homeless people.

The third annual Night In A Car homelessness simulation will be held in February at Trinity Lutheran Church in Bloomington, The (Bloomington) Pantagraph reported.

The program, organized by Trinity Lutheran and Home Sweet Home Ministries — which provides services for the homeless — aims to highlight the difficulties faced by homeless people who sleep in their cars by having participants do the same for one night.

Former missile base to become a brewery

PA PITTSBURGH — A new brewery is set to launch in a Cold War-era missile command center near Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported Grist House Craft Brewery has set its sights on a structure known as “the bunker building” at the former Nike missile base.

It was one of several U.S. Army-operated bases using

anti-aircraft guns and Nike and Hercules missiles to defend Pittsburgh from Soviet attack in the 1950s and 1960s.

Boa constrictor found under hood of car

FL MIAMI GARDENS — A Florida man got a slithery shock when he popped open the hood of his car and found a boa constrictor resting on the engine.

Ernst Dimanche told WSVN he had just dropped his kids off at school Friday and came home to work on his Cadillac. He says he saw the snake and “just went crazy.”

The Miami Gardens man says he called animal control but they would charge \$300 to help and he couldn’t afford that. He says his neighbor, Demetri Giddings, offered to help.

Giddings pulled the snake out of the car using a hanger.

Couple to get award for giving scholarships

NY POUGKEEPSIE — A military veteran and a retired teacher have helped dozens of students in New York’s Hudson Valley attend college through a scholarship program.

Eddie and Norma Ramirez, of Poughkeepsie — the parents of two biological sons — say it feels like they have 142 kids.

Their Hudson Valley Latino Scholarship program recognizes eight to 10 students a year on average. The Ramirezes will receive the Journal’s 2019 Richard K. Wager Inclusive Champion Award on Jan. 25.

Tiny toad hitches a ride in sneaker

MD BALTIMORE — A Johns Hopkins Uni-

versity scientist hit the gym soon after returning from a trip to South Africa and discovered an unexpected workout partner: an endangered-species toad that stowed away in her sneaker.

Nancy Connell told The Baltimore Sun she recognized the tiny toad peering up at her from her locker as one of the toads that kept jumping into her boots in the Western Cape province. She said she kept checking her boots, but never thought to check her sneakers.

She named the toad Riley, after her recently deceased cat, and learned he was a member of South Africa’s western leopard toad species.

She found help at Baltimore County’s division of animal services. They’re now trying to find Riley a zoo home.

Chain changes fries name to ‘cosmik’

MI GRAND RAPIDS — A Michigan-based bar and restaurant chain says it’s changing the name of its “Crack Fries” to “Cosmik Fries” to distance itself from a word associated with the drug epidemic.

HopCat’s founder Mark Sellers told MLive.com that the new name is a nod to the song “Cosmik Debris” by Frank Zappa, one of his favorite artists.

BarFly Ventures CEO Mark Gray announced in a December post on HopCat’s website that the “Crack Fries” name was being scrapped but the recipe and ingredients of its seasoned fries would stay the same.

Gray has said HopCat picked the “Crack Fries” name more than a decade ago as a reference to the addictive quality of the fries and their cracked pepper seasoning.

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Nuggets match franchise-best start

Associated Press

DENVER — Nikola Jokic is happiest when he's simply dribbling the ball up the floor. Or so the Denver Nuggets big man has been told.

"My godfather," Jokic said, "is always telling me, 'You look so happy when you're dribbling. You don't even need to shoot or pass it. Just punt it into the stands.'"

Now that would be something new for Jokic. Or just keep doing what he's doing.

Led by Jokic's All-Star-level play, the Nuggets are out front in the Western Conference at the halfway mark of the season. They rode a 12-game home winning streak into their showdown Tuesday against Golden State — the team everyone figured would be leading the West.

"We're doing good right now," Jokic said.

At 29-13, the Nuggets are

tied for their best NBA start in franchise history with a 1976-77 squad that featured David Thompson and Dan Issel. This also marks the latest in a season the team has led the conference since March 16, 1977.

