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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Dempsey optimistic about Tikrit battle

While not a 'sophisticated military maneuver,' top US general expresses confidence in plan

The Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain — The top U.S. general predicts the one-two punch of Iranian-backed militias and Iraqi government troops will prevail over Islamic State fighters in the unfolding battle for Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown.

But U.S. Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the expected successful push in Tikrit, about 100 miles north of Baghdad, would not be possible without U.S. airstrikes that have tied down the Islamic State group elsewhere in the north.

Dempsey was asked by reporters traveling with him overnight Friday from Washington to Bahrain whether he believes the Islamic State group will be pushed out of Tikrit.

"Yeah, I do," he said. "The numbers are overwhelming."

Dempsey said about 23,000 Iranian-backed Shiite militiamen and Iraqi soldiers are involved in the offensive, compared with "hundreds" of Islamic State group fighters.

The offensive is not what the Americans would consider textbook military tactics,

he said. He described a hodgepodge of Iraqi Humvees, trucks and other vehicles surging toward Tikrit like rush hour on the congested highway that encircles Washington, D.C.

"I wouldn't describe it as a sophisticated military maneuver," he said.

During his trip, Dempsey planned to meet with officials in Bahrain, and hold talks with government leaders and U.S. commanders in Iraq. He also planned to visit a French aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle, sent to the Persian Gulf as part of the military operations in Iraq with the U.S.-led coalition.

In the Tikrit offensive, which began Monday, the U.S. is on the sidelines, watching as Iran asserts influence by providing training, weapons and leadership for Iraqi Shiite militias leading the charge on Tikrit.

Dempsey said he sees no evidence that the Iranian military is fighting on the ground in Iraq. The Iranians have improved the Iraqi militias' fighting capabilities, but their role has raised worries among America's coalition allies. Among them are Gulf Arab nations that despise Iran.

The general said that while Iran is getting credit for enabling the Tikrit offensive,

the full story of how it was made possible has not been told.

"If it weren't for the (U.S.-led coalition) air campaign over time depleting the ISIL forces in Beiji ... then the current campaign (in Tikrit) as currently constructed would not be militarily feasible," he said, using a common acronym for the militant group.

Islamic State had surged into Beiji, just north of Tikrit, in hopes of controlling a key oil refinery. But the militants have been halted and tied down by U.S. airstrikes, Dempsey said. That little-noted Islamic State setback has divided and weakened its forces, he added.

"The important thing about this operation in Tikrit is less about how the military aspect of it goes and more about what follows," Dempsey said.

The mostly Sunni population of Tikrit must be allowed to return to their homes, and the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad must step in with reconstruction and humanitarian aid, he said.

If that happens, "then I think we're in a really good place," he said. If it does not happen, then the future could be problematic, he said.

Iraq: Militants raze another archaeological site

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi officials in the northern city of Mosul said Saturday that militants with the Islamic State group have begun demolishing the ancient archaeological site of Hatra in northern Iraq in a push to rid its territory of symbols it says promote idolatry.

An official with the ministry of tourism and antiquities' archaeological division in Mosul told The Associated Press that multiple residents living near Hatra heard two large explosions Saturday morning, then reported seeing bulldozers

begin demolishing the site. He spoke anonymously for fear of reprisal.

Saeed Mamuzini, a Kurdish official from Mosul, told the AP that the militants had begun carrying away artifacts from Hatra as early as Thursday and on Saturday, began to destroy the 2,000-year-old city.

Hatra, located 68 miles southwest of the city of Mosul, was a large, fortified city during the Parthian Empire and capital of the first Arab kingdom. The ancient city, a UNESCO world heritage site, is said to have withstood invasions by the Romans in A.D. 116 and 198 thanks to its

high, thick walls reinforced by towers.

"The destruction of Hatra marks a turning point in the appalling strategy of cultural cleansing underway in Iraq," said Irina Bokova, the director-general of UNESCO, and Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri, director general of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in a joint statement.

