

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, July 11, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

British warship thwarts Iranian boats

BY JOSHUA KARSTEN

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — A British frigate prevented three Iranian patrol boats from stopping a British tanker as it was entering the Strait of Hormuz, British and U.S. defense officials said Thursday.

The HMS Montrose “ensured the safe passage” of the tanker British Heritage, U.K. Defense Secretary Penny Mordaunt said in a statement Thursday.

“I would like to thank the Royal Navy for their professionalism, which upheld international law and supported freedom of navigation through a shipping channel that is vital to global trade,” Mordaunt said.

The Montrose reportedly maneuvered between the three

fast boats — believed to belong to Iran’s Revolutionary Guard — and the tanker near the island of Abu Musa on Wednesday. The Iranian vessels turned away after “verbal warnings” from the frigate, said a separate British government statement cited by BBC News.

“We are concerned by this action and continue to urge the Iranian authorities to deescalate the situation in the region,” Mordaunt said.

U.S. Central Command officials said they were aware of the incident.

“Threats to international freedom of navigation require an international solution,” CENTCOM spokesman Capt. Bill Urban said in a statement.

Although Urban’s statement did not specifically comment on the details of the incident,

he added that “the world economy depends on the free flow of commerce, and it is incumbent on all nations to protect and preserve this lynchpin of global prosperity.”

Other U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said Wednesday’s incident occurred as the British Heritage was approaching the northern entrance of the Strait of Hormuz.

“The Royal Navy HMS Montrose, which was also there, pointed its guns at the boats and warned them over radio, at which point they dispersed,” said a U.S. official quoted by The Associated Press.

“It was harassment and an attempt to interfere with the passage,” another official said, according to the AP.

One-fifth of the world’s oil

and 90% of Persian Gulf oil is transported through the strait.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guard denied on Thursday that its vessels had tried to seize the tanker.

“There have been no encounters with foreign vessels, including the British ones,” the force said in a statement carried by the semi-official Fars news agency.

The incident comes a week after British marines seized an Iranian tanker off the coast of Gibraltar on suspicion of violating sanctions and transporting oil to Syria.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that Britain would face “consequences” over the seizure of the Iranian tanker.

Stars and Stripes reporter Chad Garland contributed to this report.

Army chief of staff: Keep US troops in Afghanistan

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan too soon would be a mistake, Army Gen. Mark Milley told senators Thursday, saying the U.S. military is needed to ensure the Afghan representatives and the Taliban reach a settlement to end the war that has dragged on for nearly 18 years.

“I think it is slow, it’s painful, it’s hard. I’ve spent a lot of my life in Afghanistan, but I also think it’s necessary,” he said during his confirmation hearing to become the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Milley, the Army’s chief of staff, was nominated in April to be the chairman of the Joint

Chiefs, replacing Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, who will serve through September after having been the chairman since 2015.

During the hearing, Milley was questioned about his responsibility to give his best advice to President Donald Trump as the chairman, which is the highest-ranking officer in the military and is the primary military adviser to the president, defense secretary and the National Security Council.

Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, asked Milley whether he would be intimidated.

“Absolutely not. By no one. Ever,” the general responded and said he and other officers such as Dunford who have seen combat and buried soldiers understand the hazards of their chosen profession.

Senators raised concerns about the Defense Department having more than a dozen vacancies in key leadership roles — including an acting defense secretary — and whether not having confirmed leaders in those jobs weakens the civilian and military relationship, as well as sends a bad message to allies and adversaries.

“In terms of the effectiveness and the efficiency of the department, it would be much better to have the nominees fully vetted and confirmed because that gives us much more effectiveness,” Milley said about civilian control of the military.

Sen. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., asked Milley whether he would commit to working with her to address sexual assault in the military.

McSally’s question followed

reports Wednesday of sexual misconduct allegations against Air Force Gen. John Hyten, the nominee to become the next vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Milley thanked the senator for her efforts and called sexual assault “fratricide” by one soldier on another.

It is “a cancer within an organization and we’ve got to crush it,” he said.

McSally also brought up an attempt Wednesday by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to stop a British tanker entering the Strait of Hormuz.

Milley said they are planning for the coalition to provide similar naval escort efforts for commercial shipping and it will be developing over the next couple of weeks.

NDAA provision on clean water draws veto threat

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Art Schaap owns a dairy farm near Cannon Air Force Base outside Clovis, N.M. that he said has been contaminated with a chemical that has been leaking from the base into the ground.

The chemical, called perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl, or PFAS, is a substance commonly found in firefighting foam often used during training on military bases across the country and has been cited in news reports in recent years as the cause of contamination of nearby groundwater.

Schaap said Wednesday that the contamination from the Air Force base has damaged his farm. He cannot sell any milk or his cows, and he's lost 40 employees, putting his family and business in distress. Schaap said he needs \$2 million to install filters on 20 wells on his farm and another \$500,000 yearly to maintain them.

"We've lost our income, we lost the value of our animals. My bank is looking at me every day," Schaap said during a conference call with reporters.

Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., was also on the conference call Wednesday touting his bill in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2020 that expands Air Force authority to provide drinking water to surrounding communities to include water for agriculture and farmers, such as Schaap. The Udall provision was added to the Senate's version of the NDAA with a modified version included in the House version.

But President Donald Trump is threatening to veto the NDAA over several provisions being debated in the House version of the legislation, including Udall's attempt to help farmers get cleaner water.

Udall called the president's veto threat "outrageous."

"[Trump] is threatening to veto the national defense bill because it tries too hard to clean up Department of Defense's toxic waste that is imperiling

America's drinking water and farmers businesses and way of life," the senator said during the conference call coordinated by Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit that focuses on environmental issues.

A White House statement issued Tuesday lists several dozen amendments to the House's version of the NDAA and states that as the legislation is now written, Trump would be advised to veto it. Two amendments in the White House statement pertain to PFAS.

Studies have shown exposure to the chemical can cause increased cholesterol levels and have offered some findings related to low infant birth weight, cancer and impacts to the immune system in humans, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

One amendment in the House NDAA bill authorizes DOD to provide water or water treatment for agricultural water that has been contaminated by perfluorooctanesulfonic acid, known as PFOS, or perfluorooctanoic acid, known as PFOA, which are PFAS chemicals. More than 100 military sites in the U.S. have known PFAS contamination in the drinking or groundwater, Udall said.

"The concentration of PFAS detected in the groundwater below Cannon Air Force Base next to Mr. Schaap's dairy [farm] exceeded 2600 parts per trillion," the senator said. "That's 371 times greater than the U.S. EPA drinking water health advisory level of 70 parts per trillion."

The White House objected to this amendment, saying the EPA's drinking water health advisory was not applicable because it was not meant to determine unhealthy levels of PFOS and PFOA chemicals in agricultural water as well as the effects on humans who consumed food that was produced with the agricultural water. It also objected to singling out DOD for the contamination issue because it would have a significant impact on and cost to the department.

Misconduct claim clouds joint chiefs vice chair process

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The confirmation of the nominee to become the next vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could be delayed as senators question how the Pentagon handled sexual assault allegations against him even though military authorities deemed them insufficient to bring charges.

President Donald Trump in early April nominated Air Force Gen. John Hyten, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, to become the next vice chairman.

Shortly thereafter, an Army colonel who had been relieved of her duties while serving on his staff for allegedly creating a toxic work environment alleged that Hyten had had sexually abusive contact with her on more than a half-dozen occasions, including in a California hotel room during the Reagan National Defense Forum in December 2017.

The allegations — which Hyten denies — prompted a probe by the Air Force criminal investigative service. Based on the results, the Air Force decided not to press forward with a court-martial or any other disciplinary actions against Hyten, who is in charge of the nation's nuclear arsenal.

"After a comprehensive investigation by the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, there was insufficient evidence to support any finding of misconduct on the part of Gen. Hyten," Pentagon spokeswoman Col. DeDe Halfhill said in a statement. "With more than 38 years of service to our nation, Gen. Hyten has proven himself to be a principled and dedicated patriot."

Air Force officials briefed

senators Wednesday morning about the results of the investigation.

A senior U.S. military official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the details of a legal matter, said investigators spoke to 53 people in three countries and 13 states, reviewed thousands of emails and ended up "out of rocks to turn over" after following all the leads provided.

The Army colonel, who said she was in the force for 28 years, including two tours in Afghanistan and two tours in Iraq, and had served a variety of prestigious assignments involving high-level strategy, said she didn't tell anyone about the incidents at the time.

A spokesman for Hyten at Strategic Command declined to make the general available for comment. In a statement, the spokesman said Strategic Command fully cooperated with the investigation.

The Army colonel, who spoke on the condition that The Washington Post not use her name but agreed to be described by her service and rank, characterized a series of incidents in which she alleged Hyten touched, hugged or kissed her without her consent, and spoke of his feelings for her. In many of the alleged incidents, she said she rebuffed him or warned him that his actions were inappropriate.

The colonel said the first incident occurred during a visit to Palo Alto, Calif., in January 2017. She had stayed behind in Hyten's hotel room after a team meeting, she said, and the general pressed her hand to his groin as she tried to leave.

Other alleged incidents followed, she said.

Tropical storm threatens flooded Louisiana

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Tropical Storm Barry formed off the coast of Louisiana on Thursday and threatened to blow ashore as a hurricane with relatively weak winds but torrential rains that could test the flood control improvements made in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina 14 years ago.

Forecasters said the first hurricane of the Atlantic season could hit the state's swampy southern tip Friday night or early Saturday, with potentially ruinous downpours that could go on for hours as the storm pushes inland.

Plaquemines Parish, at Louisiana's southeastern tip, ordered the mandatory evacuation of as many as 10,000 people, and

communities began handing out sandbags.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards declared an emergency and said National Guard troops and high-water vehicles will be positioned all over the state.

