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Senators seek to block AF's A-10 move

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senators are trying to block the Air Force from moving 18 A-10 Thunderbolts into its backup fleet, saying it amounts to a “backdoor divestment” as lawmakers continue to debate the future of the aircraft.

The group of eight lawmakers led by Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., say the move will unnecessarily siphon off A-10 personnel and reduce the military's ability to provide effective close air support to infantry troops.

The sidelining of up to 36 of the aircraft, also known as the Warthog, was approved by Congress in last year's defense budget. But A-10 supporters on Capitol Hill have not given up a legislative battle that is set to continue through this year's budget process over an Air Force proposal to retire the A-10, which the service says will

save money and make way for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

“Despite the growing need for the (close air support) capabilities that the A-10 provides, as evidenced by the deployment of A-10s to fight ISIS (the Islamic State group) and deter additional aggression in Europe, the Air Force continues to attempt to pursue a ‘backdoor’ divestment of the A-10 using a (backup aircraft inventory) plan,” Ayotte and her fellow senators wrote in a Feb. 25 letter.

About 300 Air Force personnel and 12 A-10s from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona arrived last month at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany as tensions with Russia over Ukraine rose.

On Friday, Air Force Secretary Deborah James said about 30 percent of close-air-support sorties have been flown by the A-10 during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It accounted

for about 11 percent of total sorties against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria even though it entered battle several months after the conflict began last August, according to the secretary.

The authorization passed last year by Congress — despite strong resistance — allows the service to move maintenance personnel out of A-10 units and reduce flight hours as it seeks to redistribute funding across a shrinking force. The Air Force and the other military services face a budget cap this year that is putting even more pressure on spending.

The senators acknowledged that the plans would free up valuable airmen but said the Air Force should find “other ways to meet maintenance personnel requirements that do not involve gutting the readiness of our nation's best close air support aircraft.”

The Air Force said Friday

that it is holding off on moving the remaining 18 Warthogs into its backup fleet, called BAI, despite the defense budget authorization.

“While we are authorized by Congress to put 36 aircraft into BAI status, doing that now would require taking down an entire squadron. Out of respect for the intent of Congress, we're placing 18 aircraft in BAI status,” James said in a released statement.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh said the service will revisit the decision later this year.

“This action represents the difficult choices required to balance between maintaining the capacity to meet current operational requirements and the resource investment required to keep our modernization efforts on schedule,” Welsh said in a written statement.

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USS Mississippi commanding officer relieved of duties

Honolulu Star-Advertiser

The commanding officer of the Pearl Harbor, Hawaii-based Virginia-class fast attack submarine USS Mississippi was relieved of his duties Friday due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command, the Navy said.

Cmdr. Tory Swanson was removed from his position by Capt. Harry Ganteaume, commander of Submarine Squadron 1. A command investigation into the circumstances leading to Swanson's relief is ongoing, the Navy said.

Cmdr. Brook DeWalt, a spokesman for the U.S. Pacific Fleet submarine force, said he was limited in what he could say but that the removal “was a matter of a professional nature.

‘[It] was a matter of a professional nature. Not a personal transgression or anything like that.’

Cmdr. Brook DeWalt

U.S. Pacific Fleet submarine force spokesman

Not a personal transgression or anything like that. It's issues revolving around operational decision-making.”

Swanson, who had served aboard the Mississippi since April 2013, has been administratively reassigned to the staff of the Pacific Fleet submarine force, the Navy said.

The Mississippi arrived at

Pearl Harbor on Nov. 25, the fourth new Virginia-class submarine to be homeported in Hawaii. The Navy said it was “a tangible manifestation of the Pacific Rebalance, and further exemplifies the importance we place on the Asia-Pacific region.”

Pearl Harbor is the sole Pacific home for Virginia-class subs,

which cost an average of \$2.7 billion, according to the Congressional Research Service.

With the Virginia-class, the Pacific Fleet submarine force gains greater undersea capability in the littorals, or offshore seas, where a lot of quiet foreign diesel electric subs operate.

