

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Rockets fall near US troops in Iraq

By CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

IRBIL, Iraq — Several rockets struck areas in Baghdad and an air base used by American troops Saturday, the Iraqi government said.

Five civilians were reported injured in the capital's Jadriya neighborhood. No casualties were reported at two other impact sites, Grand Celebrations Square in the Green Zone, and Balad Air Base, about 55 miles north of Baghdad.

The attacks came hours after the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq bolstered security at bases and suspended training with government security forces in the wake of a deadly strike that killed Iran's Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leaders, a military official said.

"Our command places protection of U.S. forces, as well as our allies and security partners in the coalition as the top priority," a coalition military official said on condition of anonymity. "We remain vigilant and resolute."

Just before 8 p.m. Saturday, Army Maj. Charlie Dietz, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition's Task Force Iraq, tweeted that the U.S. Embassy, in the capital's heavily-fortified international zone, had not been struck. About an hour later, he tweeted that "all clear" had been sounded at Union III, a base inside the zone that houses coalition troops.

Initial reports from Balad indicated there were no casualties, said a coalition military official, who was not authorized to speak and asked not to be

named. The strike at Celebrations Square left no one hurt, reported regional news site Al Arabiya, which posted photos of cars damaged by the blast in the Green Zone. But the incident in the Jadriya neighborhood wounded at least five civilians, the outlet said.

Some 5,000 American troops are deployed to Iraq to help its forces battle Islamic State. More than 3,000 U.S. civilian contractors were also taking part in the mission in Iraq and Syria, the latest U.S. Central Command figures from October show.

The U.S.-led coalition also includes a few thousand troops from NATO allies and others working to build up the Iraqi forces.

"NATO's mission is continuing, but training activities are currently suspended," acting NATO spokesman Dylan White said in a statement Saturday.

The alliance is closely monitoring the situation, White said, and is in regular contact with U.S. officials.

The increased defensive measures come as The Associated Press reported that thousands of mourners chanting "America is the Great Satan" marched in a funeral procession through Baghdad on Saturday for Soleimani, commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, and Iran-backed Iraqi militia fighters killed in a U.S. airstrike early Friday.

Stars and Stripes reporters John Vandiver in Stuttgart, Germany, and Nancy Montgomery in Vicenza, Italy, contributed to this report.

## US warns of retaliatory cyberattacks from Iran

*Associated Press*

BOSTON — Iran's retaliation for the United States' targeted killing of its top general is likely to include cyberattacks, security experts warned Friday. Iran's state-backed hackers are already among the world's most aggressive and could inject malware that triggers major disruptions to the U.S. public and private sector.

Potential targets include manufacturing facilities, oil and gas plants and transit systems. A top U.S. cybersecurity official is warning businesses and government agencies to be extra vigilant.

In 2012 and 2013, in response to U.S. sanctions, Iranian state-backed hackers carried out a series of disruptive denial-of-service attacks that knocked offline the websites of major U.S. banks including Bank of America as well as the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ. Two years later, they wiped servers at the Sands Casino in Las Vegas, crippling hotel and gambling operations.

The destructive attacks on U.S. targets ebbed when Tehran reached a nuclear deal with the Obama administration in 2015. The killing early Friday in Iraq of Quds Force commander Gen. Qassam Soleimani — long after Trump scrapped the nuclear deal — completely alters the equation.

"Our concern is essentially that things are going to go back to the way they were before the agreement," said John Hultquist, director of intelligence analysis at the cybersecurity firm FireEye. "There are opportunities for them to cause real disruption and destruction."

Iran has been doing a lot of probing of critical U.S. indus-

trial systems in recent years — trying to gain access — but has limited its destructive attacks to targets in the Middle East, experts say.

It's not known whether Iranian cyberagents have planted destructive payloads in U.S. infrastructure that could now be triggered.

"It's certainly possible," Hultquist said. "But we haven't actually seen it."

Robert M. Lee, chief executive of Dragos Inc., which specializes in industrial control system security, said Iranian hackers have been very aggressive in trying to gain access to utilities, factories, and oil and gas facilities. That doesn't mean they've succeeded, however. In one case in 2013 where they did break into the control system of a U.S. dam — garnering significant media attention — Lee said they probably didn't know the compromised target was a small flood control structure 20 miles north of New York City.

Iran has been increasing its cyber capabilities but is not in the same league as China or Russia. State-backed Russian hackers have proven most adept at sabotaging critical infrastructure, witnessed in attacks on Ukraine's power grid and elections, experts agree.

And while the U.S. power grid is among the most secure and resilient in the world, plenty of private companies and local governments haven't made adequate investments in cybersecurity and are highly vulnerable, experts say.

"My worst-case scenario is a municipality or a cooperative-type attack where power is lost to a city or a couple of neighborhoods," Lee said.

# Iraqis mourn death of Iranian general

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Thousands of mourners chanting “America is the Great Satan” marched in a funeral procession Saturday through Baghdad for Iran’s top general and Iraqi militant leaders, who were killed in a U.S. airstrike.

Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s elite Quds force and mastermind of its regional security strategy, was killed in an airstrike early Friday near the Iraqi capital’s international airport. The attack has caused regional tensions to soar.

Iran has vowed harsh retaliation, raising fears of an all-out war. U.S. President Donald Trump says he ordered the strike to prevent a conflict. His administration says Soleimani was plotting a series of attacks that endangered American troops and officials, without providing evidence.

Soleimani was the architect of Iran’s regional policy of mobilizing militias across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, including in the war against the Islamic State. He was also blamed for attacks on U.S. troops and

**‘I don’t think there will be a war, but we must get his revenge.’**

**Hojjat Sanieefar**  
Iraqi

American allies going back to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The mourners, mostly men in black military fatigues, carried Iraqi flags and the flags of Iran-backed militias that are fiercely loyal to Soleimani. They were also mourning Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a senior Iraqi militia commander who was killed in the same strike.

The mourners, many of them in tears, chanted: “No, No, America,” and “Death to America, death to Israel.” Mohammed Fadl, a mourner dressed in black, said the funeral is an expression of loyalty to the slain leaders. “It is a painful strike, but it will not shake us,” he said.

Two helicopters hovered over the procession, which was attended by Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and leaders of Iran-backed militias. The procession later made its way to

the Shiite holy city of Karbala, in central Iraq.

The gates to Baghdad’s Green Zone, which houses government offices and foreign embassies, including the U.S. Embassy, were closed.

Iraq, which is closely allied with both Washington and Tehran, condemned the airstrike that killed Soleimani and called it an attack on its national sovereignty. Parliament is to meet for an emergency session on Sunday, and the government has come under mounting pressure to expel the 5,200 American troops based in the country, who are there to help prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State.

The U.S. has ordered all citizens to leave Iraq and closed its embassy in Baghdad, where Iran-backed militiamen and their supporters staged two days of protests earlier this

week in which they breached the compound.

No one was hurt in the embassy protests, which came in response to U.S. airstrikes that killed 25 Iran-backed militiamen in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. said the strikes were in response to a rocket attack that killed a U.S. contractor in northern Iraq, which Washington blamed on the militias.

On Saturday, billboards appeared on major streets in Iran showing Soleimani and carrying the warning from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that “harsh revenge” awaits the U.S.

On the streets of Tehran, many said they mourned Soleimani and some demanded revenge.

“I don’t think there will be a war, but we must get his revenge,” said Hojjat Sanieefar. America “can’t hit and run anymore,” he added.

A man, who only identified himself as Amir, was worried.

“If there is a war, I am 100% sure it will not be to our betterment. The situation will certainly get worse,” he said.

## US avoided strike on Soleimani for years, feared risk

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In 2007, U.S. commandos watched as a convoy carrying a powerful Iranian military leader made its way to northern Iraq.

It was a prime opportunity to take out Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who had been accused of aiding Shiite forces that killed thousands of American troops in Iraq. But ultimately, military leaders passed on a strike, deferring to deep concerns about the potential fallout of such a provocative attack.

“To avoid a firefight, and the contentious politics that would follow, I decided that we should monitor the caravan, not strike immediately,” retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal wrote last year in Foreign Policy.

Fears about the repercussions and reverberations of a targeted killing of Soleimani

persisted throughout the administrations of President George W. Bush, a Republican, and President Barack Obama, a Democrat, according to officials who served under both. Soleimani, they calculated, was just as dangerous dead and martyred as he was alive and plotting against Americans.

That approach came to an end this week when President Donald Trump authorized an airstrike against Soleimani. He was killed after his plane landed at the Baghdad airport.

Trump heralded the attack on Twitter, declaring that Soleimani “should have been taken out many years ago!”

But some former administration officials argued that despite Soleimani’s role in orchestrating deadly attacks on U.S. troops, Trump’s decision may ultimately put Americans in the region at heightened

risk.

“Previous presidents have had the opportunity to take measures like what we saw last night but have held back because of the risks entailed and the questions that were there about where this would all lead,” said Derek Chollet, an assistant secretary of defense during the Obama administration. “Unfortunately, those questions are not any clearer today.”

Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark Milley said officials were well aware of the prospect of retaliation but believed “the risk of inaction exceeded the risk of action.” He cited “compelling, clear, unambiguous intelligence indicating that Soleimani was planning a significant campaign of violence against the U.S. in the coming days, weeks, months.” He would not provide any specifics on the intelligence.



# Congress at impasse over impeachment

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress opened the new year with the Senate deadlocked over President Donald Trump's impeachment trial, leaving the proceedings deeply in flux as Republicans refuse to bend to Democratic demands for new witnesses.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell showed no signs Friday of negotiating with the Democrats as he aims for Trump's swift acquittal. At the same time, the Republican leader acknowledged the Senate cannot begin the historic undertaking until House Speaker Nancy Pelosi delivers the articles of impeachment — which she is refusing to do until he provides details on the trial's scope. Neither seems willing to budge.

"Their turn is over," McConnell said about the Democratic-led House. "It's the Senate's turn now to render sober judgment as the framers intended."