It's a tenuous lead, though, and just a half-game ahead of the Warriors (29-14), who've won four straight. The Nuggets beat Golden State 100-98 at home on Oct. 21 thanks to Juancho Hernangomez swatting away a shot at the buzzer.

Denver has been difficult to beat at the Pepsi Center, boasting a league-best 18-3 record. The team's play at home inspired coach Michael Malone to utter this retort directed at all the opposing fans showing up at the arena: "Take that 'L' on the way out." The phrase has now found its way onto T-shirts.

"For years, it was the altitude," Malone said of the

home-court advantage in the Mile High City. "What I like to think now is that it's not only the altitude, but you have a really talented team and great fan support where this building is rocking out every night. Our fans are a big part of that, getting loud, and getting into the game, and making it uncomfortable for opposing teams."

What truly makes teams uncomfortable is facing the multi-dimensional Jokic, who's averaging 19.7 points, 10.2 rebounds and 7.5 assists this season. He's having a season that just may earn him an All-Star appearance, which would be Denver's first since Carmelo Anthony in 2011.

"Jokic, he's the best passing big in the league," Los Angeles Clippers coach Doc Rivers recently said. "I don't know who would be in that category other than him."

The Serbian center certainly

stepped up this weekend. On Saturday, the Nuggets lost to a Phoenix Suns squad that's last in the West. Jokic sensed his team needed a boost against Portland on the second night of a back-to-back. He delivered with 40 points and 10 rebounds in a 116-113 win as the Nuggets improved to 6-0 in the Northwest Division.

"We were kind of loose. We were not focused," Jokic said. "I tried to take advantage and do whatever."

Jokic pairs nicely with point guard Jamal Murray to form a powerful tandem. It's proving difficult to contain, with Murray averaging 18.5 points and 4.9 assists.

"It's a lot of strain on our defense," Charlotte coach James Borrego said. "You have two guys who are capable playmakers, passers/scorers out there. ... This team has multiple ways of scoring."

Serena rolls in opening match of Australian Open

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — This was quite a return for Serena Williams. Almost as if she never left.

In her first match at the Australian Open since winning the 2017 title while pregnant — and her first official match anywhere since a loss in the chaotic U.S. Open final last September — Williams looked to be at her dominant best, overpowering Tatjana Maria 6-0, 6-2 in the first round Tuesday.

"I kind of like to jump in the deep end and swim," Williams said in an on-court interview after the 49-minute workout, "and see what happens."

She hadn't dipped her toe in Grand Slam waters since New York, where everything devolved after Williams was warned for getting coaching, then docked a point for breaking a racket and eventually docked a game for calling the chair umpire "a thief" during

the final.

When that match was mentioned by a reporter during Williams' news conference Tuesday, as part of a question about whether coaching should be allowed during matches at majors, she replied, "I, like, literally have no comment."

Truth be told, the match against Maria was not much of a test for Williams, who is pursuing an eighth title in Melbourne and 24th Slam singles trophy overall.

Williams needed all of 18 minutes to wrap up the first set, ceding just five of 29 points along the way.

The American, a former No. 1 who is seeded 16th on account of playing only 24 matches in 2018, never faced a single break point and compiled a 22-7 edge in winners.

Two years ago, no one knew Williams was carrying her child while winning her 23rd major. Her baby, Olympia, was born on Sept. 1, 2017, and Wil-

liams was off the tour until last March.

When she returned, she often was asked to rate herself in comparison to how good she played in the past.

"I don't want to give myself a ranking anymore. I think it gives me too much negative expectations. I always expect to reach the sky, and anything below it is not good enough for me," said Williams, who'll face Eugenie Bouchard next. "I don't know. I just know that I'm going in the right direction. I feel like I'm in the right direction. We'll see."

The tournament's two No. 1 seeds, Novak Djokovic and Simona Halep, played at night and both won — although in contrasting fashion. Djokovic eliminated Mitchell Krueger of the U.S. 6-3, 6-2, 6-2, while Halep trailed by a set and a break before coming back to beat Kaia Kanepi 6-7 (2), 6-4, 6-2 and avoid becoming the first top-seeded woman in 40

years to lose her opening match at the Australian Open.