A native of Arvada, Colo., Swanson enlisted in the Navy in 1989. He earned a Navy ROTC scholarship to Purdue University and graduated in 1996 with a major in Pre-Law/Interdisciplinary Engineering. Swanson served as engineer officer onboard the submarine USS Greenville out of Pearl Harbor from August 2003 to January 2006, completing Western and Eastern Pacific deployments.

PM: Iran nuke deal a threat to Israel's security

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted Monday that his plans to address Congress are not aimed at disrespecting President Barack Obama, even as he assailed the U.S. leader's bid for a nuclear deal with Iran as a threat to his country's survival.

"I have a moral obligation to speak up in the face of these dangers while there is still time to avert them," Netanyahu said during an address to a pro-Israel lobbying group in Washington.

As Netanyahu spoke, Secretary of State John Kerry was opening a new round of talks with Iran in Geneva aimed at reaching a framework nuclear deal ahead of a late March

deadline. Obama views the prospect of a nuclear accord with the Islamic republic as a central component of his foreign policy legacy.

While Obama and Netanyahu have never had a warm personal relationship, the prime minister's visit to Washington this week has exposed the depth of their tensions.

At the heart of this latest flare-up is Netanyahu's decision to address a joint meeting of Congress, a Tuesday event during which he is sure to criticize the nuclear talks. The speech was arranged by Republican leaders without the Obama administration's knowledge, a move the White House blasted as a breach of diplomatic protocol.

N. Korea fires missiles as joint exercise begins

BY ERIK SLAVIN
AND YOO KYONG CHANG
Stars and Stripes

North Korea fired two short-range missiles into the ocean Monday in an apparent response to the kickoff of the longest U.S.-South Korea annual military exercise.

"North Korea launched two missiles that are being assumed short-range ballistic missiles, having a range of more than 490 kilometers [304 miles], in the direction to the East Sea from Nampo between 6:32 a.m. and 6:41 a.m. today," according to a statement from the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff office.

Nampo is a city on North Korea's west coast. The East Sea is also known as the Sea of Japan.

South Korean defense officials told Stars and Stripes they believe the launches were a response to the start of the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises, which include sev-

eral thousand U.S. and South Korean troops.

"Our military is watching for the possibility of additional North Korean launches and various provocations while maintaining a readiness posture," a Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman said on condition of anonymity, which is customary.

Last year, North Korea launched missiles off its east coast in advance of the exercises, and has taken similar measures in the past. Each time, North Korean media has denounced the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises as acts of aggression.

A statement from North Korea's army, sent prior to Monday's missile launches, threatened South Korea with a "merciless baptism by fire," Ministry of Defense spokesman Kim Min-seok told reporters Monday.

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Iraq: Effort to retake Tikrit has commenced

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Backed by allied Shiite and Sunni fighters, Iraqi security forces on Monday began a large-scale military operation to recapture Saddam Hussein's hometown from the Islamic State extremist group, state TV said, a major step in a campaign to reclaim a large swath of territory in northern Iraq controlled by the militants.

Hours into the operation, a key test for the embattled Iraqi army, the military said it still hadn't entered the city of Tikrit, indicating a long battle lies ahead.

The Pentagon said the U.S. is not providing airstrikes in support of Iraq's ground offensive because the Iraqi government did not request it. Pentagon spokesman Army Col. Steve Warren, said the U.S. was alerted to the offensive before it started Monday.

Tikrit, the provincial capi-

tal of Salauhddin province, 80 miles north of Baghdad, fell into the hands of the Islamic State group last summer along with the country's second-largest city, Mosul, and other areas in the country's Sunni heartland after the collapse of national security forces. Tikrit is one of the largest cities held by Islamic State forces and sits on the road to Mosul.

Security forces so far have been unable to retake Tikrit, but momentum has begun to shift since soldiers, backed by airstrikes from a U.S.-led coalition, took back the nearby refinery town of Beiji in November. Any operation to take Mosul would require Iraq to seize Tikrit first because of its strategic location for military enforcements.

U.S. military officials have said a coordinated military mission to retake Mosul will likely begin in April or May.

Kerry in Russia amid tensions over Ukraine

The Associated Press

GENEVA — Secretary of State John Kerry met Monday with his Russian counterpart in what appeared to be less-than-amicable talks amid continuing tensions over Ukraine and American calls for a full probe into the murder of a prominent opposition figure in Moscow.