Pelosi responded that Mc-

Connell's stance "made clear that he will feebly comply with President Trump's cover-up of his abuses of power and be an accomplice to that cover-up."

The House and Senate gavelled in for brief sessions Friday with the sudden crisis in the Middle East, prompted by U.S. airstrikes in Iraq that killed a top Iranian general, only adding to the uncertainty about how lawmakers will proceed with the impeachment trial, only the third in U.S. history.

Trump was impeached last month by the House on charges that he abused power and obstructed Congress in his dealings with Ukraine. Trump withheld nearly \$400 million in military aid for Ukraine, an Eastern European ally that depends on U.S. support to counter Russia, after asking President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to publicly announce an investigation into Trump rival Joe Biden. The aid was ultimately released after Congress objected.

Democrats believe their de-

mands for witnesses are bolstered by new reports about Trump's decision to withhold the aid and unease among some GOP senators over the situation.

"The American people deserve the truth," Pelosi said in a statement. "Every Senator now faces a choice: to be loyal to the President or the Constitution."

McConnell has said the trial should start, and then senators can decide the scope. Acquittal seems likely in the Senate because Republicans hold a 53-47 seat majority, and it takes two thirds of the Senate to convict. But McConnell's leverage is limited during the trial. Either side needs to reach just a 51-vote threshold to call witnesses or seek documents, which could politically test some senators.

The witnesses that Senate Democrats want to call refused to testify in the House proceedings under orders from the White House. They are Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton, acting chief of staff Mick Mul-

vaney and two other officials who were directly involved with Trump's decision to withhold the military assistance for Ukraine. Republicans, in turn, could try to hear from Biden or his son, Hunter Biden, who worked for an energy company in Ukraine while his father was vice president.

McConnell showed no signs of deviating from his opening stance. He defended his earlier remarks in which he said he would not be an "impartial juror" in the trial and stuck with his plan to follow the process used during Bill Clinton's impeachment, in which the trial was convened and then votes were taken to decide if additional witnesses were needed.

The GOP leader suggested the Senate will carry on with its other business while it waits for the House to act.

"We can't hold a trial without the articles," McConnell said. "So for now, we are content to continue the ordinary business of the Senate while House Democrats continue to flounder."

## President Trump energizes evangelicals in Miami

Associated Press

MIAMI — Highlighting his record on religious liberty, President Donald Trump on Friday worked to energize a group of evangelical supporters who make up an influential piece of his political base that could prove vital in battleground states.

Trump spoke to more than 5,000 Christians, including a large group of Latinos, at a Miami megachurch, just days after he was the subject of a scathing editorial in Christianity Today magazine that called for his removal from office. Thousands of the faithful lifted their hands and prayed over Trump as he began speaking and portrayed himself as a defender of faith.

"We're defending religion

itself. A society without religion cannot prosper. A nation without faith can not endure," said Trump, who also tried to paint his Democratic rivals for the 2020 election as threats to religious liberty. "We can't let one of our radical left friends come in here because everything we've done will be gone in short order."

"The day I was sworn in, the federal government war's on religion came to an abrupt end," Trump declared. He later added: "We can smile because we're winning by so much."

Although some of his address resembled his standard campaign speech, Trump cited his support for Israel, installation of federal judges, prison reform and a push to put prayer in public school. Those are issues his

Republican reelection campaign believes could further jolt evangelical turnout that could help them secure wins in states like Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Georgia.

Advisers believe that emphasizing religious issues may also provide inroads with Latino voters, who have largely steered clear of supporting the president over issues like immigration. Deep into his speech, Trump touched on the issue by praising his border wall. His aides believe even a slight uptick with faith-focused Latinos could help Trump carry Florida again and provide some needed breathing room in states like Texas.

The president made no mention of the editorial, which ran

in a magazine founded by the late Rev. Billy Graham.

"Remember who you are and whom you serve," the editorial states. "Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior. Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump's immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency."

Campaign officials said the Miami event was in the works well before the op-ed, and they trotted out a number of high-profile evangelical pastors to defend the president.

"I think his record in the past three years is rock-solid in things that the faith community cares about," said Jentezen Franklin, a pastor at a megachurch in Georgia.

# Methodists propose split in LGBTQ impasse

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — United Methodist Church leaders from around the world and across ideological divides unveiled a plan Friday for a new conservative denomination that would split from the church in an attempt to resolve a decades-long dispute over gay marriage and gay clergy.

The proposal, called “A Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation,” envisions an amicable separation in which conservative churches forming a new denomination would retain their assets. The new denomination also would receive \$25 million.

The proposal was signed in December by a 16-member panel, who worked with a mediator and began meeting in October. The panel was formed after it became clear the impasse over LGBTQ issues was irreconcilable. The next step could come at the church’s General Conference in May.

Methodist Bishop Karen Oliveto, the

denomination’s first openly gay bishop, said the United Methodist Church leadership “was clearly at a point in which we couldn’t agree to disagree” over same-sex relationships. “I’m actually really sad that we couldn’t build a bridge that could have provided a witness to the world of what unity amid diversity and disagreement could look like.”

