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Taliban leader's death stalls talks

BY ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL
AND SLOBODAN LEKIC

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban confirmed on Thursday that their founder and leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, had died, as Pakistan canceled a new round of peace talks between the Afghan government and the insurgents due to “uncertainty” caused by the death.

Also on Thursday, a Taliban commander said the group's ruling body had elected Mullah Akhtar Mansoor to replace Mullah Omar, who was reported to have died in Pakistan in 2013. Mansoor, who served as Mullah Omar's deputy, was governor of Kandahar province and a cabinet minister before the 2001 U.S.-led invasion that ousted the Taliban regime.

“The leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the family of Mullah Mohammad Omar ... announce that the founder and the leader of Islamic Emirate ... has passed away because of the sickness he suffered,” said a statement posted on the Taliban website. The Taliban refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The next round of negotiations between

the insurgents and the Afghan government was scheduled to be held Friday in Murree, a hill resort near the Pakistani capital of Islamabad that hosted the first formal talks between the warring sides on July 7.

The cancellation cast doubt on the future of the nascent peace process, which a statement attributed to Mullah Omar had indirectly endorsed after the initial meeting.

“In view of the reports regarding the death of Mullah Omar and the resulting uncertainty, and at the request of the Afghan Taliban leadership, the second round of the Afghan peace talks, which was scheduled to be held in Pakistan on 31 July 2015, is being postponed,” the Pakistani government said in a statement. It expressed hope that the Taliban leadership would remain engaged in efforts to negotiate a peaceful end to the 14-year war.

The Taliban initially denied that Mullah Omar, who hasn't been seen in public since U.S.-backed coalition forces defeated the Taliban in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, was dead.

But on Thursday, a Taliban commander in southern Afghanistan said the movement's leadership, the Shura, had already appointed Mullah Omar's deputy to

replace him.

“It is a big loss, (Mullah Omar) was the spiritual leader for (the Taliban),” said the commander, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “But we are not going to stop; we will follow his path while we are alive.”

The Associated Press reported that the seven-member Shura also named Sirajuddin Haqqani, a Pashtun warlord, as the movement's new deputy leader. Sirajuddin Haqqani is the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose faction was considered the toughest wing of the Taliban.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has made the peace process and an end to the war with the Taliban a top priority since he assumed office in late September.

The first round of talks this month was preceded by a series of unofficial meetings involving Afghan government and civil society figures and representatives of the guerrilla movement that were held in Doha, Qatar; Oslo, Norway; and Urumqi, China.

In addition to the Pakistani hosts, diplomats from the U.S. and China attended the first round as observers. They were also scheduled to participate in the talks on Friday, Pakistani officials said.

Despite the negotiations, fighting between the Taliban and government

troops has escalated significantly since the start of the fighting season in April. The guerrillas have managed to overrun a handful of district centers but have been chased out of most of these by government reinforcements.

On Wednesday, the guerrillas captured the district center of Now Zad in southern Helmand province, the insurgents and government officials said. Hashim Alkozai, a member of the upper house of Afghanistan's parliament from Helmand, said the district center fell on Wednesday afternoon.

“We have occupied it,” Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi said in a telephone interview. He said the attackers killed 39 members of the security forces during the 24-hour assault. The Taliban often exaggerate casualty figures.

The region surrounding Now Zad, located about 280 miles southwest of Kabul, has been a hotbed of Taliban activity throughout the war. Helmand was a focus of President Barack Obama's troop surge in 2009 and 2010.

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Navy gets mileage out of guided-missile subs – while it can

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS Michigan and three others like it can pack more conventional missile firepower than any other submarines — and in about a decade, they're probably going away.

Guided-missile submarines like the Michigan can also stay at sea longer and deploy larger groups of Navy SEALs than the service's more plentiful fast-attack subs.

For all their advantages, Navy officials acknowledge they are luxury items in a fiscal environment that doesn't support building replacements.