Neither Kerry nor Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov smiled or spoke substantively as they shook hands before photographers at a Geneva hotel on Monday, less than a week after Kerry told Congress that Russian officials have lied to his face about Moscow's role in Ukraine.

That comment drew a rebuke from the Russian Foreign Min-

istry. U.S. officials have pointed out that Kerry did not specifically accuse Lavrov of lying to him. They say he was referring to public statements and media reports, although Lavrov is the only Russian official Kerry is known to have met face-to-face in recent months. The pair last met in February on the sidelines of an international security conference in Munich shortly before a new Ukraine cease-fire agreement was agreed upon.

Both Ukraine and the Russia-backed rebels have accused each other of violating the truce and the meeting comes as the U.S. and its European allies contemplate additional sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

Johnson pulls away, earns win in Atlanta

The Associated Press

HAMPTON, Ga. — One by one, Jimmie Johnson picked off all the drivers ahead of him.

By the end, he was the guy everyone was chasing.

Good luck with that.

The six-time NASCAR Sprint Cup is already taking aim at No. 7.

With a performance that all but locked up his spot in the championship Chase, Johnson didn't even wait for the calendar to flip to spring to show that he'll be awfully tough to beat.

After starting near the back of the field because he didn't get a chance to qualify, Johnson pulled away after the final restart with 13 laps remaining to win Sunday at Atlanta Motor Speedway. He beat Kevin Harvick by nearly 2 seconds.

"When he's on, really switched on, and the car's in his comfort zone, it's amazing what he can do with a race car," said Chad Knaus, Johnson's longtime crew chief.

Johnson is the only driver to make the Chase through each of its first 11 years, but he's coming off an 11th-place finish in 2014 — the first time he's ever placed lower than sixth over a full season.

Some wondered, at age 39, if that signaled the beginning of a decline.

Not so fast.

"It takes the pressure off in some ways," said Johnson, who didn't pick up his first of his four victories a year ago until the 12th race.

He heads to Las Vegas next weekend knowing he remains the king of the mile-and-a-half tracks, like the one in Atlanta and the one he'll be racing on in Sin City. In some ways, this was the start of the real season, competing under the rules and on the style of track that will make up most of the 36-race schedule.

"I definitely think it gives you a sign of who's going to be competitive," Johnson said. "I feel really good coming here and having this kind of showing. What we did here, we can take to a lot of the race-tracks ahead."

While Johnson shined, NASCAR faced more questions about its safety procedures.

A week ago, Kyle Busch sustained serious injuries when his car crashed head-on into an exposed concrete wall during an Xfinity Series race at Daytona. Jeff Gordon was involved in another scary crash in Atlanta, slamming into a wall just

beyond the cushion of the SAFER barrier.

Busch, missing his second straight Cup race while recovering at home from a broken foot and leg, sent out a tweet directed at NASCAR after watching Gordon's crash on television.

"When will this end," he wrote.

Gordon was not injured, but he appeared angry as he talked with a safety worker. Track officials had increased the amount of padding in Atlanta after Busch's wreck, but there were still sections of unprotected walls, as there are at most tracks. Gordon's crash will surely step up pressure on NASCAR to mandate protective padding on all concrete walls.

"Hopefully, soon, they'll get that fixed," he said.

Gordon was making his final appearance at Atlanta, the track where he began his Cup career at the end of the 1992 season. The four-time champion, who plans to retire at the end of the season, is off to a rough start in his farewell tour after winning the pole for the Daytona 500. He finished 33rd in the season opener, where he was also caught up in a wreck, and ended up 41st in Atlanta.

The start of the race was delayed nearly an hour to allow the track to dry after

morning showers.

While the rain held off the rest of the way, the temperature was only 43 degrees when the green flag waved under low, thick clouds. Not surprisingly, the stands were not even half full, another blow for one of NASCAR's most historic tracks, which hasn't come close to selling out in recent years and even took down a large section of seats in the third turn before this race.

Atlanta once hosted two events a year, including the Cup finale, and even after losing its spring race still held a prime spot on the Labor Day weekend. But attendance woes led to the track's only race being shifted to the second week of the season, while north Georgia is still in grips of winter.