Oliveto was challenged by the denomination’s highest court, the Judicial Council, in 2017 when it declared that the bishop’s consecration “was incompatible with church law.”

However, Oliveto was allowed to remain as the resident bishop of the Mountain Sky Conference, which includes United Methodist churches in Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and a section of Idaho. Asked what a post-separation world looks like for the church to move forward, Oliveto said, “We are no longer using LGBTQ people as scapegoats.”

Members of the 13-million-person de-

nomination have been at odds for years over the issue, with members in the United States leading the call for full inclusion for LGBTQ people.

The rift widened last year when delegates meeting in St. Louis voted 438-384 for a proposal called the Traditional Plan, which affirmed bans on LGBTQ-inclusive practices. A majority of U.S.-based delegates opposed that plan but were outvoted by U.S. conservatives teamed with delegates from Methodist strongholds in Africa and the Philippines.

Methodists in favor of allowing gay clergy and gay marriage vowed to continue fighting. Meanwhile, the Wesleyan Covenant Association, representing traditional Methodist practice, had already been preparing for a possible separation.

Concern over the future of the church pushed members, led by Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone, to convene a group to share ideas across the theological spectrum.

## Risk intensifies in Australian wildfire crisis

Associated Press

SYDNEY — A father and son who were battling flames for two days are the latest victims of the worst wildfire season in Australian history, and the path of destruction widened in at least three states Saturday due to strong winds and high temperatures.

The death toll in the wildfire crisis is now up to 23 people, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said after calling up about 3,000 reservists to battle the escalating fires, which are expected to be particularly fierce throughout the weekend.

“We are facing another extremely difficult next 24 hours,” Morrison said at a televised news conference. “In recent times,

particularly over the course of the balance of this week, we have seen this disaster escalate to an entirely new level.”

Dick Lang, a 78-year-old acclaimed bush pilot and outback safari operator, and his 43-year-old son, Clayton, were identified by Australian authorities after their bodies were found Saturday on a highway on Kangaroo Island. Their family said their losses left them “heartbroken and reeling from this double tragedy.”

Lang, known as “Desert Dick,” led tours for travelers throughout Australia and other countries. “He loved the bush, he loved adventure and he loved Kangaroo Island,” his family said.

Clayton Lang, one of Dick’s four sons,

was a renowned plastic surgeon who specialized in hand surgery.

The fire danger increased as temperatures rose Saturday to record levels across Australia, surpassing 109 degrees Fahrenheit in Canberra, the capital, and reaching a record-high 120 F in Penrith, in Sydney’s western suburbs.

Video and images shared on social media showed blood red skies taking over Malla-coota, a coastal town in Victoria where as many as 4,000 residents and tourists were forced to shelter on beaches as the navy tried to evacuate as many people as possible. By Saturday evening, 3,600 firefighters were battling blazes across New South Wales state.

## ‘Affluenza teen’ to be released from jail in Texas

Associated Press

DALLAS — A man who became known as the “affluenza teen” for his unusual defense at a 2013 manslaughter trial was set to be released from a Fort Worth, Texas, jail after prosecutors raised questions Friday about a drug test that triggered an alleged probation violation.

Ethan Couch, 22, avoided prison following his initial conviction for killing four people while driving drunk. He was instead

sentenced to 10 years of probation after a trial in which a psychologist testified that Couch — 16 at the time of the crash — was affected by “affluenza,” or irresponsibility caused by family wealth.

Couch was arrested Thursday after probation officers reported that a drug monitoring patch he wears returned a “weak positive” result for THC, the psychoactive substance found in marijuana, District Attorney Sharen Wilson said in a statement.

But it is possible the patch was set off by legal CBD oil and it will take further testing to be sure, she said.

Couch’s lawyers said they are optimistic the tests will verify he did not use a prohibited substance.

“Ethan is committed to his sobriety and to remaining compliant with all of the terms and conditions imposed by the court,” attorneys Scott Brown and Reagan Wynn said in a statement.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Cars get trapped in giant tumbleweeds

**WA** WEST RICHLAND — Some people spent part of their New Year's Eve trapped on a Washington state highway after tumbleweeds blocked their route, authorities said.

YakTriNews reported that the Washington State Patrol announced via Twitter that State Route 240 was closed in both directions near West Richland.

Trooper Sarah Clasen told KAPP-KVEW that vehicles were trapped in a pile of tumbleweeds that stood up to 15 feet tall.

## Amazon delivery driver steals UPS package

**PA** WILKES-BARRE — An Amazon delivery driver stole a package that was delivered earlier by UPS at a Pennsylvania home, police said.

A woman in Wilkes-Barre reported a package being stolen from her home.

Surveillance footage showed a UPS driver dropping off a package at the house. Later that afternoon, an Amazon driver dropped off two packages and took the UPS package as he was leaving.

## Man cut another with samurai sword in fight

**ME** MILLINOCKET — A Maine man who police said cut another man's arm with a samurai sword during a fight was charged with aggravated assault and possession of a dangerous weapon.

Jeremy Rideout, 35, of Millinocket, turned himself in, police said.

Police were called to a high school parking lot in Millinock-

et where they found the injured man.