As the Navy's submarine fleet shrinks over the next 13 years due to the retirement of its Cold War-era subs, it will look toward less expensive technology to offset the loss of boats such as the Michigan, service officials told Stars and Stripes.

However, as long as the Navy has its guided-missile subs, they are getting plenty of use.

The USS Michigan had been on deployment for 21 months when it pulled in to Yokosuka Naval Base for a port visit earlier this month.

“My operational commander would like us to be at sea every minute that I can be,” said Capt. Joe Turk, the Michigan's Blue Crew commanding officer. “The only thing that limits sustainability is food.”

The Michigan's separate Blue and Gold crews typically fly from Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, Wash., to Guam every four months or so, where they swap out command of the boat.

Beginning its mission

The Michigan entered service as one of the Navy's 18 Ohio-class nuclear trident missile submarines, known colloquially as “boomers.”

When the Navy cut the number of nuclear-missile subs to 14, it converted four of them to carry up to 154 Tomahawk missiles.

The four submarines began global deployments during the past decade. In 2011, the USS Florida took part in a guided-missile submarine's largest-scale conventional combat operation when it fired 90 Tomahawks in the effort to defeat former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's forces.

When a guided-missile submarine isn't firing Tomahawks, it functions much more like a smaller fast-attack submarine, though it retains the typically higher-ranking captain and crew structure of a boomer.

Comparing subs

Both the guided-missile subs and fast-attacks conduct surveillance, train to fight ships and other subs, and conduct special operations.

Guided-missile subs have multiple

lockout chambers to deploy SEALs and their vehicles underwater. They also have an extra 200 feet of length and a little more width than fast-attack subs, meaning special operators have more room to get comfortable, said Capt. Brian Humm, commodore of Submarine Squadron 19.

“[Special operations] is physically intensive — they work hard,” Humm said. “It'd be nice if they had own racks, it's nice that they have tons of gear to work out with and ... larger facilities.”

Budgetary restraints

However, those are amenities that aren't likely to last into the long term.

The current 30-year Navy shipbuilding plan calls for guided-missile subs to be decommissioned between 2025 and 2027.

By October 2028, the total number of attack and guided-missile subs would drop to 41, down from 57 today, before climbing back to 48 boats in 2036.

As those numbers drop, the Navy will also ask Congress to fund an Ohio-class replacement in order to preserve what the Pentagon considers the most survivable leg of its nuclear deterrent.

It will cost the Navy \$96 billion to acquire the 12 ballistic missile submarines slated to replace the 14 Ohio-class subs carrying nuclear payloads, according to a 2015 General Accountability Office estimate.

At that price, no one has pushed hard to build four more as guided-missile

subs. Instead, many in the Navy and Congress are backing an addition that would add more armament to the latest class of fast-attack subs.

The Virginia Payload Module would lengthen the midsection of Virginia-class subs and allow them to carry 76 percent more torpedoes and Tomahawks. The addition would increase cost of the \$2.8 billion subs by 13 percent, according to a Congressional Research Service report in June.

That doesn't include the Tomahawks, themselves, which cost about \$1 million each, depending on what cost factors are included.

Seamless transition

For now, multiple sailors aboard the USS Michigan said they were happy to serve aboard a boat that combines fast-attack missions with Ohio-class dimensions.

There are a few more systems aboard a guided-missile sub than on a fast-attack version; however, most of what gets learned to earn “dolphins” — the distinctive pin worn by a submarine-qualified sailor — transfers seamlessly to any of the Navy's boats, said Chief of the Boat Jason Puckett, of Columbus, Ohio.

“The basics of being a submariner are the same, no matter the platform,” Puckett said.

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Marines en route to Ukraine detained

BY MICHAEL S. DARNELL
Stars and Stripes

Nine U.S. Marines en route to Ukraine for a training exercise were held up in Vienna for questioning last week because their weapons had not been properly declared, an Austrian newspaper reported.