"The entire coast of Louisiana is at play in this storm," he warned.

On Wednesday, with the gathering storm still out over the Gulf of Mexico, it dumped as much as 8 inches on metro New Orleans in just three hours. The deluge triggered flash flooding and raised fears about the even heavier rains on the way.

The National Hurricane Center said as much as 20 inches of rain could fall in parts of eastern Louisiana, including Baton Rouge, and the entire region could get as much as 10 inches. New Orleans could receive 10 inches, forecasters aid.

The storm's surge also could prevent water from emptying out of the already swollen Mississippi River, possibly sending water over levees near New Orleans, forecasters said. The river has been running high for months.

The National Hurricane Center said Barry could have maximum sustained winds of about 75 mph, just over the 74 mph threshold for a hurricane, when it comes ashore, making it a Category 1 storm.

In New Orleans, where Katrina in 2005 caused catastrophic flooding that was blamed for more than 1,500 deaths in Louisiana and other states, officials asked people to keep at least three days' worth of supplies on hand and to keep their neighborhood storm drains clear so water can move quickly.

Immigration enforcement action set to begin

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A nationwide immigration enforcement operation targeting people who are in the United States illegally is expected to begin this weekend after it was postponed last month by President Donald Trump, according to two administration officials and immigrant activists.

The operation, which is sparking outrage and concern among immigrant advocates, would target people with final orders of removal, including families whose immigration cases had been fast-tracked by judges in 10 major cities.

The sweep remains in flux and possibly could begin later, according to the officials, who were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition

of anonymity. Activists are circulating information about hotlines for immigrants to call and bolstering know-your-rights training.

The operation is similar to ones conducted regularly since 2003 that often produce hundreds of arrests. It is something unusual to target families, as opposed to immigrants with criminal histories, but not unprecedented. The Obama and Trump administrations have targeted families in previous operations.

But this one is notable really because of the politics swirling around it.

Trump announced on Twitter last month that the sweep would mark the beginning of an effort to deport millions of people who are in the country illegally, a near-

impossibility given the limited resources of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which makes the arrests and carries out deportation orders.

Then he abruptly canceled it after a phone call with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., while lawmakers worked to pass a \$4.6 billion border aid package. Plus, details had leaked and authorities worried about the safety of ICE officers.

They still are. The agency said in a statement that it would not offer specifics on enforcement operations.

"As always, ICE prioritizes the arrest and removal of unlawfully present aliens who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security," according to the statement.

Steroids found in supplements at Air Force base store

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Two dietary supplements sold at an Air Force base in Georgia have tested positive for steroids during a health probe, according to military investigators.

The products were discovered at Moody Air Force Base during a health and wellness inspection in December 2018.

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service said 5 Star Nutrition has blocked the sale of the products "Alpha Shredded" and "Trenatestin" on military installations.

The nutrition stores are located at seven Army and Air Force bases: Fort Hood, Fort

Bliss and Joint Base San Antonio in Texas; Fort Riley, Kan.; Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark.; Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo.; and Moody Air Force Base.

"If a product is determined to be unsuitable as to quality, value or other appropriate criteria by medical authorities, AAFES and its concessionaires take immediate action to remove it from shelves," AAFES spokesman Chris Ward said in a statement.

The investigation was conducted by the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, which shared its findings with other military units in a bulletin that warned: "Supplements Sold at AAFES Exchanges May

Contain Steroids."

The suspected products were seized and submitted for laboratory testing, according to a July 3 alert from Army Criminal Investigation Command, commonly known as CID.

"Soldiers may find a false sense of security when purchasing performance enhancing supplements from a legitimate and reputable business, even a business located at an AAFES Exchange," stated the CID alert, which was posted on the popular military social media site Army WTF Moments. CID confirmed the document's authenticity.

Acosta defends Epstein deal amid calls for his resignation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Trying to tamp down calls for his resignation, Labor Secretary Alex Acosta on Wednesday defended his handling of a sex trafficking case involving now-jailed financier Jeffrey Epstein, insisting he got the toughest deal he could at the time.

In a nearly hourlong news conference, Acosta retraced the steps that federal prosecutors took in the case when he was U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Florida a decade ago, insisting that “in our heart, we were trying to do the right thing for these victims.” He said prosecutors were working to avoid a more lenient arrangement that would have allowed Epstein to “walk free.”

“We believe that we proceeded appropriately,” he said, a contention challenged by critics who say Epstein’s penalty was egregiously light.

The episode reignited this week when federal prosecu-

tors in New York brought a new round of child sex trafficking charges against the wealthy hedge fund manager.

While the handling of the case arose during Acosta’s confirmation hearings, it has come under fresh and intense scrutiny after the prosecutors in New York brought their charges Monday, alleging Epstein abused dozens of underage girls in the early 2000s, paying them hundreds of dollars in cash for massages, then molesting them at his homes in Florida and New York. Epstein has pleaded not guilty to the charges; if convicted he could be imprisoned for the rest of his life.

