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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Iraqi forces enter militant-held Fallujah

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi special forces battled their way into the center of Fallujah on Friday, capturing a key neighborhood and a government complex from Islamic State group fighters, and thousands of residents fled as the militants' grip on the city appeared to crumble.

As Islamic State fighters abandoned some checkpoints that had kept people bottled up in the city, residents surged to leave, some jumping into the Euphrates River to swim to safety, others picking their way down roads laced with hidden bombs. In some cases, the Islamic State group allowed people to leave

only if they took the jihadis' families with them.

Iraqi forces now control about 80 percent of Fallujah, with the remaining militants largely concentrated in several districts on the city's northern edge, the special forces commander, Brig. Haidar al-Obeidi, told The Associated Press.

The Iraqi drive into the center came after weeks of fighting in Fallujah, the last major city in Iraq's western Anbar province still held by the Islamic State group. The militants overran the city in early 2014, the first urban area to fall into its hands before it overran most of Anbar and much of northern Iraq.

Early Friday, the special

forces punched into the central al-Nazzal neighborhood, which had served as a base for the militants with weapons warehouses and command centers, al-Obeidi said. After heavy fighting, backed by air support from the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi air force, the troops were able to move into the center at about 6 a.m. and take a major government complex.

"Iraqi forces are now in the center of the city. They had not been there since the beginning of 2014," al-Obeidi said.

He said his troops are besieging the nearby central hospital, clashing with Islamic State snipers in adjacent buildings. He said that according to intel-

ligence, the group has set up a command center on the hospital's third floor.

The Iraqi forces were also clearing roadside bombs near the government complex, which includes the municipality offices that the militants had torched, the police station and other government buildings. Troops are also clearing the highway west of the city, linking it to Baghdad, al-Obeidi said.

Aid groups had estimated that 50,000 civilians had been trapped inside Fallujah when the assault began several weeks ago, and thousands have been fleeing since. With the capture of the city center, the flight of many residents accelerated.

US airstrikes launching from 2 regions

BY CHRIS CHURCH

Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE USS BOXER — The 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit began airstrikes against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria on Thursday from the amphibious assault ship the USS Boxer, highlighting the flexibility of U.S. naval operations around the world.

The air campaign marks the first time the U.S. Navy has used ship-based aircraft from both the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf at the same time during Operation Inherent Resolve.

Coordinating these missions shows that the Navy has the ability to strike at any time and place of its choosing, Amphibious Squadron One Commodore Capt. Keith Moore said.

The 13th MEU's AV-8BII Harriers left the flight deck of the Boxer carrying the maximum payload of ordnance for

sorties against the Islamic State group over Iraq.

Two weeks ago, the U.S. Harry S. Truman began launching airstrikes against the Islamic State group from the Eastern Mediterranean. It was the first time the Navy had targeted the militant group from there.

The 13th MEU's commanding officer, Col. Anthony M. Henderson, said the operations from the Truman and the Boxer would be effective "countering ISIL's operations and supporting the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi government as they are trying to reclaim and push back ISIL from the areas of operation you are familiar with in Fallujah, Mosul and other places." He used an alternate acronym for the Islamic State group.

While amphibious assault ships like the Boxer cannot conduct as many airstrike

sorties as an aircraft carrier — the 13th MEU deployed with six Harriers — it brings other unique capabilities to the theater. An amphibious ready group and an MEU can support a variety of contingencies within a theater of operations, Henderson said, including airstrikes, embassy reinforcement, humanitarian assistance and maritime security operations, among other capabilities.

The Boxer's amphibious ready group and the embarked 13th MEU comprise 4,500 sailors and Marines on three ships — the Boxer, the USS New Orleans and the USS Harpers Ferry.

Currently, each of the three ships is in a different part of the 5th Fleet area of operations, which covers some 2.5 million square miles, including the conflict-prone Persian Gulf.

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President urged to change Syria stance

WASHINGTON — Dozens of State Department employees signed and submitted a memo early this week urging President Barack Obama's administration to adopt a more aggressive stance against the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad, including the use of military force.