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. David Westover, a EUCOM spokesperson, said the Marines were traveling by commercial air from Alaska to Ukraine to participate in the Saber Guardian exercise.

"They were stopped while traveling on NATO travel or-

ders through Vienna," Westover said in a statement. The Austrian newspaper Kurier reported on its website Wednesday that the Marines were carrying weapons without the necessary clearance.

"Because there were problems with their onward flight in Schwechat (Vienna airport), they had to rebook and therefore leave the transit area," Col. Michael Bauer, a Defense Ministry spokesman told the Kurier.

The ensuing security search of their luggage revealed M16 assault rifles and pistols, Kurier reported, which had not

been declared or registered. The weapons were seized, and the Marines were taken for questioning, Kurier reported. Authorities contacted the U.S. Embassy.

Westover said the troops were in possession of their "assigned military equipment."

"By unintentional oversight, the necessary clearances required for transiting Austria were not properly processed prior to their departure," Westover said.

Although a member of the European Union, neutral Austria does not belong to NATO.

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New rate: Command sr. chief

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy has established a command senior chief rate designed to give senior enlisted personnel additional leadership experience, the Navy announced.

The new rating "strengthens the command leadership triad and provides our very best senior chiefs increased responsibilities in this rating while enabling greater levels of experience as they advance through the ranks," Fleet Master Chief April Beldo, fleet master chief for Manpower, Personnel, Training and Education, was quoted as saying in a Navy news release.

The new rating also creates a specific career path to command master chief, a Navy personnel spokesman said, and is expected to help stabilize manning and to reduce manning gaps for senior enlisted leaders in the fleet.

Like command master chiefs, command senior chiefs are to be the senior enlisted advisors at their commands. One of their major duties is ensuring the personal and professional wellbeing of enlisted personnel and advising their commanding officers of matters involving the enlisted force.

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Plane debris to be sent to France for inspection

The Associated Press

PARIS — A wing part that washed up on an island in the western Indian Ocean might be the first trace of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 since it vanished nearly a year and a half ago, and provide a solid clue to one of aviation's most perplexing and expensive mysteries.

Malaysia's prime minister said Thursday the debris found on the French island of Reunion will be sent to Toulouse, France.

"We have had many false alarms before, but for the sake of the families who have lost loved ones, and suffered such heartbreaking uncertainty, I pray that we will find out the truth so that they may have closure and peace," Najib Razak

said on his personal blog.

He promised to make any new information public quickly.

Air safety investigators — one of them a Boeing investigator — identified the component as a "flaperon" from the trailing edge of a Boeing 777 wing, a U.S. official said. Flight 370, which disappeared March 8, 2014, with 239 people on board, is the only 777 known to be missing.

"It's the first real evidence that there is a possibility that a part of the aircraft may have been found," said Australian Transport Minister Warren Truss, whose country is leading the search for the plane. "It's too early to make that judgment, but clearly we are treating this as a major lead."

Flight 370 had been traveling

from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, but investigators believe, based on satellite data, that the plane turned south into the Indian Ocean after vanishing from radar. If the wing part is from the Malaysian plane, it would bolster that theory.

Investigators have found a number on the part, but it is not a serial or registration number, Truss said. It could be a maintenance number, which might help investigators figure out what plane it belongs to, he said.

It could help investigators figure out how the plane crashed, but if it will help pinpoint the rest of the wreckage is unclear, given the complexity of the currents in the Indian Ocean and the time that has elapsed since it disappeared.

UVa grads sue Rolling Stone over retracted rape story

The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Three University of Virginia graduates and members of a fraternity who were portrayed in a debunked account of a gang rape in a retracted Rolling Stone magazine story filed a lawsuit against the publication and the article's author,

court records show.