Acosta’s lawyerly presentation was an effort to push back against growing criticism of his work in a secret 2008 plea deal that let Epstein avoid federal prosecution on charges that he molested teenage girls. A West Palm Beach judge found this year that the deal had violated the Crime Victims’ Rights Act because the victims were not

informed or consulted.

Acosta insisted his office did the best it could under the circumstances a decade ago. He said state authorities had planned to go after Epstein with charges that would have resulted in no jail time until his office intervened and pressed for tougher consequences, a contention that is supported by the record. The alternative, he said, would have been for federal prosecutors to “roll the dice” and hope to win a conviction.

But Epstein was given only 13 months in a work release program, which let him work out of the jail six days a week. Acosta said it was “entirely appropriate” to be outraged about that leniency, but he blamed Florida authorities.

His account did not sit well with Barry Krischer, who was the Palm Beach County attorney during the case. Krischer, a Democrat, said Acosta “should not be allowed to rewrite history.”

Police say 18 pet dogs ate missing Texas man

The Washington Post

The bone pieces found on the man’s overgrown trailer-and-shed property were suspicious. But the truth didn’t hit the sheriff’s deputies until they inspected some dog feces and found what looked like human hair and bits of clothes.

Freddie Mack had been eaten by his only companions at his rural home near Venus, Texas: his 18 dogs.

“Our initial reaction was kind of disbelief, because there was nothing left,” Johnson County Sheriff Adam King told The Washington Post.

It’s surprisingly common for animals to eat human remains, Johnson said.

But the whole body, clothes and all?

The senior investigators the sheriff’s office consulted with had never heard of pets consuming an entire person before, he said.

The final confirmation came Tuesday when detectives learned that medical examiners had identified the few remnants deputies collected as Mack’s.

It’s not clear whether the large mutts killed the 57-year-old or devoured him after he died of his “serious medical conditions,” King said. The sheriff’s office is not disclosing Mack’s medical information.

Mack first came to the sheriff’s attention in May when a family member said he had not heard from his reclusive relative in weeks. Mack kept to himself, King said, his only reliable human contact coming every two weeks or so when family dropped by to take him to the store.

Wondering about Mack, relatives had tried to search his property, but the dogs were aggressive and kept them out, according to the sheriff’s office. Deputies, too, struggled to get past the animals.

Lawmaker’s campaign-funded trip to Italy was family vacation, judge ruled

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — A federal judge in the criminal case against Rep. Duncan Hunter ruled in an order filed this week that a campaign-funded trip Hunter’s family took to Italy was not legally protected legislative activity, and neither were efforts to control political damage from a probe into his campaign spending.

Judge Thomas J. Whelan listed the findings Tuesday in the three-page order memorializing his Monday ruling to deny some of the lawmaker’s key motions to dismiss part or all of a 60-count indictment against him for allegedly using more than \$250,000 in campaign

money for personal purposes including getaways with girlfriends, dental work, private school tuition, video games and more.

Hunter, R-Calif., and his wife and former campaign manager, Margaret, were indicted Aug. 21, 2018. Both originally pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Last month, Margaret Hunter agreed to plead guilty to one count of conspiracy that named Duncan Hunter as her co-conspirator.

In motions filed late last month, Hunter, a Marine veteran, argued that the charges should be dismissed because some of the government’s evidence was legislative material

and activity protected by the U.S. Constitution. He specifically named evidence related to campaign spending for a trip to Italy in 2015 and efforts that members of Hunter’s staff made in 2016 to plan a public rebuttal for release when the Office of Congressional Ethics disclosed the results of its probe into Hunter’s political spending.

Whelan wrote in his order Tuesday that based on the law and a preponderance of evidence, the court had determined the arguments were “wholly without merit.”

Hunter’s trial is scheduled for Sept. 10, according to court records.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Authorities: Company sold mislabeled crab

NC COLUMBIA — A North Carolina seafood company has been charged with selling almost 200,000 pounds of foreign crab meat falsely labeled domestic Atlantic blue crab for \$4 million.

Charges filed last month by the U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of North Carolina say Capt. Neill's Seafood of Columbia repackaged and mislabeled crab from Asia and South America as a "Product of the USA."

The charging documents accuse the company of selling the mislabeled crab meat from 2012 through 2015.

Newlyweds say gifts stolen from hotel

DE WILMINGTON — Four Delaware newlywed couples said thousands of dollars' worth of cash and gifts were stolen from them during separate weddings at the Hotel du Pont.

Three couples told the Delaware News Journal that they think the items went missing when hotel staff delivered champagne to the locked, unattended bridal suite as the couples socialized with guests downstairs.

The Wilmington Police Department said it's investigating four theft reports from the hotel since October 2018.

Hotel spokeswoman Shannon Maguire DeLucia told the paper they've "cooperated fully" with police.

Trooper stops truck and saves passenger

IN ANDERSON — A state trooper who stopped a truck going 105 mph in central

Indiana is credited with giving lifesaving first aid to the passenger, who was bleeding from a gash in his neck.