The 51 signatories to the document, which was sent through the department's internal "dissent channel," were largely midlevel diplomats based in Washington and overseas, including a Syria desk officer and the consul general in Istanbul, and some described by one official as having "only peripheral involvement" with Syria policy.

The memo also calls on the administration to respond to the worsening humanitarian situation in Syria, where at least a quarter of a million people have been killed in five years of civil war.

From The Washington Post

VA stops enforcing new law on firing employees

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs notified Congress on Friday that it will no longer enforce a law passed after the 2014 wait-time scandal aimed at quickly firing employees.

The law reduced the appeals process by fired employees to just three weeks, versus many months, and was designed to root out a perceived culture of corruption at the VA as part of the \$16 billion Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act.

But the streamlined appeals process has raised legal concerns since being unveiled two years ago. It took a final hit late last month when the Justice Department agreed with former Phoenix VA director Sharon Helman that the short appeals were unconstitutional, leaving open the possibility that the executive at the center of the 2014 scandal someday could return to work.

The VA has struggled to fire or reprimand a series of executives charged with misconduct since the scandal. Its announcement Friday left lawmakers frustrated and scrambling for new reform legislation on employee firings.

“It is outrageous and unconscionable that the VA is choosing to blatantly ignore all of the accountability reforms set in place by the Veterans Choice Act,” Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, said in a released statement.

The VA did not immediately provide comment.

Before the 2014 scandal, terminated VA employees had the same option as other federal employees. They could appeal their termination to the Merit Systems Protection Board in a process that could typically take months.

Pressure built to fire executives — and to do it more quickly — after a joint VA-White House investigation during the summer of 2014 found a “corrosive culture” and widespread poor management at veteran hospitals. Congress passed a dramatically scaled-back appeals process with an administrative judge making a final decision within 21 days and no appeal options.

At the time, lawyers who specialize in federal employment cases as well as a group representing federal executives warned the changes were a “recipe for disaster” and were likely unconstitutional.

Navy lifts some curbs over drinking in Japan

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy in Japan rescinded restrictions on sailors’ drinking alcohol in their homes and on base Friday but retained an off-base booze ban ordered in the wake of multiple high-profile arrests.

Sailors living on or off base can purchase and drink alcoholic beverages at home, though sailors in paygrades E-5 and below still must file plans with their command for off-base activities outside the home, according to a Navy statement Friday.

Sailors E-5 and below are also required to have a liberty buddy when drinking alcohol at on-base bars and restaurants.

“The temporary restriction on alcohol was not intended to be a punishment, nor was it ever intended to be permanent,” Rear Adm. Matthew Carter, Commander Naval Forces Japan, said in a statement. “We took this pause to train and reflect on the dangers of alcohol abuse. We must all be on the lookout to step in before alcohol-related incidents jeopardize our relationship with Japan.”

No sailors had been arrested for off-base incidents since the restrictions began, Navy officials said Friday. Navy officials have asked civilians, contractors and family members to “show solidarity” with active-duty sailors and not drink alcohol off-base, though they were not required to do so.

The Navy Exchange resumed selling alcoholic beverages on bases. The Navy ordered restrictions on all alcohol consumption for active-duty sailors in Japan on June 6, two days after Okinawa police reported that a sailor drove drunk down the wrong side of a highway and injured other drivers. That arrest came in the middle of a military-declared mourning period for Rina Shimabukuro, 20, who was found dead in an Okinawa forest in April. Police have recommended murder and rape charges for Kenneth Franklin Gadson, a civilian base worker and former Marine who also goes by the last name Shinzato.

The incidents have sparked anti-base demonstrations on Okinawa.

Afghans ready to fight Pakistan as tensions mount

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan that escalated in recent days has spurred thousands of Afghans to say they would take up arms on behalf of the government to fight longtime rival Pakistan, officials said.

Clashes erupted Sunday amid growing anger over Pakistan’s moves to tighten border controls — building a gate at the well-trafficked Torkham crossing and requiring Afghans to have a valid passport and visas to enter the country, rather than just identification cards.