"With this latest act of barbarism against Hatra, (the Islamic State group) shows the contempt in which it holds the history and heritage of Arab people."

The Sunni extremist group

has been campaigning to purge ancient relics they say promote idolatry that violates their fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law. A video they released last week shows them smashing artifacts in the Mosul museum and in January, the group burned hundreds of books from the Mosul library and Mosul University, including many rare manuscripts.

On Friday, the group looted artifacts from Nimrud, a 3,000-year-old city in Iraq, and bulldozed it in a move United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon declared "a war crime."

NCIS investigator testifies on Hamdania

By JENNIFER HLAD
Stars and Stripes

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — A top investigator in the 2006 killing of an Iraq civilian in Hamdania testified on Friday that when he first heard about the case, he believed it was a “good shoot.”

“I just didn’t think the Marines would do something like this,” James Connolly, who was an investigator for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service at the time, said in a pretrial hearing Friday.

He later added that he thought claims by the victim’s

family that the man was murdered were “just another way for the Iraqis to get money from the United States.”

But after a few days of site visits and witness interviews, everything went “sideways,” Connolly said.

A Navy corpsman in Sgt. Lawrence G. Hutchins III’s squad “spilled his guts” about the killing to another investigator, Connolly said, changing the possible wrongful death into a homicide investigation.

Hutchins was convicted in 2007 of unpremeditated murder, larceny and making a false official statement in the killing.

He has already served more than six years of his 11-year sentence.

Hutchins’ conviction was overturned in 2011, reinstated and then overturned again in 2013 because he was placed in solitary confinement for a week with no access to an attorney during the interrogation.

Now, he’s facing another court-martial for the same incident despite efforts by his civilian lawyer to have the case thrown out because of comments made by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus that he believes amount to unlawful command influence.

The attorney, Chris Oprison, called a handful of witnesses to speak on the issue.

One of them, retired Marine Corps lawyer Colby Vokey, said by telephone that after the comments were published in 2009, he heard Marines saying that it seemed like evidence that Hutchins couldn’t get a fair trial and that the Marine Corps was “out to get him.”

Prosecutor Maj. Adam Workman disputed the idea that comments made more than five years ago would have an impact on this court-martial.

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Army eases ban on transgender troops

WASHINGTON — The Army issued a directive Friday that protects transgender soldiers from being dismissed by mid-level officers, requiring the decision for discharge to be made by the service’s top civilian for personnel matters.

The Army’s new policy is the latest indication that the military’s ban on transgender troops may be eased or even lifted.

Last month, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told troops he was “very open-minded” about transgender troops, adding that nothing but a person’s ability to serve should keep them from serving.

Two days later, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said President Barack Obama endorsed Carter’s comments.

USA Today first reported on the policy change in the All Army Activities directive when it was in draft form. The Army declined to comment on it Friday, said Lt. Col. Alayne Conway, a spokeswoman.

In essence, the announcement places a moratorium on dismissals by requiring officers to explain their decision to discharge a transgender soldier to a civilian leader, a move many would view as potentially damaging to their careers.

From USA Today

CIA to see major reorganization

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Director John Brennan has ordered a sweeping reorganization of the CIA, an overhaul designed to make its leaders more accountable and close espionage gaps amid widespread concerns about the U.S. spy agency’s limited insights into a series of major global developments.

Brennan announced the restructuring to the CIA workforce, including a new di-

rectorate devoted to boosting the CIA’s computer hacking skills.

He said the move comes after nine agency officers spent three months analyzing its management structure, including what deputy CIA director David Cohen called “pain points,” organizational areas where the CIA’s bureaucracy does not work efficiently.

Briefing reporters with Cohen at CIA headquarters last week, Brennan said the chang-

es are necessary to address intelligence gaps that the CIA is not covering. He lamented that there is often no single person he can hold accountable for the spying mission in any given part of the world.

The changes Friday come against a backdrop of evidence that the CIA’s focus on hunting and killing terrorists since the Sept. 11 attacks has led to an erosion of the espionage and analytic capabilities the agency built during the Cold War.