The result was predictable: cold temperatures and poor crowds all weekend. In fact, the sparse turnout in the stands appeared smaller than crowds of more than 50,000 that attended a pair of Supercross events at the Georgia Dome.

All weekend, drivers praised the speedway as one of their favorite tracks.

It sounded more like lobbying to keep Atlanta on the schedule beyond 2015.

Suh set to hit free agency

The Associated Press

DETROIT — Ndamukong Suh can test the open market when free agency begins March 10 after the Lions decided not to use the franchise tag on the star defensive tackle, according to a report on the team's website.

Monday was the deadline for teams to designate franchise or transition players. The Lions did not officially confirm the decision to let the deadline pass without franchising their 28-year-old All-Pro, but the report on the team's website said Detroit concluded that the franchise tag's price of around \$27 million for Suh proved too daunting.

Last month, general manager Martin Mayhew said he was optimistic about getting a deal done with Suh, but the franchise tag was probably the team's best source of leverage, and even that would have come at a prohibitive cost.

Suh has been a force in the middle of Detroit's defensive line ever since the Lions drafted him with the second overall pick in 2010. He has 36 sacks in five seasons, including 8½ in 2014, when the Lions made the playoffs as a wild card while boasting one of the league's top defenses.

Suh has been hit with several fines in his career for his aggressive on-field actions, and he was nearly suspended for Detroit's playoff game at Dallas last season — a one-game ban for stepping on Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers was overturned on appeal. But that occasional drama has done little to detract from Suh's overall value to the Lions, who now face the prospect of having to bid against other teams for his services.

Suh, quarterback Matthew Stafford and wide receiver Calvin Johnson — all of whom came to the Lions via high draft picks — have helped Detroit reach the postseason twice in the last four years. The Lions were able to secure Stafford and Johnson on long-term deals beyond their rookie contracts, but so far they've been unable to sign Suh.

Also:

■ The Kansas City Chiefs signaled they have no intention of parting ways with Justin Houston on Monday, moving swiftly to place the franchise tag on their All-Pro pass rusher.

The Chiefs made the decision to use the non-exclusive designation well ahead of the afternoon deadline, a person familiar with the move told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team had yet to announce the move.

The 25-year-old Houston set a franchise-record with 22 sacks last season, just a half-sack short of the NFL record. He also made 68 tackles while playing the final year of his rookie deal.

■ The Denver Broncos have placed their franchise tag on star receiver Demaryius Thomas, guaranteeing him roughly \$12.8 million next season and buying them more time to work out a long-term deal.

General manager John Elway used that same tactic before re-signing kicker Matt Prater and left tackle Ryan Clady before training camp in recent years.

Selected 22nd overall in 2010 out of Georgia Tech, Thomas has made the Pro Bowl in each of his three seasons with Peyton Manning at quarterback.

Seller's market for NHL

The Associated Press

General managers, count your draft picks. In this trade market, they're valuable currency.

In the days leading to Monday's NHL trade deadline, draft picks have been moving at a swift pace. It's a seller's market and much more selling could be coming.

Already the Toronto Maple Leafs, Carolina Hurricanes and Arizona Coyotes have gotten first-round picks for Cody Franson and Mike Santorelli, Andrej Sekera and Antonie Vermette, and older players like Kimmo Timonen and Jaromir Jagr have fetched second-rounders and more.

The Montreal Canadiens made the first major move on the morning of trade deadline Monday by acquiring Jeff Petry from the Edmonton Oilers for draft picks.

The defenseman was considered one of the most likely players to be dealt before the 3 p.m. EST deadline. Petry can become an unrestricted free agent this summer.

In exchange for the 27-year-old player, Montreal sent a 2015 second-round draft choice and a conditional fifth-round pick to Edmonton.

Petry had been the subject of trade talk for several weeks. He said in an interview in Toronto last month that he's playing for a "contract moving forward" and wants to show he's a "guy that's going to bring intensity ... day in and day out."

The St. Louis Blues bolstered a defense that's been without All-Star Kevin Shattenkirk for a month, acquiring veteran Zbynek Michalek and a conditional third-round draft pick from the Arizona Coyotes for prospect Maxim Letunov.