The three men, George Elias IV, Stephen Hadford and Ross Fowler, filed suit Wednesday in U.S. District Court in New York. They are also suing Rolling Stone's publisher, Wenner Media. A lawyer for the men said they suffered "vicious and hurtful attacks" because of inaccuracies in the November

2014 article, which was written by journalist Sabrina Rubin Erdely.

Also on Wednesday, The New York Times reported that Will Dana, Rolling Stone's managing editor, will be leaving the magazine next month.

When asked whether Dana's departure was linked to the retracted story, a spokeswoman

for the magazine's publisher, Jann Wenner, said that "many factors go into a decision like this," according to the report.

In the lawsuit, the three 2013 graduates said the article "created a simple and direct way to match the alleged attackers" from the alleged gang rape to them based on details provided in the story.

Luck still ranks atop 2012 QB class

The Associated Press

MIAMI — The pontificating and prognosticating that have always swirled around the quarterback class of 2012 can transform even a punter into a pundit.

Take comparisons between Andrew Luck and Ryan Tannehill, two of the five current starting QBs drafted in 2012. This spring, Tannehill became the first of the group to sign a contract extension, and punter Pat McAfee was quick to suggest his Colts teammate was worth a lot more.

"Today's market showed that a 25-25 record gets you 96 million American dollars," McAfee tweeted. "Andrew's about to own a team I think."

Tannehill is actually 23-25 with the Dolphins. McAfee made a typo in his rush to offer an opinion on how the quarterbacks of 2012 stack up, an ongoing debate that began even before that year's draft.

They've collectively thrown more than 6,600 passes in three seasons. Luck is the best so far. Seattle's Russell Wilson has exceeded expectations, Robert Griffin III has fallen short of them. Tannehill has made slow, steady progress.

Griffin and Nick Foles carry the biggest question marks into 2015.

"By and large, it's pretty much as advertised," said longtime NFL power broker Bill Polian, a 2015 NFL Hall of Fame inductee.

"You've got two guys who have per-

formed awfully well, two where you could say the grade is incomplete, and one, Tannehill, who keeps getting better," Polian continued. "That's about the way the draft typically goes."

Polian wants to see a larger body of work before drawing final conclusions. But it's safe to say the Colts feel good about their much-scrutinized decision to take Luck over 2011 Heisman Trophy winner Griffin with the top overall pick. Peyton Manning won one Super Bowl in Indianapolis, and his successor is so talented the Colts talk of multiple titles with Luck.

"Since my first day in this building that has been the goal — to win the Super Bowl, and try to win another," Luck said. "Obviously it's a lot easier said than done, but that's what we work for."

Luck has started all 48 games, advancing Indy one step deeper in the playoffs each year. In 2014 he set a Colts single-season record with 4,761 yards passing and had 40 touchdown passes. Now he's surrounded by the most talented offensive cast of his career.

"Thus far Andrew is everything that everybody thought he would be," Polian said. "And the sky's the limit."

Unlike Luck, Griffin's career has been a roller-coaster in danger of derailing. Taken second overall, he was 2012 NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year as Washington won the NFC East, but he's since battled injuries and been benched by two coaches.

It's unclear how much the athletic, free-

styling Griffin will stay in the pocket this season.

"You have got to be true to who you are," he said in June. "Right now I'm a 25-year-old young man who can do a lot of different things, so I'm not going to limit myself to just being a dropback passer."

The same issue inspired doubts about Wilson. He's answered detractors by staying healthy and winning a lot — 36-12 in the regular season and 1-1 in the Super Bowl.

Wilson has the best passer rating (98.6) and touchdown-interception ratio (72-26) among the 2012 QBs. He has also benefited from the best supporting cast, but it's clear Wilson was a steal with the 75th overall pick.

"He gives us such a dynamic approach to the quarterback position," coach Pete Carroll said. "He's a perfect fit for us."

While the Dolphins have locked up Tannehill, Wilson is in the final year of his rookie contract, making \$1.5 million with no guarantee beyond this season.