Authorities in Kabul have opposed the gate, which is being constructed on land claimed by both countries along the strategically important Khyber Pass, about 120 miles east of Kabul.

Pakistani officials said the new measures were needed to help keep militants out.

A cease-fire appeared to be holding Thursday after days of sporadic cross-border fire that, according to local officials, left three Afghan border guards dead and killed a Pakistani army officer. Dozens of others were reported injured on both sides.

“Thousands of people contacted our office from different provinces of Afghanistan, saying they are ready to come over and help out and even go to the front line to

fight,” said Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman for the governor of Nangarhar province, where the Torkham crossing is located.

Relations between the two countries have long been strained. Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of offering safe haven to Taliban militants. Last month, a U.S. drone strike killed the Taliban’s leader inside Pakistani territory. However, authorities in Pakistan repeatedly deny assisting the militants.

The clashes at the Torkham crossing mark the latest setback for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s efforts to improve relations with Pakistan in the hope that Islamabad could help bring the Taliban to the negotiating table for peace talks aimed at ending the 15-year war.

It comes down to Game 7 for stars

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — It's the two-time reigning Most Valuable Player who is trying to finish off a record-setting season with a second consecutive NBA title, against a two-time champion who is tantalizingly close to finally ending Cleveland's 52-year title drought.

Steph vs. LeBron.
Warriors vs. Cavaliers.
Game 7 awaits on Sunday night to decide these NBA Finals, decide the legacy of the season that has been put together by Stephen Curry and Golden State, and maybe even decide a big chunk of LeBron James' legacy of his second time around in Cleveland, as well.

"I'll take it," James said.
"Forty-eight minutes left," Curry said.
This series is still going because James had his second consecutive 41-point game in Cleveland's 115-101 victory Thursday with the Cavaliers again facing elimination. He's the fifth player in NBA Finals history to post back-to-back games of 40 or more, alongside Jerry West, Shaquille O'Neal, Rick Barry and Michael Jordan.

He has answered the call when his team has needed him most. He even let Curry know how he felt with a little trash-talking after blocking a layup late in Game 6.
"At the end of the day my whole mindset is how I can put myself in position to help these guys be successful and I could be successful as well," James said. "I don't really get caught up in what everybody else talks about."

Now it's on Curry to answer. He had 30 points in Game 6, but got into foul trouble again — the Warriors said some of the calls were flat wrong, and that will surely earn coach Steve Kerr a fine before Game 7 after he offered a very clear, impassioned plea that Curry wasn't getting the sort of whistle that an MVP merits.

Curry got ejected after fouling out, throwing his mouthpiece and hitting a fan. He was trying to throw it at the scorer's table and missed, which strangely fit a night where the Warriors shot only 40 percent.

It won't be 1-on-1 Sunday night. But if the former MVP — who still very well may be the best player in the world — outduels the current MVP, the Larry O'Brien Trophy might be taking up occupancy in Cleveland for the first time.

James again keeps Cavs alive

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — From the edge of elimination to the brink of history.
LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers have pushed the NBA Finals to their limit. Game 7 is necessary.

James scored 41 points, delivering another magnificent performance with the season on the line, Kyrie Irving added 23 and the Cavs sent the Finals packing for California by beating the rattled Golden State Warriors 115-101 on Thursday night to even this unpredictable series and force a decisive game.

Cleveland saved its season for the second time in four days and will head back to Oakland's Oracle Arena for Sunday's climactic game with a chance to become the first team to overcome a 3-1 deficit in the NBA Finals, and more importantly, give this title-starved city its first major sports championship since Dec. 27, 1964.

"One more game left," James said. "I'll play it anywhere."

James added 11 assists, eight rebounds and again outplayed two-time league MVP Stephen Curry, who fouled out and was ejected in the fourth quarter.

The Warriors never imagined being in this spot. The defending champions, who powered their way to a record 73 wins in the regular season, won the first two games by 48 combined points. Curry and his teammates have lost their touch, their

poise and are in danger of seeing their historic season — and a second consecutive title — vanish.