## Man crashes after live streaming and driving

**CT** GROTON — A man who was live streaming while driving over 100 mph crashed his car in Connecticut, according to state police.

Connecticut State Police posted the driver's video of the crash.

Kenneth Hofler, 23, of Middletown, was using his phone to record himself driving over the Gold Star Memorial Bridge, officials said.

Hofler's video shows him filming the road ahead of him and his speedometer before losing control on the off-ramp and dropping his phone.

## Family found illegally staying in cabin

**TN** MILLINGTON — Authorities in Tennessee discovered two adults and two young children illegally staying in a state park cabin, sheriff's officials confirmed.

Park rangers at Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park went to the cabin over the weekend to prepare it for a renter's upcoming stay, the Shelby County Sheriff's Office told WMC-TV. But rangers instead found recently slept-in beds and clothes strewn about the cabin that was supposed to be unoccupied, news outlets reported.

Rangers later found Shawn and Leah Hyde there, as well as a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old.

## Drunk driver says GPS led him onto railroad

**FL** WEST PALM BEACH — A Florida man facing a DUI charge told police officers he drove onto an unused

portion of train track and was sideswiped by a passing commuter train while following GPS directions.

Luis Daniel Lopez Rojas, 19, escaped injury, and West Palm Beach police officers found him asleep behind the wheel, an arrest report said.

After police woke him up, they said he denied being on the tracks, then told officers he had been following GPS directions, the report said.

## 48-year-old elephant euthanized at zoo

**CA** SAN DIEGO — Tembo, a 48-year-old elephant, was euthanized at the San Diego Zoo after a sudden change in her health following longtime treatment for age-related ailments, the zoo announced.

The female African bush elephant died Dec. 29.

Tembo had lived at the zoo since 1983. Before that she was privately owned and had been an animal actor, the zoo said.

"On Saturday, animal care staff noted a sudden change in Tembo's condition, including behaviors that indicated severe discomfort," the zoo tweeted.

## Man offers \$10K for return of stolen dog

**SC** NORTH CHARLESTON — A South Carolina man is offering \$10,000 for the safe return of his dog after someone stole his truck with the pet inside.

The dog named Bella was inside Ben Brengle's truck when it was stolen last week from outside a home improvement store in North Charleston, news outlets reported.

It was cold and rainy that Sunday before Christmas, so Brengle left the 2-year-old yellow Labrador mix in the truck

with the engine running, he said.

By the time he returned minutes later, Bella and his white Chevy Silverado were gone, he said.

He's set up social media accounts in the hopes of spreading the message.

## Man who killed dog said he's Jesus Christ

**MD** OCEAN CITY — A Maryland man has been sentenced to more than five months in jail for killing his dog. Police said the man had claimed he was Jesus Christ and had sent the canine to heaven.

The Daily Times reported Tuesday that Joseph Cryer pleaded guilty in late December to aggravated animal cruelty. The Ocean City man had already served 104 days in jail before he received his sentence.

Police said they came to his house after a woman heard screaming from Cryer's home. Police said an officer noticed a significant amount of blood and that Cryer told the officer that he was Jesus Christ.

## Ice crashed through windshield, hurt driver

**MA** BURLINGTON — A man was seriously injured on Thursday when ice on a commercial truck apparently dislodged and went crashing through the windshield of the pickup truck he was driving, Massachusetts State Police said.

A woman, two children and the driver of the pickup went to the hospital.

A trooper stopped a commercial truck thought to be responsible for the injuries.

From wire reports

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# Eagles' Wentz ready for playoff debut

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Carson Wentz was forced to watch from the sideline as Nick Foles became a local legend, leading the Philadelphia Eagles to the franchise's first Super Bowl title two years ago.

Wentz was a spectator again last season when Foles rallied the Eagles to three straight wins, an unlikely playoff berth and a wild-card victory.

It's Wentz's time now.

Wentz avoided injuries while seemingly everyone around him went down, set franchise passing records and led the Eagles (9-7) to four consecutive wins down the stretch and their second NFC East title in three seasons.

He'll make his first career playoff start Sunday when the Eagles host the Seattle Seahawks (11-5).

"I'm grateful to be healthy and be in this moment with these guys, to be on the field," Wentz said. "I'm just excited for the challenge. I've been on the sidelines the last few years for these games, so I'm pretty pumped for the opportunity."

Wentz started all 16 games for the second time in his four seasons. He set single-season team records with 4,039 yards passing and 388 completions.

Wentz became the first quarterback in NFL history to throw for 4,000 yards without a single wide receiver reaching 500. Tight end Zach Ertz led the team with 916.

The Eagles lost starting receivers DeSean Jackson, Alshon Jeffery and Nelson

Agholor, released Mack Hollins, signed and released Jordan Matthews and finished with five players off the practice squad making valuable contributions at the skill positions.

The constant was Wentz, who silenced most critics with his clutch performance in must-win games. The Eagles had to win their last four games to secure a playoff berth. Wentz led them to consecutive comeback victories to start the winning streak and completed 67.6% of his passes for 1,199 yards, seven TDs and no interceptions in those four games.