The 32-year-old Michalek also is out, however, missing two weeks with a con-

cussion. In 53 games, he has two goals and six assists and is among the top shot blockers with 130.

The 19-year-old Letunov was a second-round draft pick last year, 52nd overall.

The Philadelphia Flyers traded defenseman Braydon Coburn to the Tampa Bay Lightning in exchange for defenseman Radko Gudas and draft picks.

The Flyers also will acquire first- and third-round picks in the 2015 draft.

Coburn had one goal and nine points in 39 games this season for the Flyers. Coburn has 37 goals and 129 assists over his 10-year career with the Flyers and Atlanta Thrashers. On Sunday, the New York Rangers acquired All-Star defenseman Keith Yandle from the Coyotes for defenseman John Moore, a top prospect and two draft picks.

Arizona also sent defenseman Chris Summers and a fourth-round draft pick to the Rangers, who gave up prospect Anthony Duclair, a conditional first-round draft pick in 2016 and a second-rounder this year.

The Rangers made two more deals ahead of the trade deadline, acquiring forward Carl Klingberg from the Winnipeg Jets for forward Lee Stempniak, and picking up forward James Sheppard from the San Jose Sharks for a fourth-round pick in 2016.

The Detroit Red Wings acquired forward Erik Cole from Dallas. The Stars got center Mattias Janmark, defenseman Mattias Backman and a second-round pick this year for Cole and a conditional third-round pick.

Also, Washington got forward Curtis Glencross from Calgary for second- and third-round picks this year.



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UConn upsets No. 21 SMU

The Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — UConn's Ryan Boatright isn't ready to give up on the idea of making it back to the NCAA tournament.

Boatright scored 23 points and Rodney Purvis had a career-high 28 and the Huskies (17-11, 10-6 American) beat a ranked opponent for the first time this season, upsetting No. 21 SMU 81-73 on Sunday.

"We finally got a signature win under our belt," Boatright said. "It gives guys the confidence that we can compete with these teams."

Daniel Hamilton scored 14 of his 16 points in the final 7:41 for UConn, which knocked the Mustangs (23-6, 14-3) out of first place in the American Athletic Conference.

Markus Kennedy had 18 points to lead SMU, which had won five straight, 13 of its past 14 and 21 of its past 23 games.

Yanick Moreira added 14 points, but 12 of them came in the first half. Sterling Brown added 13 points.

The Mustangs led only once, 53-51, on a jumper in the lane by Kennedy with 8:10 left.

Hamilton responded with back-to-back three-pointers to start a 17-4 UConn run. He hit a pair of free throws that gave UConn its largest lead at 68-57 with 4 minutes to play.

Kennedy cut the deficit to 71-67 on a jumper with 1:22 left. But UConn hit its free throws down the stretch.

The Huskies shot 53 percent from the floor and made nine of their 20 3-point attempts.

Going into the last week of the regular season, SMU is a half-game behind Tulsa, which beat Memphis in overtime on Saturday. The two teams meet in the regular-season finale on March 8.

UConn has won three straight and six of its past eight. The Huskies are in fifth place in the league, a game ahead of Memphis. The top five teams will get first-round byes when the conference tournament opens in Hartford on March 12.

No. 5 Wisconsin 68, Michigan State 61

Frank Kaminsky scored 31 points in his final home game, sophomore Nigel Hayes added 14 and host Wisconsin clinched at least a share of the Big Ten regular-season title with a win over Michigan State.

Kaminsky celebrated Senior Day with a dominating performance, going 11-for-17 from the field for the Badgers (26-3, 14-2).

The Spartans (19-10, 10-6) trailed by 22 points before rallying in the second half. Bryn Forbes' open three from the corner got them within 64-53 with about 2:30 left.

But Michigan State had no answer for Kaminsky.

He banked a short jumper off the glass for a 13-point lead with 1:52 left before blocking a shot on the other end to whip the crowd into a frenzy.

Forbes finished with 21 points.

No. 25 Providence 77, Marquette 66

LaDontae Henton's experience paid off for the Providence Friars.

The senior had 25 points and 15 rebounds in a win over visiting Marquette.