Curry was ejected with 4:22 left after he was called for his sixth personal foul, cursed several times at an official and fired his mouthpiece into the front row, striking a fan. Curry finished with 30 points, Klay Thompson had 25 and Draymond Green, back from a one-game suspension, had 10 rebounds.

Warriors coach Steve Kerr felt the officiating was biased against Curry.

"He gets six fouls called on him, three of them were absolutely ridiculous," Kerr said. "As the MVP of the league, we're talking about these touch fouls in the NBA Finals. I'm happy he threw his mouthpiece."

Curry walked off the floor smiling before making the long walk to the locker room.

"I didn't think I fouled either Kyrie or LeBron," said Curry, recounting fouls No. 5 and 6. "It was obviously frustrating fouling out in the fourth quarter of a clinching game and not being out there with my teammates. So it got the best of me, but I'll be all right for the next game."

On Wednesday, James called Game 7, "the two best words ever."

He'll live them once more, thanks to a spellbinding effort — the two-time champion had a hand in 27 consecutive points during a stretch in the second half — and

put away the Warriors after they trimmed a 24-point deficit to seven in the final period. James scored 14 in the fourth before checking out to a thunderous ovation in the final minutes as Cleveland fans chanted, "Cavs in 7!" and "See you Sunday!"

"It's LeBron being LeBron," Cavs coach Tyronn Lue said. "He's one of the greatest of all-time. Our back was against the wall and he took it upon himself, him and Kyrie, they put us on their backs. They've got us to where we wanted to be and that's Game 7."

In typical Cleveland fashion, there were some heart palpitations in the fourth. The Cavs were up 70-46 in the third, and when J.R. Smith blindly dropped a lob pass to a trailing James for a dunk, Quicken Loans shook with noise.

The Warriors, though, weren't done. On the same floor where they won their title exactly one year ago, Thompson made a pair of three-pointers as Golden State, playing without injured center Andrew Bogut, used a 25-10 run to pull within 80-71 entering the final 12 minutes.

James, as he did while winning two titles in Miami, made sure those belonged to him and extended Cleveland's dream season.

For the Warriors, a golden year is suddenly stained.

"The playoffs haven't been easy," Curry said. "But we've given ourselves a chance with Game 7 at home."

US earns berth in Copa America semis

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Another benchmark for the United States. Another huge goal for Clint Dempsey.

As unlikely as it seemed a few weeks ago, the U.S. is in the semifinals of the Copa America.

Dempsey scored for the third straight game and set up Gyasi Zardes for a tap-in goal, boosting the United States into the Copa America semifinals with a wild 2-1 win over Ecuador on Thursday night.

"Clint is special," U.S. coach Jurgen Klinsmann said. "He showed that tonight. He showed that the last couple of weeks. He showed that throughout his entire career."

Playing before a boisterous and almost completely partisan home crowd of 47,322

in the soccer-mad Pacific Northwest, the U.S. won a knockout game against a nation outside its region for only the second time other than in the CONCACAF Gold Cup. It will play Argentina or Venezuela on Tuesday in Houston.

And the Americans did it on the back of Dempsey, their fiery 33-year-old striker whose place on the U.S. team was debated early this year. Dempsey's 52nd international goal, five behind Landon Donovan's American record, put the U.S. ahead in the 22nd minute.

Zardes guided Dempsey's cross into the net in the 65th for his sixth goal and a 2-0 lead.

"I've been blessed that I was able to step up and, hopefully, I can keep going," Dempsey said. "I thought we played well. I thought we created some good chances

in front of goal. We were unlucky not to score more."

Michael Arroyo scored for Ecuador in the 74th minute, making for a tense ending, and Enner Valencia missed a pair of great chances moments later on a pair of headers.

It was a chippy game that became costly for the U.S. American midfielder Jermaine Jones was shown a red card during a 52nd-minute confrontation that also saw Ecuador winger Antonio Valencia sent off after a second yellow card for a harsh tackle on Alejandro Bedoya along the sideline.

Jones will be suspended for the semifinal along with Bedoya and Bobby Wood, who both got their second yellow cards of the tournament.