Foles was a third-round afterthought, too, taken 88th by the Eagles. In 2013 his 27-2 touchdown-interception ratio set an NFL record, his passer rating of 119.2 was third highest in league history, and Philadelphia won the NFC East a year after going 4-12.

He backslid last year, throwing 10 interceptions in eight games before breaking a collarbone. An offseason trade sent Foles to the Rams, who haven't had a winning record since 2003.

"That's the ultimate factor in judging quarterbacks — winning games," Tannehill said. "We're here to win. That's what we get paid to do."

And Tannehill has fallen short. Wilson won a Super Bowl, and Luck, Griffin and Foles won division titles, but Tannehill has yet to oversee a winning season, plagued by poor protection and enduring 139 sacks, by far the most in the NFL in that span. He has showed admirable durability, starting every game since being drafted eighth overall, and last year set a franchise record for completions while throwing for 4,045 yards and 27 touchdowns.

The Dolphins rewarded Tannehill with a \$96 million, six-year deal through 2020, making him their first franchise quarterback since Dan Marino.

"They put their money where their mouth is," Tannehill said.

The Colts, meanwhile, exercised the fifth-year option on Luck, who will make \$7 million this year. Team owner Jim Irsay has repeatedly promised to lock up Luck before he hits free agency after the 2016 season, and knows it will be costly.

Which gets back to the point raised by McAfee: If Tannehill is worth \$96 million, what is Luck worth?

"That's a good question," Polian said with a laugh. "Frankly, I don't know the answer. We're going to have to find out next year, I would guess."

Peterson glad to be in pads

The Associated Press

MANKATO, Minn. — Adrian Peterson burst through the line of scrimmage and veered toward the sideline as he headed up the field.

Safety Robert Blanton had the Minnesota Vikings running back in his sights and eased off the throttle as he went in to "thud" Peterson, looking to deliver a cordial bump during the team's first training camp practice with players in pads. To Blanton's surprise, Peterson lowered his shoulder and delivered a jolt to the fourth-year defensive back.

Most veterans dread the early days of camp and the first few hits that open the door to six months filled with jarring blows, aches and pains.

Not Peterson. He hadn't felt the pop of the pads for more than 10 months, an exile brought on by child abuse allegations against him. With the case settled, his punishment over, his contract situation resolved and fans welcoming him back to the field, Peterson couldn't help but be a little eager to finally get back to the business of football.

"I've been looking forward to it for a long time," said Peterson, who missed the final 15 games of last season. "It was good to get the first day down. I feel comfortable. I didn't feel sluggish or weighed down because of the pads. I felt pretty good."

Vikings owner Mark Wilf said he was only too happy to see Peterson back on

the field with a smile on his face after so much drama surrounding the team and its star player.

"Obviously he's a unique talent and a good person," Wilf said. "We're happy he's here playing for us. We can't wait for the season to get going here."

There were times in the offseason that it appeared like Peterson could be parting ways with the only NFL franchise for which he has played. A perceived lack of support from some in the organization, and the criticism that was heaped upon him by many fans and media when the allegations first surfaced, had Peterson thinking that it was time to move on.

But he was still under contract and the Vikings refused to entertain the idea of trading a player they think can resume his role as the focal point of the offense, even as he passes the 30-year-old milestone that has spelled the beginning of the end for so many running backs before him.

As a show of faith, the Vikings also restructured Peterson's contract to guarantee him \$7 million next season in case of injury. It was the last in a series of efforts by the organization to smooth things over heading into a season with high expectations.

"He's had a long history here with the Vikings and the community," Wilf said. "We know what kind of person he is. That's all in the rearview mirror as far as some of that stuff goes and we're looking forward to him being a big part of our team going forward."

Court moves Brady's lawsuit to New York

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Tom Brady's lawsuit against the NFL in which he wants his four-game suspension overturned will be heard in New York instead of Minnesota.