State police said Trooper Ron Huff stopped the speeding truck and the driver ran to him, yelling that his friend was dying. Huff found a man in his 20s holding a towel to his neck to cover the 4-inch gash.

Huff used gauze treated with a clotting agent and direct pressure to stop the bleeding before an ambulance arrived.

The man had been helping renovate an unoccupied school when a wall mirror broke, cutting his neck.

Couple buys home that inspired movie

RI HARRISVILLE — A Maine couple bought a Rhode Island farmhouse that inspired the horror movie "The Conjuring."

Cory Heinzen told the Sun Journal in Maine that he's heard doors opening, footsteps and knocks. He said the house in Harrisville is "very busy."

The movie is based on the story of a family that lived in the farmhouse in the 1970s.

Heinzen, of Mexico, Maine, said he and his wife hope to open the home to visitors and investigators later this year.

Message in a bottle found on beach

TX HIGH ISLAND — A message in a bottle tossed overboard last year by a Massachusetts couple sailing in the West Indies was found thousands of miles away on a Texas beach.

The Houston Chronicle reported James Howie Hill, of Carthage, discovered the algae-covered green bottle near High Island.

That's nearly 2,400 miles

from where George and June Smith, of Nantucket, Mass., threw the bottle into the water off Martinique. A note inside the bottle was dated Dec. 22.

Tractor-trailer hauling garbage overturns

NH WARNER — New Hampshire troopers said a tractor-trailer hauling 60,000 pounds of garbage overturned on the interstate, sending trash across the highway in Warner.

Tyler Cushman told WMUR-TV that he merged into the left lane when the truck entered the highway and he saw out of the corner of his eye that it was tumbling over. Neither he nor the tractor-trailer driver were hurt.

State police said the driver of the tractor-trailer was charged with speeding.

More than 100 sheep killed in truck crash

CO AULT — Police said more than 100 sheep were killed when two trucks collided in northern Colorado.

The Coloradoan reported that the driver of a Waste Management semitrailer pulled out from a county road in front of a semi carrying about 300 sheep. The truck hauling the sheep landed on its side.

Police said the driver was taken to the hospital with minor injuries. The driver of the Waste Management semi was cited for careless driving.

Lobster boat skipper charged with OUI

ME STONINGTON — Officials said a lobsterman whose vessel collided with a recreational boat at the Stonington dock was

charged with operating under the influence.

The Bangor Daily News reported that the Hancock County Sheriff's Department cited Brandon Murphy, 22, of Trenton after he allegedly failed a blood-alcohol test.

A Coast Guard response boat on hand for security during lobster boat races saw Murphy operating his boat, Black Thundah II, at the time of the crash.

No injuries were reported.

Dog that fled crash reunited with owner

NJ LITTLE EGG HARBOR — A dog that went missing after a car crash in southern New Jersey last month was reunited with its owner.

Jax, a rottweiler-boxer mix, was riding in a car driven by Gabrielle McMillan, 23, of Little Egg Harbor when she struck a utility pole June 24. The car then rolled over and Jax escaped and ran off.

McMillan, who was injured in the crash, continues to recover at home.

Jax remained on the loose in the days after the accident despite numerous attempts to track him down. He was finally captured and reunited with McMillan this week.

Man pleads guilty to taking lemur from zoo

CA SANTA ANA — A man who stole a ring-tailed lemur from a Southern California zoo pleaded guilty to a federal crime.

Aquinas Kasbar, 19, of Newport Beach entered the plea to unlawfully taking an endangered species. He could face up to a year in federal prison and a \$100,000 fine when he's sentenced in October.

From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

On a mission to provide credible reporting and daily news to America's military, wherever they serve.

Mobile apps available: www.stripes.com/apps.

Trade deadline nears after All-Star break

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Francisco Lindor and the Cleveland Indians, looking up at Nelson Cruz and the surprising Minnesota Twins. Matt Chapman and the Oakland Athletics, trying to run down Jose Altuve and the Houston Astros. Max Scherzer and the Washington Nationals, chasing Ronald Acuna Jr. and the Atlanta Braves.

Baseball ramps up again this weekend, and a handful of contenders have a lot of work to do.

Five of the majors' six divisions feature deficits of at least 5½ games as play resumes after the All-Star Game, in which the American League beat the National League 4-3 Tuesday night.

Life is pretty good for two iconic franchises, with Cody Bellinger and the Los Angeles Dodgers in control of the NL West again and Aaron Judge and the New York Yankees looking down on the rest of the AL East despite a rash of injuries.

"This team is capable of some

great things," Yankees pitcher James Paxton said. "You've got some really talented players here, guys with a lot of drive, great leadership. We're set up really well to make a good run the second half here as well."

The one exception at the moment is the crazy NL Central, where the Chicago Cubs have a 4½ -game advantage — over last-place Cincinnati. Yup, that's right, it's just 4½ games from top to bottom, with Christian Yelich and Milwaukee a half-game back of Javier Baez and the inconsistent Cubs.