Broncos LB says he'll sit if deal isn't done

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — The Denver Broncos' summer break began with an ominous message from superstar Von Miller. The Super Bowl MVP suggested he'll sit out the 2016 season if general manager John Elway doesn't meet his contract demands in the next month.

One day after saying on Chelsea Handler's new Netflix show that there was no way he'd consider skipping the season, Miller posted a photo on Instagram on Thursday that said: "I love my Teammates, Coaches, and My Fans" but there is "No Chance" I play the 2016 season under the Franchise tag."

If the sides can't agree on a long-term

extension by July 15, Miller would have to play this season on the franchise tag of \$14.129 million — or he could choose to sit out the season.

If he played for the tender, the Broncos could use their exclusive franchise tag on him again next year, putting him in the same situation.



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Nats earn 9th win in 11 games

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Bryce Harper and Wilson Ramos hit back-to-back homers and Anthony Rendon added a solo shot as the Washington Nationals beat the San Diego Padres on Thursday night for their ninth victory in 11 games.

Tanner Roark (6-4), who won his third straight against the Padres, worked six innings, surrendering four runs and seven hits. He walked two and struck out five.

Shawn Kelley pitched the ninth for his second save in as many chances.

Erik Johnson (0-2), who was acquired from the Chicago White Sox on June 4 in the deal for James Shields, struggled again. He was charged with five runs, seven hits and two walks over six innings. He struck out two in his second start with the Padres.

Orioles 5, Red Sox 1: Tyler Wilson allowed three hits in eight innings, Adam Jones added a home run and three RBIs, and visiting Baltimore got its second series win against Boston this season.

Baltimore scored three runs in the first four innings and added two in the fifth. The Orioles have hit 33 home runs in their past 13 games.

Wilson (3-5) was strong throughout, striking out six. Pitching on an extra day of rest, he held Boston to one hit through six innings.

Eduardo Rodriguez (1-2) took the loss, lasting just 41/3 innings and giving up eight hits and five runs in his fourth start of the season.

Mets 6, Pirates 4: Neil Walker and Michael Conforto provided an immediate jolt in his return from a nagging injury, and Bartolo Colon pitched host New York past Pittsburgh.

Curtis Granderson set a Mets record for leadoff homers (17), while Walker also went deep and had three RBIs against his former team after missing the previous three games with a sore lower back.

Conforto, who hadn't started since Saturday, landed on his ailing left wrist when he saved a run with a sensational diving catch in the first inning. Showing no ill effects, the left fielder followed Walker's two-run shot in the third inning with a home run to end a 5-for-54 slump.

Colon (6-3) doubled and scored earlier in the inning on Yoenis Cespedes' deep sacrifice fly.

All three Mets homers came off Juan Nicasio (5-6), who gave up six runs and seven hits in 41/3 innings.

Blue Jays 13, Phillies 2: J.A. Happ al-

lowed three hits and an unearned run in seven innings and Toronto hit five home runs in a victory over host Philadelphia.

Happ (8-3) struck out five as he improved to 4-0 against his former team. It was the Blue Jays' third consecutive victory over the Phillies, and they have outscored them 31-7 in those games.

Kevin Pillar hit two homers and Edwin Encarnacion, Michael Saunders and Devon Travis added one apiece for the Blue Jays, who set season marks with the five homers and 17 hits.

Encarnacion hit his sixth homer in as many games and his 18th of the season in the first inning against Phillies starter Aaron Nola (5-6). Encarnacion has eight home runs and 21 RBIs in June.

Yankees 4, Twins 1: Didi Gregorius hit a tiebreaking three-run homer in the seventh inning and CC Sabathia had another strong start as visiting New York stopped a four-game losing streak.

Fernando Abad relieved Twins starter Kyle Gibson (0-5) with one out in the seventh to face the left-handed Gregorius, after an infield single and a walk to start the inning. Abad, who hadn't allowed a homer all season and took a 0.79 ERA into the game, threw a first-pitch fastball to Gregorius that he hit into the right-field seats.