Brady and the players' union filed their suit Wednesday in Minnesota. But the NFL already had filed papers Tuesday in New York, moments after announcing that Commissioner Roger Goodell upheld the suspension for Brady's involvement in the use of underinflated footballs in the AFC championship game.

U.S. District Court Judge Richard Kyle, based in Minnesota, ordered the transfer.

The judge wrote that he "sees little reason for this action to have been commenced in Minnesota at all." He noted that Brady plays in Massachusetts, the union is headquartered in Washington and the NFL in New York, Kyle added that "the arbitration proceedings took place in New York and the award was issued in New York."

Jeffrey Kessler, the lead attorney for Brady and the union, wasn't concerned about this game of musical witness chairs.

"The court decided the case should be heard in New York because the NFL filed

first there," he told The Associated Press in an email Thursday. "We are happy in any federal court, which unlike the arbitration before Goodell provides a neutral forum, and will now seek our injunction in the New York court."

In a footnote, Kyle said the court "strongly suspects the union filed in Minnesota because it has obtained favorable rulings from this court in the past on behalf of its members."

Kessler had said the lawsuit should be heard in Minnesota because it was related to a case involving Adrian Peterson's suspension last season. Kyle countered that the union made "only a fleeting attempt" to link the Brady case to Peterson's.

Kyle reasoned that the union's argument would mean, for example, any court that had heard a racial discrimination case against a large corporation would then hear every other racial discrimination case against that company.

"Venue simply cannot be predicated on such a thin reed," he said.

The union asked the court to throw out the suspension before Sept. 4. That would keep Brady from missing any practices before the Patriots' Sept. 10 season opener against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Brady is allowed to participate in all training camp and preseason activities.



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Sources: Phils deal Hamels to Rangers for prospects

The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — After years of trade speculation, Cole Hamels' time in Philadelphia is ending.

Two people familiar with the deal say the Phillies have agreed to trade the ace left-hander to the Texas Rangers for a package of prospects.

Both people spoke to The Associated Press late Wednesday night on condition of anonymity because the trade had not been finalized. Hamels has a limited no-trade clause but does not have to approve a deal to the Rangers.

Hamels would become the first pitcher in major league history traded during a season immediately after throwing a no-hitter — he no-hit the Chicago Cubs on Saturday at Wrigley Field.

"He's definitely a great pitcher," Rangers first baseman Mitch Moreland said after Texas beat the New York Yankees 5-2 Wednesday. "Obviously watched the no-hitter the other day, pretty impressive. He's got a long track record of great success. It will be huge for us."

The 2008 World Series MVP was an integral part of the greatest run in franchise history when the Phillies won five straight NL East titles, two pennants and one World Series from 2007-11.

"He's been here a long time, but that's baseball," Phillies catcher Carlos Ruiz said following an 8-2 loss at Toronto. "Definitely it's sad when you're around one of your teammates for a long time and then they have to go away."

The rebuilding Phillies, a big league-worst 38-64, traded All-Star closer Jonathan Papelbon to Washington on Tuesday. Both players made it clear they wanted to play for contenders.

Texas is seven games behind AL West-leading Houston and four games behind Minnesota for the AL's second wild-card spot.

There was thought the Phillies might wait to move Hamels in the offseason after recently hired executive Andy MacPhail officially replaces Pat Gillick, but general manager Ruben Amaro Jr. pulled the trigger with MacPhail's input.

Hamels was 114-90 with a 3.30 ERA in 10 seasons in Philadelphia. He went 7-4 with

a 3.09 ERA in 13 postseason starts and also earned MVP honors in the '08 NLCS.

Hamels has three years remaining in a \$144 million, six-year contract, a deal that includes a club option for 2019. He's owed \$22.5 million per year through 2018 with a club option for 2019 at \$20 million or a \$6 million buyout. His option becomes guaranteed at \$24 million if he throws 400 innings or more in 2017-18, including at least 200 in 2018, and isn't on the disabled list at the end of 2018 with a left shoulder or elbow injury.