"I think he's grown up as a leader of this team," coach Doug Pederson said. "He's really just put the team on his back and said, 'Hey, follow me,' and I think that's a sign of growth and a sign of maturity. I spent eight years in Green Bay with Brett Favre, and that's what Brett did. Brett just put the team on his back when the chips were against us, and he said, 'Hey, follow me,' and that's what Carson can do."

"The guys really and I have so much faith and trust in him that I can call almost any play and he's either going to make that one work or he's going to get us into a better play, and so he's really grown up that way and really matured that way in this league and just really turned into a pro."

Wentz, the No. 2 overall pick in 2016, had a breakout sophomore season when he finished third in NFL MVP voting. He led the Eagles to an 11-2 record and set a franchise record with 33 touchdown passes that season, including his final one after he tore

two ligaments in his knee.

He missed the rest of the season while Foles stepped in and led the Eagles to a 41-33 victory over New England in the Super Bowl, earning MVP honors.

Foles got a statue outside the stadium and will forever be revered in the city. His popularity only grew last season when he went 4-1 in December and January.

But Wentz is the franchise quarterback, and Foles went off to Jacksonville. Wentz got a huge contract extension in the off-season and heard plenty of criticism from doubters throughout the season.

He played his worst game in a 17-9 loss to Seattle in Philadelphia on Nov. 24. He threw two picks and lost two fumbles in that one.

That can't happen this time around.

"Everyone kind of feels the sense of urgency, but I don't think anyone presses or feels they need to do anything different," Wentz said. "We know what we have to do. Offensively, we know we've got to take care of the football, we have to stay on the field, we have to put some points up on the board, and we're excited for the challenge."

Though this will be Wentz's first playoff game, the last four games had similar pressure because one loss would've knocked the Eagles out of contention.

"I don't want to add any more stress or pressure on him," Pederson said. "Just the game itself, it's a one-and-done mentality, and I want him to play free and not have to worry about things in the past that are out of our control."

## RBs Cook, Kamara could play pivotal roles

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The Dalvin and Alvin show is coming to the Superdome.

And the stakes are a lot higher than the last time they shared the stage as NFL debutants three seasons ago.

Vikings running back Dalvin Cook and Saints rusher Alvin Kamara look primed to play pivotal roles when New Orleans (13-3) hosts Minnesota (10-6) on Sunday in the wild-card round of the NFC playoffs.

They are two of the most dynamic running backs in the league capable of breaking off big gains as runners or receivers.

Saints coach Sean Payton said Cook, who is returning from a

shoulder injury that sidelined him the last two weeks of the season, has a "substantial" influence on Minnesota's offense.

"He has extremely good balance. He's a strong runner and has outstanding speed," Payton said. "You watch countless 15- to 25-yard gains by him and that's hard to do."

Vikings coach Mike Zimmer sounds as if he could be talking about Cook when he is in fact discussing the challenge Kamara presents to Minnesota's defense.

"He's extremely shifty in the way he runs, but he's a physical runner as well," Zimmer said. "Catches the ball out of the backfield, runs good routes... He can go the distance at any

time."

Cook had the better debut, gashing the Saints for 127 yards rushing in a 29-19 Vikings win to open the 2017 season.

But while Cook's rookie campaign was ended prematurely by a major knee injury, Kamara blossomed into the offensive rookie of the year, with 1,554 yards and 13 TDs from scrimmage in 2017.

This season was Kamara's least productive because of knee and ankle ailments that sidelined him for a couple of games. But Kamara increasingly has regained form, rushing for four touchdowns in the past two weeks.

Kamara also is a playoff veteran, having played four post-

season games.

Cook is making his playoff debut after fulfilling the promise he showed before tearing up his knee in October of 2017. In 14 games this season, he gained 1,135 yards and scored 13 TDs rushing while catching 53 passes for 519 yards.

Cook said he feels "refreshed" and that the Vikings' relative good health puts them in position to compete with a Saints squad that tied for the top record in the NFC but missed out on a bye in a three-way tiebreaker with San Francisco and Green Bay.



## Briefly

## Ohio tops Nevada in Potato Bowl

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Ohio quarterback Nathan Rourke is projected to be the top quarterback taken in the Canadian Football League draft this spring. He's pretty good at the American version of football, too.

Rourke, from Oakville, Ontario, accounted for 231 yards of offense and ran for a touchdown to help Ohio beat Nevada 30-21 on Friday in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl.

Ohio (7-6) rebounded from a 1-3 start for its fifth straight winning season under coach Frank Solich.

Nevada (7-6), which dismissed defensive coordinator Jeff Casteel and two other defensive position coaches at the end of the regular season, struggled to slow Ohio's high-powered offense.

Rourke, who finished with 144 yards passing and 87 yards rushing along with one touchdown, garnered MVP honors.

## Mississippi State fires coach after 2 seasons

Mississippi State fired Joe Moorhead after two seasons Friday, making the unusual decision to dismiss a coach after a bowl game.