Gregorius is 6-for-11 with seven RBIs in his last three games. Lefties are batting just .125 against Abad.

Sabathia (5-4) needing 116 pitches to complete six innings, but he struck out seven and retired the last five batters he faced. Aroldis Chapman pitched the ninth for his 12th save in 13 attempts.

Mariners 6, Rays 4: Dae-Ho Lee drove in three runs, James Paxton (1-2) gave up three runs and seven hits in six innings and visiting Seattle avoided a three-game sweep.

Lee had an RBI single in a three-run first and drove in two with a double during the fourth.

Blake Snell, a 23-year-old Seattle native, was recalled from Triple-A Durham before the game and started for the Rays. Snell (0-1) allowed five runs — one earned — and eight hits in 31/3 innings.

Braves 7, Reds 2: Matt Wisler (3-7) allowed two runs and eight hits in 62/3 innings in his first win since May 20, ending a streak of four straight losing decisions.

A day after becoming the first major leaguer this year to hit for the cycle, Freddie Freeman had three hits, including a two-run homer, for host Atlanta.

Dan Straily (4-3) allowed a season-high

six runs, seven hits and three walks in 41/3 innings.

Brewers 8, Dodgers 6: Jonathan Villar hit a tiebreaking two-run home run in the top of the ninth inning to lift visiting Milwaukee to the victory.

Villar launched the first pitch he saw from Pedro Baez (0-2) an estimated 420 feet to straightaway center field for his sixth home run and first career game-winner in the ninth.

Tyler Thornburg (3-1) earned the win with a scoreless eighth inning. Jeremy Jeffress struck out Corey Seager with the bases loaded and two outs in the bottom of the ninth to preserve the win for his 19th save.

Aaron Hill and Chris Carter also homered for the Brewers, who ended a three-game losing streak.

Rangers 5, Athletics 1: Colby Lewis lost his no-hit bid for Texas in the ninth inning when Max Muncy opened with a double that glanced off right fielder Nomar Mazara's glove in visiting Texas' victory over Oakland.

Lewis was perfect until walking Yonder Alonso with two outs in the eighth. Two batters after Muncy's hit, Lewis (6-0) lost his shutout when left fielder Ryan Rua couldn't make a diving catch on a blooper by Coco Crisp that went for an RBI double.

Lewis walked one and struck out four in a two-hitter, matching the low-hit complete game of his big league career.

Daniel Mengden (0-2) allowed two runs — one earned — and four hits in 61/3 innings. He retired 15 consecutive batters before Ian Desmond homered leading off the seventh.

Tigers 10, Royals 4: Victor Martinez matched a career-best with three home runs and Detroit pounded six as a team in a victory over host Kansas City.

Martinez hit two solo shots and Nick Castellanos went deep before James McCann homered off Royals reliever Luke Hochevar (1-1) leading off the seventh to tie the game 4-4. Cabrera followed moments later with a two-run shot that gave the Tigers their first lead.

Detroit added three runs in the eighth before Martinez hit his third homer in the ninth. The veteran designated hitter's other three-homer game came on July 16, 2004, at Seattle.

Justin Verlander (7-5) allowed four runs on eight hits in seven innings, continuing his mastery of the Royals at Kauffman Stadium. Verlander improved to 13-5 in 22 starts in the ballpark.

Landry shoots 66 in US Open

Associated Press

OAKMONT, Pa. — Andrew Landry needed only one shot Friday morning to set an Oakmont record at the U.S. Open.

Landry rolled in a 10-foot birdie putt on the ninth hole to finish his rain-delayed first round at 4-under 66, giving him a one-stroke lead over Lee Westwood among the first half of the field that finally finished nearly 24 hours after it started.

In the 10 majors at Oakmont in stroke play, Landry set a record for the lowest score in the opening round. The previous record was 67 by Ben Hogan in the 1953 U.S. Open and Tom Watson in the 1978 PGA Championship. This is Landry's first U.S. Open.

"History is history," Landry said. "I'm just playing golf."