It also would have been only the seventh time at any major tournament that the No. 1 woman departed so early. This sixth instance of that came in September at the previous Slam, when Halep was beaten by Kanepi on Day 1 at the U.S. Open.

Other seeded winners Tuesday included No. 4 Naomi Osaka, No. 7 Karolina Pliskova, No. 12 Elise Mertens, No. 13 Anastasija Sevastova, No. 17 Madison Keys and No. 18 Garbine Muguruza among the women, plus No. 4 Alexander Zverev, No. 8 Kei Nishikori, No. 11 Borna Coric and No. 12 Fabio Fognini among the men.

Williams' older sister, Venus, is unseeded at a major for the first time in five years and she was a game from a first-round exit before coming all the way back to eliminate 25th-seeded Mihaela Buzarnescu 6-7 (3), 7-6 (3), 6-2.

OU QB Murray declares for NFL Draft

Associated Press

Kyler Murray, the first-round Major League Baseball draft pick and Heisman Trophy-winning Oklahoma quarterback, declared himself eligible for the NFL Draft on Monday.

Murray announced his decision in a tweet, ending his brief and storied college career. What's next for Murray is not yet known.

The Oakland Athletics made the speedy outfielder the ninth overall selection last June and agreed to \$4.66 million signing bonus. The A's agreed to let him continue playing football, and he made the most of it by winning the Heisman in his only season as a starter for the Sooners. He passed for 4,361 yards and 42 touchdowns and ran for 1,001 yards and another 12 scores, posting the second-

best passer efficiency rating in FBS history.

As Murray dominated, his draft stock improved. Jim Callis, a senior writer on MLB.com, said the A's couldn't have foreseen Murray would be a potential first-round NFL Draft pick because of his size. Listed at 5-foot-10 and 195 pounds, Murray would be a small quarterback in the NFL by any standard.

"I don't think anybody was saying he could be an NFL first-round pick," Callis said.

Once the NFL emerged as a potential option for Murray, the A's took action. Representatives of the A's and Major League Baseball met Sunday with Murray, according to a person with direct knowledge of the session who spoke on condition of anonymity because the meeting was not made public.

The possibility existed Oak-

land could offer more money by putting him on the 40-man major league roster.

Even with the A's efforts, Murray would have a shot at a bigger payday sooner in football and he wouldn't have to go to the minor leagues.

Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley said in November that if anyone could play both sports, it's Murray.

"I don't want to put it past him," Riley said. "A lot of people would say he can't do what he's done right now — how well he performed for our baseball group here this spring, and how well he's played here for us. So there's certainly some different dynamics with it. Obviously the fact that he would want to play quarterback, if he chooses the football route, is a little different than Deion [Sanders] or Bo [Jackson] or some of those

guys. But he athletically is so gifted and can transition between the two."

The NFL scouting combine is in late February and early March and could intersect with his spring training — major league camp starts in mid-February and minor league camp begins in early March. If Murray wanted to participate in the combine, the A's would need to allow it and it would need to be reflected on his contract.

Murray's road to his NFL Draft choice was a winding one from his prep days in suburban Dallas. After a disappointing freshman season in football at Texas A&M in 2015, he transferred to Oklahoma. He sat out a year because of transfer rules, and then was the backup during Baker Mayfield's Heisman-winning 2017 season.

College basketball roundup

Battle scores 32 to help Syracuse knock off No. 1 Duke

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Tyus Battle scored a season-high 32 points, and Syracuse used its 2-3 zone defense to rattle No. 1 Duke in overtime as the Orange pulled off the upset, 95-91 on Monday night.

With swingman Cameron Reddish out with an illness and point guard Tre Jones suffering a shoulder injury roughly 5½ minutes in, Duke was down two starters and was a completely different team — and the Orange took full advantage.

Paschal Chukwu added 10 points and a career-high 18 rebounds while Elijah Hughes added 20 points, Frank Howard finished with 16 and Oshae Brissett had 14 for the Orange (12-5, 3-1 Atlantic Coast Conference).

Zion Williamson had a career-high 35 points and 10 rebounds, and his free throw with 16.2 seconds left in regulation tied it at 85 for Duke (14-2, 3-1), but he missed a second go-

ahead foul shot.