"Nobody really wants to run away with it," Cardinals shortstop Paul DeJong said. "That gives us confidence as a group to think that we can run away with it."

It sets up for some very tough decisions ahead of the trade deadline after trade waivers were eliminated in the offseason, meaning no player can be traded after July 31 through the end of the regular season. Players who clear outright waivers can still be claimed and will be eligible for the postseason if they are in the organization

before Sept. 1.

Buying or selling will be one tricky call for several teams, all the way to the final days of July. The hard deadline also could affect the prices for some of the top players on the market, possibilities like San Francisco pitchers Madison Bumgarner and Will Smith, Toronto right-hander Marcus Stroman and Detroit lefty Matthew Boyd.

"I know something could happen, but I don't take a peek at what people are saying," Smith said. "There's so much out there, and you don't know what's true."

Cleveland could inject some drama into the AL Central as soon as this weekend, when Minnesota comes to town for a three-game series. The Indians hit the All-Star break with the majors' longest active win streak at six in a row, improving to 21-6 since June 1 and moving within 5½ games of the division-leading Twins.

"In the beginning it seemed like we were good, then all of a sudden in May we had that stretch where we weren't playing as good as we wanted to

play," Lindor said. "But right now, we continue to play the game right and we're enjoying it, we're all having fun. We all get along, we love each other, we back each other up. We're having a blast."

Washington also is having some fun again, moving into position to shake up the NL East after a terrible start to the season. Led by a resurgent Scherzer, the Nationals have won 15 of 19 to pull within six games of the division-leading Braves.

Washington plays Atlanta 14 times in the last half of the season, including seven games in July.

"When we can go out there and play our best baseball and play mistake-free baseball, we're a tough team and we can compete with anybody in this league," Scherzer said.

The Nationals have seven players with at least 11 homers, led by Anthony Rendon with 20. But everyone is going deep these days.

Tight free-agent market impacts baseball's best players

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — His free agency delayed a year because the Chicago Cubs kept him in the minor leagues for one extra day, Kris Bryant is the shining example of why players are agitating for change in their labor contract.

Baseball has had labor peace following eight work stoppages from 1972-95, but the relationship between Major League Baseball and the union is strained as the current deal approaches its expiration in December 2021.

"I think people are prepared. I think we've very well-educated," Bryant said Monday as NL All-Stars gathered in a room. "The problems are out on the board and I think the sides are kind of working towards not getting to that point. But I think

everyone here in this room knows what's going on. There has to be change, and I think there will be."

Bryant debuted on April 17, 2015, leaving him one day shy of the service time needed to become a free agent after the 2020 season. The players' association filed a grievance in 2015, but the case has not been argued.

Houston pitcher Gerrit Cole becomes eligible for free agency this autumn after watching former teammate Dallas Keuchel and All-Star closer Craig Kimbrel sit out until June because they did not think any of the offers they received before then were appropriate.

As a higher percentage of free agents waited to sign until after spring training was underway, the average salary has stagnated at about \$4.1 million

for three straight seasons. Players say a lack of competition for free agents has hurt competition on the field, leading to an attendance drop. Management says there always has been rebuilding teams.

Milwaukee infielder Mike Moustakas gets asked about his free-agent experience by other players. He rejected a \$17.4 million qualifying offer from Kansas City after the 2017 season and returned to the Royals in mid-March for a one-year contract that included a guaranteed \$6.5 million, and then earned an additional \$2.2 million in performance bonuses.

He became a free agent again and agreed in February to a \$10 million, one-year deal with the Brewers: a \$7 million salary this season and an \$11 million mutual option for 2020 with a \$3 million buyout.

"It's pretty crazy to have Kimbrel and Keuchel sign so late," Moustakas said. "Baseball needs those kind of guys playing. Those are two superstar players that need to be in the game."

Astros outfielder George Springer played his first big league game on April 16, 2014, six days shy of being eligible for free agency after the 2020 season. He is among those angry over the treatment of free agents.

"We owe it to the fans to put the best product out of the field at all times," he said. "There's a lot of guys who work really, really hard to get to free agency, to get to that point, who deserve to get what they get."

MLB agreed last winter to the union's request for an early start to negotiations on the next labor contract.

Rookie Wolff ready to feast on Deere

Associated Press

Matthew Wolff made a name for himself by winning the 3M Open in his fourth PGA Tour start after turning pro.

The 20-year-old who starred at Oklahoma State will try to make it two in a row this weekend at the John Deere Classic in Silvis, Ill.

Wolff was the tour's youngest winner since Jordan Spieth won at TPC Deere Run at age 19 in 2013. And like Spieth, he's being hyped as a future star as he arrives in the Quad Cities.

Many of the world's best players are either taking the week off or playing the Scottish Open in preparation for next week's British Open. That makes Wolff as good a bet as any to make a run at the title at a venue known for low scores.