Dustin Johnson stood stunned on the final green of the U.S. Open last year at Chambers Bay, trying to comprehend how he three-putted to allow Jordan Spieth to escape with the championship.

If he can continue playing like he has so far Friday he should be in contention to finally win the first major of his career.

Teeing off a day later than scheduled, Johnson played near flawless golf from tee to green, inching his way up the leaderboard. Through 15 holes he was at 3 under par, just a shot off the lead of Andrew Landry.

Johnson used his length off the tee to his advantage, stumbling only with a three-putt on the par-5 fourth hole, where he had 30 feet for eagle.

Johnson appeared ready to win last year's Open after hitting his second shot within 15 feet on the final hole. But his putt slipped by the hole, and he missed the one coming back for a heartbreaking loss.

Phil Mickelson is giving fans something to cheer about as he chases the only major championship he has never won.

Mickelson didn't tee off until midmorning Friday, but his front nine gave his fans some hope that he can break his U.S. Open curse and finally capture the Open title.

Mickelson, who has been runner-up six times in the Open, bogeyed his first hole but quickly settled down and made the turn in 1-under par. He began the back nine just three shots off the early pace, much to the delight of fans.

Jason Day, Mickelson and the others faced as many as 36 holes, a long walk on soggy ground, though in favorable conditions for a U.S. Open.

Westwood finished with two birdies for a 67, his lowest start in a U.S. Open and only the third time in 17 appearances he has opened with a round under par.

Even with all the rain, only seven players from the early starters managed to break par. The average score was 75.22.

Defending champion Jordan Spieth three-putted the par-5 fourth for a bogey and made only one birdie in his round of 72.

"I didn't shoot myself out of it," Spieth said. "I'm not really sure how my score stands right now, but I know that at the end of the day, the USGA is going to try to have even par win the golf tournament, and I know that I can shoot 2 under in the remaining 54 holes no matter how the course plays. I know I'm capable of it."

The road back is much longer for Masters champion Danny Willett, Rory McIlroy and Rickie Fowler. They played in the same group and were a combined 18-over par. Willett had a 75, Fowler a 76 and McIlroy made bogey on five of his last six holes for a 77. McIlroy matched his highest U.S. Open score.

IAAF upholds ban on Russian athletes

Associated Press

VIENNA — The IAAF upheld its ban on Russia's track and field team for the Rio de Janeiro Olympics on Friday in a landmark decision that punishes the world power for systematic doping.

The Russian sports ministry said it was notified of the decision by track and field's world governing body, which ruled that the country had not done enough to earn reinstatement.

The suspension was imposed in November following a report by a World Anti-Doping Agency commission that alleged state-sponsored cheating, corruption and cover-ups in Russian track and field.

The Russian ministry said it was "extremely disappointed" by the decision to ban the entire team from the Rio Games. It appealed to the IOC to "consider the im-

pact that our athletes' exclusion will have on the dreams and the people of Russia."

The International Olympic Committee has scheduled a summit of sports leaders next Tuesday to address "the difficult decision between collective responsibility and individual justice."

That meeting could potentially open the door for individual athletes who have never been accused of doping and are deemed to be clean to compete at the games.

"We will look at the next step for us," IOC vice president John Coates said earlier in Australia. "It's the IOC who have been testing and re-testing samples. The debate next Tuesday will be on the issue of individual justice and rights."

The decision to uphold the ban came in a meeting of the IAAF's ruling council. The IAAF acted on a recommendation by a special task force that has monitored

Russia's reform efforts.

The meeting came two days after a new WADA report cited continuing obstruction and violations of drug-testing in Russia.

"We are extremely disappointed by the IAAF's decision to uphold the ban on all of our track and field athletes, creating the unprecedented situation of a whole nation's track and field athletes being banned from the Olympics," the Russian sports ministry said. "Clean athletes' dreams are being destroyed because of the reprehensible behavior of other athletes and officials. They have sacrificed years of their lives striving to compete at the Olympics and now that sacrifice looks likely to be wasted."

The IAAF rejected a last-minute plea by Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko, who claimed the country had clean up its anti-doping system and met all the requirements for readmission.