"He was a possessed man today, and I mean that in a very professional way," Friars coach Ed Cooley said.

"He showed that urgency and willed us, especially when things were getting tight."

Kris Dunn added 16 points and nine assists for the Friars (20-9, 10-6 Big East).

Marquette, which is in last place in conference play at 3-13, was led by Duane Wilson's 22 points and 21 from Matt Carlino. The Golden Eagles have lost five straight and 11 of their past 12.

"When you're a natural-born scorer, you're going to find ways to score," said Marquette coach Steve Wojciechowski about Henton, who was held scoreless for the game's first 10 minutes. "He is a big-time player."

Oregon 73, Stanford 70

Dwayne Benjamin made one of two free

throws with 14 seconds remaining to give Oregon the lead in a victory over host Stanford to clinch the third seed and a first-round bye in the upcoming Pac-12 Conference tournament.

Joseph Young, who scored 21 points, sank a pair of free throws with three seconds left after a missed Stanford shot.

Elgin Cook also scored 21 points for the Ducks (22-8, 12-5 Pac-12), who won their fourth straight and eight of nine overall. Benjamin finished with 15 points.

Chasson Randle scored 17 points to lead the Cardinal (18-10, 9-7), who fell into a fourth-place tie with UCLA, which holds the tie-breaker over Stanford.

Ohio St. 65, Purdue 61

Shannon Scott hit three free throws in the final 24 seconds and D'Angelo Russell scored 28 points to lead Ohio State, which rebounded from a 12-point deficit, past visiting Purdue.

Sam Thompson added 14 points for the Buckeyes (21-8, 10-6), who have won two in a row with two games left in the regular season. A.J. Hammons had 16 points, Rapheal Davis 15 and Dakota Mathias 10 for Purdue (19-10, 11-5).

UCLA 72, Washington St. 67

Norman Powell scored a career-high 28 points, hitting a key three-pointer with 1:34 to go, and UCLA topped visiting Washington State, giving the Bruins possession of fourth place in the Pac-12.

Tony Parker had 15 points and 10 rebounds off the bench, having lost his starting spot after he showed up late to the morning shootaround. Bryce Alford added 13 points and Kevon Looney 12.

The Bruins (18-12, 10-7 Pac-12) moved a half-game ahead of Stanford. They want to win their last regular-season game against Southern California to keep one of the top four seeds in the conference tournament and earn a first-round bye. Josh Hawkinson had 21 points and 14 rebounds and DaVonte Lacy added 19 points for the Cougars (12-16, 6-10).

Harden, Rockets top James, Cavs in OT

The Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden scored 33 points and LeBron James missed a pair of free throws with 4.2 seconds left in overtime, helping the Houston Rockets hold on for a 105-103 win over the Cleveland Cavaliers on Sunday.

James hit a three-pointer with 43.5 seconds left to get Cleveland within one. Harden and James got tangled up on Houston's next possession, but no foul was called and the shot clock expired.

James drove into the lane and was fouled by Josh Smith, but missed both free throws to finish 3-for-11 at the line.

Harden had his 26th 30-point game this season but dismissed any talk that the performance was some sort of statement about the MVP award.

"Every game is a statement for me," said Harden, who leads the NBA in scoring. "I'm just out here trying to prove myself — trying to win games."

James finished with 37 points in a chippy contest that had multiple technicals and a flagrant foul by Harden on James.

The Cavaliers had a chance to win in regulation but James held the ball until right before the buzzer and his jump shot bounced off the rim.

Clippers 96, Bulls 86

At Chicago, DeAndre Jordan had 26 rebounds and Chris Paul scored 28 points to lead Los Angeles.

The Clippers were behind 76-75 when Jamal Crawford made a three-pointer with 8:02 left. They never trailed the rest of the way.

Thunder 108, Lakers 101

At Los Angeles, Serge Ibaka had 18 points and 14 rebounds, and D.J. Augustin added 18 points and nine rebounds as Oklahoma City won without Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook.

Durant is out with a foot injury, and Westbrook underwent surgery on his right cheek Saturday in his native Los Angeles.