No. 7 Kansas 80, Texas 78: Lagerald Vick scored 21 points, Marcus Garrett added a career-high 20, and the host Jayhawks held on to beat the Longhorns when Jase Febres' three-pointer at the buzzer never came close.

Dedric Lawson added 17 points and eight rebounds for Kansas (15-2, 4-1 Big 12), which blew a 10-point second-half lead before escaping with its 10th straight win over Texas.

The game was tied at 73 when Lawson made a pair of foul shots. Texas big man Dylan Osetkowski was forced into a jump ball at the other end to give Kansas possession again, and Vick knocked down a three from the wing with 1:31 left in the game to give the Jayhawks a cushion.

Pittsburgh 75, No. 11 Florida State 62: Trey McGowens had 30 points and seven rebounds, Xavier Johnson scored 16 and the host Panthers pulled

away late for a win over the Seminoles.

McGowens, a freshman guard, attacked bigger, deeper Florida State relentlessly to help Pittsburgh (12-5, 2-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) end a 13-game losing streak against ranked teams. Pitt's previous victory over a team in the AP Top 25 came against Florida State on Feb. 18, 2017.

Trent Forrest scored 19 points for the Seminoles (13-4, 1-3).

No. 19 Maryland 64, Wisconsin 60: Anthony Cowan Jr. hit a pivotal three-pointer with 44 seconds left, and the host Terrapins edged the Badgers after blowing a 21-point lead in the second half.

Back in the AP Top 25 for the first time since early December, Maryland marked the occasion with a strange hot-and-cold performance against a perennial Big Ten contender before emerging with its sixth straight win.

The Terrapins (15-3, 6-1) led by 10 after eight minutes, and 38-17 with 17:47 remaining before Wisconsin (11-6, 3-3) roared back to take a 60-59 lead with 2:01 to go.

Nate Reuvers scored a career-high 18 for Wisconsin.

Nebraska 66, No. 25 Indiana 51: Glynn Watson Jr. scored 15 points, Isaac Copeland added 14 and James Palmer Jr. flirted with a triple-double to help the visiting Cornhuskers upset the Hoosiers.

Nebraska (13-4, 3-3 Big Ten) has won two straight overall and three straight in the series. The Cornhuskers never trailed.

Romeo Langford had 18 points and Juwan Morgan finished with 17 on a miserable shooting night for Indiana (12-5, 3-3), which has lost three in a row. The Hoosiers' 10-game home winning streak also ended.

And Nebraska never really gave Indiana a chance after scoring the first nine points.

NBA roundup

Harden's 57 points help Rockets roll

Associated Press

HOUSTON — After scoring a season-high 57 points in Houston's win over the Memphis Grizzlies on Monday night, James Harden was asked how he was able to put Sunday's loss to Orlando, when he went 1-for-17 from three-point range, behind him so quickly.

"I went 1-for-17? That's a lot of threes missed," he deadpanned. "Oh, wow!"

Then the reigning MVP, who scored 38 points against the Magic despite that terrible statistic, got serious when asked if it's easy to forget about such a night.

"Yeah, because if I make six of them it's on," he said. "It's a 60-point game. So Orlando got lucky last night."

Harden extended his streak of 30-point games to 17 by half-time, pouring in a franchise-record 36 points in the first half to send Houston on its way to a 112-94 victory. It's the longest such streak since Wilt Chamberlain had 20 straight games of at least 30 points in 1964.

It's the franchise-record 14th time Harden has scored 40 this season and the eighth time in his last 11 games. It's the third time he's topped 50 points this season and the 12th time in his career. He surpassed his previous season best of 54 against Washington and fell just shy of the career-high and club-record 60 points he scored last January against Orlando.

Houston teammate Austin Rivers, who joined the Rockets just three weeks ago, marveled at Harden's ability to not let Sunday's struggles spill over into Monday's performance.

"He comes off a game where he was 1-for-17 and everybody's saying whatever and it just doesn't even faze him. He just comes in tonight like he was 17-for-17," Rivers said. "That's just the mindset that the great ones have. I'm telling you right now, if another player went 1-for-17 they would have come in tonight a little ... messed up. James comes in and that's just why he is who he is and it's impressive."