"My caddie kind of told me that this course is a little bit like last week, just the driving aspect and kind of the way it sets up," Wolff said. "I played it for the Monday pro-am, and I kind of realized that it was more of a course that suited my eye pretty well and I like the look of it."

Wolff's victory last week at TPC Twin Cities took care of a lot: It earned him instant membership and a two-year exemption on the PGA Tour and invitations to next year's Masters and PGA Championship. But it didn't get him a spot in the field

at the British Open. That, too, is a possibility this week: The top finisher not already exempt who finishes in the top 5 at TPC Deere Run will qualify to play next week at Royal Portrush — and get a seat on the charter flight that the John Deere Classic provides to players making the trip to Northern Ireland.

If he doesn't get there this year, there appear to be plenty of major championship starts in the future for Wolff, who has always shown huge potential.

Wolff, who grew up in Southern California, earned freshman All-America honors for the Cowboys in 2017-18 before winning the NCAA individual title in May. After missing the cut at the Rocket Mortgage Classic, Wolff shot 62-65 over the weekend at the 3M Open, securing the win with a 25-foot putt for eagle from the collar of the 18th green.

That made him the seventh player in the past 80 years to win a PGA Tour event before turning 21, and the other six — Spieth, Tiger Woods, Seve Ballesteros, Phil Mickelson, Raymond Floyd and Rory McIlroy — went on to win multiple majors.

Wolff and his assistant Cole Spradlin rented a van and drove straight from Minnesota to the Quad Cities, arriving around 2:30 a.m. Monday.

"It's a dream come true. I'll say that over

and over again. My life changed as soon as that putt went in," Wolff said. "But it only lasts so long, and my goal is to become the No. 1 player in the world."

He's now 135th, but that figures to change soon, too.

The John Deere Classic has long made up for its lack of star power by using sponsor exemptions to lure some of the game's brightest prospects to its event.

This year's newcomers will include Cal's Collin Morikawa, who finished one shot behind Wolff in Minnesota. Morikawa's performance earned him special temporary membership on the PGA Tour, meaning he can use unlimited sponsor exemptions in a bid to earn his tour card for next season.

Morikawa, who'll be making his fifth career start, will be joined by fellow rookies Viktor Hovland and Justin Suh.

"Obviously the goal coming into this summer was to earn a full card for next year," Morikawa said. "We're almost there."

One player who doesn't come in with much momentum is defending champion Michael Kim.

After winning at TPC Deere Run by eight shots, matching the largest margin of victory on tour in 2018, Kim began working on swing changes with coach John Tilley and has missed 17 cuts in a row.

NC State basketball cited for 4 violations by NCAA

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The NCAA has charged North Carolina State with four violations, accusing a former assistant coach of providing payments and benefits connected to the recruitment of one-and-done basketball player Dennis Smith Jr.

The school said Wednesday that its notice of allegations was received Tuesday, and now has 90 days to respond.

The notice includes four serious charges, with two that are potential top-level charges. The NCAA alleges that from 2014-17, former assistant Orlando Early provided Smith and his associates approximately \$46,700 in impermis-

sible inducements and benefits — including \$40,000 that a government witness testified he delivered to Early intended for Smith's family in 2015.

The NCAA also said former coach Mark Gottfried, now coaching at Cal State Northridge, was "presumed responsible" and "did not demonstrate" that he monitored Early for compliance. It also accuses Gottfried of failing to monitor the program's pass list, leading to a total 164 impermissible complimentary admissions to games.

The notice indicates the NCAA's hearing panel could levy show-cause penalties against both Gottfried and Early.

With Hughes in Devils' camp, Smith overlooked

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — With Jack Hughes in the New Jersey Devils' development camp, it's easy to overlook Ty Smith.

Hughes was the No. 1 overall selection in the draft last month and much is expected of the playmaking center. It's almost certain he will be on the Devils' roster when the regular season opens in October and the packed crowd at the team's training rink in the Prudential Center roared on Wednesday when he was introduced before a four-team, 3-on-3 competition.

Much like the other three dozen young players at the weeklong gathering, the 19-year-old Smith received polite

applause. What people tend to forget is Smith was the Devils' first-round pick a year ago — 17th overall — and he nearly made the roster.

A year later, Smith may be ready to take that next step. The puck-moving defenseman has added about 8 pounds and is coming off a great season in the Western Hockey League with seven goals and a career-high 62 assists, the second-highest total in league history.

Devils coach John Hynes said Smith appears to have matured in the past year, noting his body is thicker and he looks fit.

"He is not a wide-eyed kid here that is taking everything in for the first time," Hynes said.

Serena, Halep reach Wimbledon final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Serena Williams made it look easy in the Wimbledon semifinals. What she really cares about, of course, is what comes next.

That's why she puts in all the work. Why she keeps at it with everything she's already won, everything she's already accomplished.

Williams is once again on the verge of an eighth Wimbledon championship and 24th Grand Slam title, moving into the final at the All England Club with a 6-1, 6-2 victory over an overmatched Barbora Strycova of the Czech Republic on Thursday.