More Phillies could be on the move before Friday's deadline to trade players without first securing waivers. Outfielders Jeff Francoeur and Ben Revere and righty Aaron Harang could help teams in the pennant race.

Philadelphia would like to deal 2006 NL MVP Ryan Howard but his contract makes it difficult. He's owed \$25 million this year and next, and the team has a \$23 million option for 2017 with a \$10 million buyout.

Howard, Ruiz and Chase Utley are the only remaining players from Philadelphia's 2008 championship team.

Ohio State suspends four for opener

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Ohio State has suspended All-America defensive end Joey Bosa, receiver Corey Smith and H-backs Jalin Marshall and Dontre Wilson for its opening game at Virginia Tech.

In a statement released about an hour before Big Ten media days began Thursday, the Buckeyes said the players violated department of athletics policy.

The defending national champions open the season Labor Day night in Blacksburg, Va., against the only team to beat them last season.

Bosa had 13½ sacks as a sophomore and enters his junior year as one of the top NFL prospects in college football.

Marshall was second on the team in receptions as a freshman with 38 and was also the team's best punt returner.

Wilson and Smith combined for 41 catches for 555 yards.

Ohio State brings back most of its key players from last year's team, which bounced back from a September loss to the Hokies in Columbus to win the first College Football Playoff. Bosa might be the best of the Buckeyes. He had 21 tackles for loss last season, including a game-ending sack in overtime against Penn State.

Marshall was a versatile playmaker the Buckeyes lined up all over the field, including at quarterback at times. Wilson, a junior, plays a similar role for Ohio State. A foot injury against Michigan State in November cut his season short and kept him out of spring practice.

Smith, a senior, is in his second season with Ohio State after transferring from junior college.

In other college football news: ■ Southern California has been picked to win its first Pac-12 football title since 2008 in a preseason media poll.

The Trojans received 21 of 45 votes for the title, edging defending champion Oregon. The Ducks got 17 votes for the top spot and were picked to win the North division, while USC is favored to win the South.

Harper homers twice in Nats' win

The Associated Press

MIAMI — Bryce Harper continued his torrid MVP-caliber season with his power on full display.

He homered twice into the upper deck and drove in four for the Washington Nationals in a 7-2 win over the Miami Marlins on Wednesday night.

"I could remember when the kid came out a lot of people compared him to a young Mickey Mantle, that type of thunder," Marlins manager Dan Jennings said. "He's a special hitter."

The 22-year old superstar and former No. 1 overall draft pick went 3-for-4 to raise his batting average to .335.

"He did a lot of damage today," Nationals manager Matt Williams said.

Michael Taylor also homered and drove in two for Washington.

Doug Fister (4-6) picked up the win, allowing two runs and four hits in six innings.

"Tonight was much better, more consistent," Fister said. "Still left a few balls up in the middle of the plate, but I kept it to a fairly minimum number. It's another stride in the right direction."

Harper's first homer drove in three and came off of Tom Koehler (8-7) in the fifth inning breaking a 2-all tie.

Harper then led off the eighth by sending a first-pitch fastball from Sam Dyson deep to right field. It was his third multi-home run game of the season, first since hitting two against Atlanta on May 8.

"He's got such a forceful, violent swing and he's now learning to control that even more," Jennings said. "He's a special hitter. He's made us pay a few times when we've missed."

Harper said he was happy about his two-homer night.

"But all in all, I'm just very happy to have our team back and this lineup back," he said.

Koehler pitched six innings and allowed

five runs.

Ichiro Suzuki opened the scoring with an RBI double in the second for the Marlins.

The Nationals took a 2-1 lead in the fourth when Ian Desmond hit an RBI triple and scored on a sacrifice fly by Taylor.

Adeiny Hechavarria tied the game at 2 with an RBI single.