Trail Blazers 110, Kings 99

Damian Lillard scored nine of his 31 points in the fourth quarter and LaMarcus Aldridge had 26 points and 15 rebounds as visiting Portland beat Sacramento for its third straight victory.

Hornets 98, Magic 83

Mo Williams had 23 points and 11 assists as visiting Charlotte beat Orlando.

It was the fifth straight double-digit scoring game for Williams and his second time with double-digit assists since being dealt to Charlotte at the trade deadline.

Pacers 94, 76ers 74

Roy Hibbert had 14 points, 15 rebounds and five blocked shots to help host Indiana move three percentage points ahead of Brooklyn and Charlotte in the crowded race for the final Eastern Conference playoff spot.

Warriors 106, Celtics 101

At Boston, Stephen Curry scored 37 points, making four straight free throws to clinch it in the final seconds as Golden State erased a 26-point deficit to win for the seventh time in nine games.

Pelicans 99, Nuggets 92

Tyreke Evans scored 22 points, Dante Cunningham drew a key charge late in the fourth quarter as visiting New Orleans extended its winning streak to five games by holding off struggling Denver.

Ovechkin, Capitals shut out Leafs

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin's offensive performance against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Sunday night was impressive.

His celebration after his first goal, however, was not.

Ovechkin scored his 40th and 41st goals of the season and added an assist, Braden Holtby made 32 saves, and the Capitals defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-0, snapping a three-game losing streak.

Ovechkin struck just 33 seconds into the game, then did his celebratory jump into the boards and promptly fell, but was laughing as his teammates arrived to congratulate him.

"I think a sniper was up there," Ovechkin joked after surpassing the 40-goal plateau for the seventh time. "Shot me in the foot."

Ovechkin scored in the second period, and Marcus Johansson and Joel Ward (empty net) added third-period goals for Washington.

Holtby picked up his seventh shutout and 30th win of the season.

"He made it look rather easy today," Capitals coach Barry Trotz said. "He was seeing the puck well."

Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom (as-

sist) moved into a tie for the NHL scoring lead with 65 points.

"He was launching them. He could have had five goals today," Trotz said of Ovechkin. "He was shooting BBs."

James Reimer stopped 28 shots for Toronto, which has lost 16 straight road games, six by shutout. The Maple Leafs went 0 for 4 on the power play. Washington took a 1-0 lead when Ovechkin took a pass just inside the blue line, skated into the left circle, and fired a wrist shot past Reimer for Washington's fastest goal to start a game this season.

Penguins 5, Blue Jackets 3

Evgeni Malkin scored twice and added an assist as host Pittsburgh's revived power play dominated Columbus.

David Perron, Steve Downie and Derrick Pouliot also scored for the Penguins, who have won four straight. Sidney Crosby picked up two assists and Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 22 shots as Pittsburgh sent the Blue Jackets to their sixth straight defeat.

Panthers 4, Lightning 3

Jaromir Jagr had a goal and an assist as host Florida beat Tampa Bay.

Aaron Ekblad, Brad Boyes and Aleksander Barkov also scored for the Panthers. Al Montoya made 20 saves, and

Jonathan Huberdeau had three assists.

Jagr was acquired in a trade with New Jersey on Thursday for two draft picks. He gave Florida a 1-0 lead when he scored 10:24 into the game.

Jets 5, Kings 2

Andrew Ladd scored twice as host Winnipeg boosted its playoff hopes with a win over Los Angeles.

The Jets also got goals from a pair of recent acquisitions, Drew Stafford and Tyler Myers, and held the defending Stanley Cup champions to 20 shots on goal in one of their more complete efforts of the season.

Ducks 3, Stars 1

Clayton Stoner scored the go-ahead goal in the third period with his first of the season as Anaheim beat host Dallas.

Stoner put a slap shot from the left point between the legs of Dallas' Jhonas Enroth. The goal was unassisted.

Canucks 6, Blues 5

Nick Bonino, Radim Vrbata and Chris Higgins scored in the shootout as host Vancouver recovered from blowing a three-goal lead for a win over St. Louis.

Eddie Lack made 34 saves for Vancouver, while Shawn Matthias, Yannick Weber, Jannik Hansen, Henrik Sedin and Bonino each had goals in regulation.