On Saturday, Williams will take on No. 7-seeded Simona Halep of Romania, a 6-1, 6-3 winner over No. 8 Elina Svitolina of Ukraine under a cloudy sky at Centre Court.

It'll be the 11th final at the All England Club for Williams and the first for Halep, whose only major trophy came at the French Open last year.

"I look forward to it," Williams said.

Why wouldn't she? She owns a 9-1 career record against Halep, including a victory in the Australian Open's fourth round in January.

Still, the 37-year-old American also knows that she's been this close to No. 24 before: In 2018, her first season back on tour after the birth of her daughter, Olympia, Williams reached the finals at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open but lost each time.

That has left her Grand Slam total at 23, a record for the professional era and one fewer than Margaret Court accumulated while playing part of her career against amateur competition.

"I have a great job and I love what I do," Williams said, "and I'm still pretty good at

what I do, I guess."

It's been an up-and-down year because of illness and injury, limiting Williams to 12 matches until last week. After a third-round loss at Roland Garros on June 1, she stayed in France for medical treatment and finally felt pain-free while preparing for Wimbledon in England.

"It's definitely a lot better," Williams said. "Every match, I know that I'm improving."

After a three-set struggle against Alison Riske in the quarterfinals Tuesday, Williams was at her dominant best against Strycova, who appeared limited by some sort of issue with her right leg. As it is, the 33-year-old Strycova was the oldest first-time Grand Slam semifinalist in the professional era.

Williams played cleanly, accumulating nearly twice as many winners as unforced errors, 28-10. She was at her usual court-covering best, which helped limit Strycova to 10 winners. And Williams played calmly.

The semifinal's turning point came quickly. Ahead 2-1 in the first set while Strycova served at 30-all, Williams sailed a backhand return way long and let out a cry of "Aaah!"

Maybe that got her going, because she simply took over.

Williams took the next point with a swinging forehand volley winner on the 16th stroke, then one after that when Strycova's mediocre drop shot landed in the net. Having offered up a break point, Strycova crouched at the baseline and rested her racket on her head.

A cross-court forehand passing shot delivered the break for Williams, and Strycova bent over again, one of the initial signs that she was dealing with something

physical.

The runaway was on: Williams seized seven points in a row and 16 of 20 to close out that set.

Strycova would repeatedly flex or shake her legs between points or try to stretch in her sideline chair by pulling her right foot onto her left knee and rocking her leg. Nothing was going to help her slow down Williams on this afternoon, and the match was over after 59 minutes.

Halep seemed headed for a long day when her semifinal against Svitolina began with a pair of games encompassing 32 points across 20 minutes.

Halep excels at this type of play, more frequently seen on clay courts than grass, and soon enough was on her way to her fifth Grand Slam final.

Like Strycova, Svitolina never had been to the final four at any Slam. Svitolina made things competitive enough at the outset.

Five of the first 11 points lasted at least 10 strokes; two went 23.

Svitolina even earned three break chances in that opening game, but Halep eventually held there on the 16th point. Another game of the same length followed, and there again were three break points, except the difference was that Halep converted her last when Svitolina pushed a backhand wide.

While Svitolina would break back at love, that was pretty much the end of her challenge to Halep, who scrambled to cover the court so well, took balls early and created angles that earned her points.

"She played unbelievable today," Svitolina said. "She was moving really good, striking the ball perfectly."

Teuns wins Tour's sixth stage; Ciccone takes lead

Associated Press

CHAMPAGNEY, France — Two Tour de France rookies stole the show on the first mountain stage, with Dylan Teuns of Belgium winning Stage 6 and Giulio Ciccone of Italy taking the overall race lead on Thursday.

Teuns and Ciccone were rewarded for their enterprise and endurance on the terrible climb to the Planche des Belles Filles ski station in the woody Vosges mountains of eastern France. Some riders were so exhausted

at the top that race workers had to help them stay upright on their bikes after they crossed the line.

Teuns and Ciccone, both racing their first Tour, were part of a breakaway of 14 riders that sped away from the pack early in the 100-mile trek. By the end, at the top of the climb, they were the last two survivors of that group, fighting head-to-head for the win.

Ciccone cracked first on the final 24% incline, as Teuns cranked on ahead of him to the

line.

But Ciccone got a delightful consolation prize, in the shape of the yellow jersey.

"It's an incredible day. I can't grasp what's happening," the Italian said.

The previous wearer of the iconic shirt, French rider Julian Alaphilippe, did everything he could to keep it, battling behind up the ascent, through clouds of dust kicked up by Teuns and Ciccone on a section without tarmac.

But Alaphilippe fell just six

seconds short, losing the race lead he first took on Stage 3.

The severity of the climb turned out to be a revealing gauge of the fitness of some of the top Tour contenders who will battle for the race lead on even tougher climbs to come in the Alps and Pyrenees.

Geraint Thomas, the defending champion, rode strongly on the final incline, getting ahead of his teammate Egan Bernal.

"A decent day," Thomas said.