The Bulldogs went 14-12 under Moorhead, who was previously the offensive coordinator at Penn State. He was hired after the 2017 season when Dan Mullen left Mississippi State for Florida.

This season, Mississippi State (6-7) made it to the postseason with a one-point victory against rival Mississippi in the regular-season finale. The Bulldogs then lost 38-28 to Louisville in the Music City Bowl.

Moorhead was fired despite being just the second Mississippi State coach to reach bowl games in each of his first two seasons, matching a feat that Jackie Sherrill accomplished in 1991-92.

## Harden leads Rockets over 76ers

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Houston Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni is convinced James Harden operates on a different level than most players, especially after his latest dazzling performance.

Harden had 44 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists to lead the Rockets to a 118-108 win over the Philadelphia 76ers on Friday night.

"He just understands the game, sees it and knows where he wants them," D'Antoni said. "They stay out, he throws a lob. They come in, he throws that. He's got that little runner, his threes are all over the place. I mean, he's really good. He's one of the best ever."

On a "Flashback Friday" night in which the Rockets wore their retro ketchup-and-mustard uniforms from their back-to-back NBA title days in the mid-'90s, Harden sported

a retro look of his own, with a white headband and cornrows.

With Philadelphia threatening late, Harden knocked down a deep step-back three-pointer over Josh Richardson with 1:17 left in the game that put Houston up 10. On the next possession, he found Clint Capela with an alley-oop for a thunderous dunk.

Harden's triple-double was his first of the season and 43rd of his career, tying Fat Lever for eighth-most in NBA history.

Capela was a point shy of his career high in scoring, finishing with a season-best 30 points and 14 rebounds.

"You never feel comfortable," 76ers coach Brett Brown said. "He dribbles two feet over half-court and you still don't feel like you're close enough. Then, you try to get close and he's strong enough and good enough to go by you, and then, Capela gets

behind your head for the lobs. The package is lethal. They're hard to beat."

The 76ers have lost four straight, their longest skid since dropping five in a row in Dec. 2017.

Ben Simmons led Philadelphia with 29 points, 13 rebounds, 11 assists and four blocks, which matched a career-high. It was his 25th career triple-double and third this season. Tobias Harris scored 24 points.

"We can never let the highs get too high or the lows get too low," Simmons said. "We've got to get better."

After missing Philadelphia's 115-97 loss with a sore left knee on Tuesday, Joel Embiid added 20 points and 12 rebounds.

The Rockets improved to 13-4 at home this season and have won their last four games at the Toyota Center.

## NBA roundup

## Lakers top Pelicans, win fourth straight

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Anthony Davis scored 46 points against his former team, Danny Green added 25 and Los Angeles rolled to a 123-113 win over New Orleans.

It was Davis' second straight 40-point game against the team he played seven seasons for after he was the top overall pick in 2012. He also had 13 rebounds for his 16th double-double of the season.

LeBron James had 17 points and 15 assists for the Lakers, who have won four straight after a season-high, four-game skid.

Former Lakers Lonzo Ball and Brandon Ingram led New Orleans in their return to Staples Center. Ball scored a team-high 23 points and Ingram added 22 as the Pelicans had their four-game winning streak snapped.

**Magic 105, Heat 85:** Terrence Ross scored 25 points, Nikola Vucevic had 20 points and 11 rebounds and host Orlando shut down Miami down the stretch.

Miami scored only six points in the fourth quarter, going 3-for-19 from the field. Jimmy Butler had 23 points and 10 rebounds for the Heat.

One day after holding the Toronto Raptors to 6-of-42 shooting from three-point range in a victory in Miami, the Heat shot 7-for-37 from long range and 37.5% overall.

**Celtics 109, Hawks 106:** Jaylen Brown had 24 points and 10 rebounds as Boston overcome an 18-point, first-quarter deficit against visiting Atlanta.

Marcus Smart started in place of the flu-ridden Kemba Walker and scored 15 points, adding nine assists and hitting a three-pointer that gave Boston a four-point lead with 43 seconds left.

Trae Young scored 28 points with 10 assists for the Hawks. They beat Orlando on Monday to snap a 10-game losing streak.

**Trail Blazers 122, Wizards 103:** Damian Lillard scored 35 points and CJ McCollum added 24 in Portland's victory over host Washington.

Hassan Whiteside added 23 points, 21 rebounds and five blocks to help Portland snap a five-game losing streak.

Jordan McRae scored a season-high 35 points, for Washington.

**Suns 120, Knicks 112:** Devin Booker scored 38 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 29 and Phoenix rallied in the fourth quarter to beat visiting New York.

Phoenix won for the third time in four games. Aron Baynes added 20 points and 12 rebounds, and Deandre Ayton had 15 points and 13 rebounds.

Booker scored at least 30 points for the fifth straight game, the longest streak of his career and tying a franchise high.

# Wisconsin rallies over Ohio State

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Nate Reuver's jumper finally wrested the lead away from Ohio State with 1:54 left in the game, and the Wisconsin forward hit four free throws in the last 14 seconds to seal a road upset of the No. 5 Buckeyes.