Hornets 108, Spurs 93: Kemba Walker scored 33 points and Tony Parker enjoyed a triumphant return to his former hometown as Charlotte snapped San Antonio's seven-game home winning streak.

Parker had eight points, four assists and three rebounds in his first game back in San Antonio after signing with the Hornets during the offseason.

Nets 109, Celtics 102: D'Angelo Russell scored 18 of his 34 points in the third quarter and Brooklyn ended a 10-game losing streak to Boston.

The Nets handed the Celtics a winless three-game road trip.

With Kyrie Irving nursing a bruised right quadriceps, the Nets broke open the game with a 15-0 run in the third and outscored the Celtics 44-21 in the period.

Pelicans 121, Clippers 117: Anthony Davis had 46 points and 16 rebounds, Julius Randle added 27 points and New Orleans defeated Los Angeles for just its second road win this season against a Western Con-

ference team.

Davis and Randle combined to score 24 of their team's 28 points in the third quarter, when the Pelicans stretched their lead to 20.

Jazz 100, Pistons 94: Donovan Mitchell scored 28 points and Rudy Gobert tied a career high with 25 rebounds to propel host Utah past Detroit.

Kyle Korver had 19 points, including five three-pointers, to help the Jazz win for the sixth time in seven games. Gobert finished with 18 points and two blocks. Mitchell has poured in at least 26 points in six consecutive games, the best such stretch of his career.

Kings 115, Trail Blazers 107: De'Aaron Fox scored 16 points and made a key three-pointer with 1:30 remaining as host Sacramento beat Portland.

Fox also had nine assists, Buddy Hield scored 19 points and Marvin Bagley III added 13 points and 11 rebounds. The Kings have won three straight and four of five.

NHL roundup

van Riemsdyk scores hat trick as Flyers wallop Wild

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — James van Riemsdyk recorded a hat trick, and Nolan Patrick had two goals and two assists to lead the Philadelphia Flyers to a 7-4 victory over the Minnesota Wild on Monday night.

Wayne Simmonds also had two goals for the Flyers. Carter Hart had 34 saves.

It was just the second win in the last 11 games for Philadelphia, which began Monday with the fewest points in the league.

Jason Zucker, Marcus Foligno, Joel Eriksson Ek and Ryan Suter scored for Minnesota.

The Wild dropped to 0-5-1

against Metropolitan Division teams.

Avalanche 6, Maple Leafs 3: Carl Soderberg had his first career hat trick and visiting Colorado topped Toronto.

Gabriel Landeskog, Mikko Rantanen and Matt Calvert also scored for Colorado, which had lost nine of its last 10 games overall (1-7-2), and seven straight in regulation on the road. The Avs' Semyon Varlamov stopped 17 shots.

Canadiens 3, Bruins 2 (OT): Jeff Petry scored 15 seconds into overtime, batting the puck out of the air and past Tuukka Rask to lead visiting Montreal to a win over Boston.

Carey Price stopped 41 shots for the Canadiens. Paul Byron scored a short-handed goal, and Brendan Gallagher also scored to help Montreal earn its third victory in four tries.

Devils 8, Blackhawks 5: Kyle Palmieri and Blake Coleman each scored twice, and host New Jersey had its biggest offensive game of the season in beating Chicago.

Travis Zajac, Sami Vatanen, Kevin Rooney and Brett Seney also scored as the Devils won consecutive games for only the third time since opening the season with four straight wins.

Blues 4, Capitals 1: Vince Dunn scored his first goal since

October, David Perron extended his point streak and visiting St. Louis scored three goals in a five-minute span to beat Washington for its first three-game winning streak of the season.

Dunn banked the puck in on a double deflection for his first goal in 33 games and assisted on Perron's goal with a no-look backhanded pass. Ivan Barbashev and Vladimir Tarasenko also scored.

Oilers 7, Sabres 2: Milan Lucic and Zack Kassian each scored a pair of goals as host Edmonton routed Buffalo.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl also scored for the Oilers.