Suzuki ended with two hits to put him over the 2,900-hit plateau.

Blue Jays 8, Phillies 2: Troy Tulowitzki homered and had three hits in his Blue Jays debut as host Toronto beat Philadelphia.

The five-time All-Star, who was acquired in a trade with the Colorado Rockies, went 3-for-5 with two doubles and three RBIs. He scored three times.

Astros 6, Angels 3: Rookie Lance McCullers pitched seven solid innings and Preston Tucker and Jon Singleton both homered to help host Houston to a win over Los Angeles to regain first place in the American League West.

Dodgers 10, Athletics 7: Pinch-hitter Kike Hernandez delivered the go-ahead, two-run double during a five-run seventh inning, and host Los Angeles rallied from a three-run deficit for a wild victory over Oakland.

Padres 7, Mets 3: Justin Upton homered and drove in three runs and Yonder Alonso also connected as San Diego beat host New York despite three long balls from Lucas Duda.

Reds 1, Cardinals 0: Jay Bruce homered in the second to back Anthony DeSclafani's seven innings of three-hit ball, and visiting Cincinnati shut out St. Louis for the second straight night.

Rangers 5, Yankees 2: Colby Lewis went six innings for his 11th victory and host Texas snapped a three-game losing streak with a win over AL East-leading New York.

Tigers 2, Rays 1: Justin Verlander outlasted Chris Archer for his first win

this season and visiting Detroit avoided a three-game sweep by beating Tampa Bay.

Indians 12, Royals 1: Corey Kluber took a shutout into the ninth, rookie Francisco Lindor hit a three-run homer and had a career-high four RBIs, and Cleveland avoided a winless homestand with a victory Kansas City.

Pirates 10, Twins 4: Andrew McCutchen hit a home run and turned an RBI single into race around the bases while the Twins made two errors in a five-run sixth inning, helping Francisco Liriano and Pittsburgh beat host Minnesota for a two-game sweep.

Giants 5, Brewers 0: Hunter Pence doubled in Matt Duffy to break a scoreless tie in the seventh inning and San Francisco held on to beat visiting Milwaukee.

White Sox 9, Red Sox 2: Adam Eaton opened the game with a home run, Jose Quintana pitched 6⅓ solid innings and Chicago beat host Boston for its seventh straight win.

Orioles 2, Braves 0: Chris Tillman took a three-hitter into the ninth inning, Jonathan Schoop and J.J. Hardy homered and host Baltimore beat skidding Atlanta for a three-game sweep.

Cubs 3, Rockies 2: Jon Lester struck out 14, one shy of his career high and the most for a Cubs pitcher in more than a decade, leading host Chicago over Colorado.

Lester (6-8) struck out seven of his first eight hitters and nine of the first 14. He allowed two runs, five hits and one walk in eight innings.

He became the first Cubs pitcher to strike out 14 since Mark Prior had 16 on Sept. 30, 2004.

Diamondbacks 8, Mariners 2: Wellington Castillo homered twice off Seattle ace Felix Hernandez, including a two-run shot in the first inning, and visiting Arizona won its fifth straight.

Kaka, MLS All-Stars edge Tottenham

COMMERCE CITY, Colo. — The news kids in the league can play a little bit.

Kaka and David Villa, a pair of 33-year-old international icons in their first season in Major League Soccer, showed they still have some panache to their games.

Kaka scored on a penalty kick and set up Villa's goal minutes later in the first half to help the best players in MLS beat Tottenham Hotspur 2-1 on a blustery Wednesday night.

The MLS improved to 9-3-1 against international competition in its All-Star Game. Kaka, who served as the team's captain, was selected the game MVP.

"Everybody is happy," said Kaka, "because tomorrow in the soccer world everybody will talk about the MLS All-Star team beating a very good European team."

Harry Kane scored for the Spurs, who open the English Premier League season against Manchester United on Aug. 8.