Reuvers scored 17 points and keyed the late rally in a 61-57 victory Friday night in front of a sellout crowd that opened the grueling Big Ten stretch for both teams.

"I think we've just gotten a lot better since November," Reuvers said. "As coach (Greg) Gard has said, we've matured a lot more. You can especially see that in the defensive end of the floor. I think we did a really good job hitting the offensive glass, too. That was huge, especially down the stretch."

Ohio State (11-3, 1-2) lost a second consecutive game. The Buckeyes got a terrific performance from Kaleb Wesson, who had 22 points and 13 rebounds. But Wesson missed a three-pointer with 19 seconds left that would have tied the score at 57. After that, Ohio State had to start fouling.

"We were looking for the best shot and my teammates found me," Wesson said of the critical miss. "We thought that was our best shot of that possession."

Both teams started slowly and struggled from the field throughout. Wisconsin missed its first five shots and finished at 38% from the field. Ohio State shot 40%.

Wisconsin led by four at halftime of a sloppy, slow game, but Ohio State ripped off back-to-back three-pointers early in the second half to start a 13-2 run. Wisconsin tied it at 47 with 6:51 to play but wouldn't grab the lead until Reuvers took charge late.

Kobe King, who added 13 points for Wisconsin (9-5, 2-1), said his team would not have been able to stay with Ohio State a month ago in a one- or two-possession game.

"They're one of the best teams in the country, and we watched their games," King said. "They came out 7-0 and another run at halftime, and just knowing we could fight back and claw back and make it more of a dogfight rather than let them get into rhythm."

Ohio State became the second top-5 team in the AP Top 25 to lose this week after No. 4 Oregon fell at Colorado on Thursday night.

# Ex-Stars coach calls firing 'appropriate,' enters rehab

Associated Press

DALLAS — Former Dallas Stars coach Jim Montgomery said Friday his abrupt dismissal by the NHL club was "appropriate" and he has entered alcohol rehab.

Montgomery made his first public comment since he was fired Dec. 10 for unspecified unprofessional conduct. He said the firing was "a wake-up call."

"It was also the appropriate call," Montgomery said. "I let the team's front office, staff and players down."

"More importantly, I let my wife and my family down. The team's decision to end my role forced me to look into the mirror and decide whether I wanted to continue living a damaging lifestyle or get help. I decided to get help."

Montgomery said he entered a rehab facility Friday, adding he "turned to professionals in the field of alcohol abuse for their guidance and counseling. It has been an overwhelming and a very humbling experience knowing that I am not alone."

General manager Jim Nill wouldn't get

into specifics when he announced the firing of the third coach he has hired since taking over in April 2013.

"We are supportive of this decision by Jim and we hope that by pursuing this help, he and his family will be stronger for it," Nill said in a statement issued by the team. "Out of respect for him and his family, we will not be commenting on this situation further."

Montgomery, 50, was in his second season with Dallas after making the rare jump from college coaching at the University of Denver. The Stars made the second round of the playoffs with their rookie coach, losing in seven games in the second round to eventual champion St. Louis.

Montgomery had two years left on his contract at \$1.6 million per season.

The Stars were 17-11-3 when Montgomery was fired, having recovered from a dismal 1-7-1 start by going 14-1-1. They have since gone 7-3-1 under interim coach Rick Bowness and are in third place in the Central Division.

## NHL roundup

# Samsonov, Caps hold off 'Canes

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Ilya Samsonov isn't playing like a rookie. He isn't playing like a backup, either.

Samsonov made 18 of his 38 saves in the first period as the Washington Capitals edged the Carolina Hurricanes 4-3 on Friday night.

"We allowed them to get the momentum, and he was really, really sharp, definitely the difference-maker tonight," Washington coach Todd Reirden said.

Evgeny Kuznetsov and Lars Eller each had a goal and an assist for the Capitals, who had dropped two in a row.

Washington led 4-1 early in the third period before Carolina rallied on power-play goals by Teuvo Teravainen and Ryan Dzingel. Samsonov stopped Warren Foegele late in the game to preserve the victory.

Jordan Staal also scored for Carolina (24-15-2).

"It seems like every time we play them that is pretty much how the games go, pretty tight, lots of scoring chances," Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "But

... we just didn't find a way to pull it out."

The NHL-leading Capitals (28-9-5) had dropped their past four games against the Hurricanes dating to Games 6 and 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals last season.

After Carolina beat the Capitals 6-4 on Dec. 28, Foegele confirmed the series had developed into a rivalry, saying: "We don't like them. They don't like us."

Samsonov helped Washington break through against the Hurricanes. He is the Capitals' No. 2 goaltender behind Braden Holtby, who is an NHL All-Star for the fifth consecutive season.

Samsonov entered as the first goalie in NHL history to open his career with wins in his first seven road games in the same season. He is 11-2-1 overall.

"Both of our goalies play unbelievable hockey," Kuznetsov said.

**Stars 4, Red Wings 1:** Joe Pavelski had a goal and an assist as host Dallas earned its fourth straight come-from-behind win.

Pavelski was honored before the game for playing in his 1,000th NHL game last month, and then showed why he has lasted so long in the league.