50 years later, Selma in the spotlight

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

SELMA, Ala. — Swelling with pride at its place in history, this city is in a frenzy as it prepares to host a pair of presidents and tens of thousands more to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement’s bloody climax.

But under the spotlight, Selma’s blight is impossible to miss.

More than 40 percent of Dallas County’s residents live below the poverty line, compared with the national average of 14.5 per-

cent. Selma helped break down legal barriers, paving the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but economic ones have been more stubborn.

Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, along with nearly 100 members of Congress, were scheduled to appear Saturday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge for a ceremony.

The view shows a sleepy downtown. Vacant, boarded-up buildings dot the side streets.

A few blocks away is Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, where the Bloody Sunday march

began. Many of the 600 souls who were met that day with clubs and tear gas from white police and townspeople lived in a federal housing project adjacent to the church.

The tidy, red brick church now features a monument to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The George Washington Carver Homes are mostly unchanged.

Labor-intensive cotton farming has dwindled, as timber and catfish now are the primary agricultural products. Textile mills are long gone. Craig Air Force Base closed in 1977.

'Red Army' goes behind curtain

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Gabe Polsky wouldn't stop pestering him, so Slava Fetisov grudgingly promised 15 minutes to the American making a documentary about the Soviet Union as reflected through its dominant Red Army hockey team.

When the Hall of Fame defenseman finally met Polsky in Moscow, they ended up spending 18 hours together over three days, remembering and examining the halcyon days of arguably the greatest Soviet sporting institution.

Fetisov gradually realized this first-time documentarian had provided him with much more than an opportunity to remind the world about the brilliance of the smooth-skating, slick-passing Red Army club and, of course, the Soviet national team that is now best remembered in the West only as the victims of the Miracle on Ice in the 1980 Olympics.

"I don't know, for some reason I felt I could support this guy," Fetisov said.

"It was important to let the West know what we went through. He wanted to talk about the whole story. Most guys only want to talk about one story."

That would be the United States' upset victory over the Soviets at Lake Placid in a game that loomed over the Cold War until the USSR's dissolution. Fetisov often gets blank stares outside Russia when he reminds people that the Soviets and their Unified Team successor won the next three Olympics and seven of eight world championships with flair, teamwork and an unmatched consistency.

But Fetisov, the longtime Red Army captain, seized the chance to describe his lengthy struggle to escape the Soviet team's grip to pursue an NHL career, which ended with two Stanley Cup titles for the Detroit Red Wings.

"That's why I appreciate what Gabe did, to show the world what I went through," Fetisov said. "Maybe this will change the historical thinking, not only for the hockey, but for the future generations."

Fetisov's groundbreaking career is at the center of "Red Army," Polsky's evoca-

tive documentary currently opening in wider release around North America.

The film, which has received wildly positive reviews since premiering at Cannes last year, gives viewers a glimpse behind the Iron Curtain and a chance to see the players charged with the daunting task of being the sporting manifestation of the Soviets' military and political power.

"Red Army" is much more than a sports movie: Polsky's interviews humanize the monolithic Soviet machine. Fetisov recalls his parents' years of sacrifice just to put skates on his feet, while the players' bitter memories of famed coach Viktor Tikhonov belie their success under his dictatorial reign.

"It's a story that's largely unknown in the West, because we don't understand the Russian experience, what they went through," Polsky said. "This film puts a human face on what Russia was and is."

Polsky played hockey at Yale after growing up in Chicago as the son of Ukrainian immigrants. He has worked alongside celebrated German filmmaker and documentarian Werner Herzog, whose inventive spirit runs through several moments in "Red Army," such as an interview with a former KGB handler in a sunny park while a young girl blithely plays in the background among towering Soviet icons and statues.

The documentary blends remarkable archival footage — acquired through untold hours of sifting through Russian film archives — alongside insightful interviews and eye-catching graphics. And while "Red Army" is a cultural document, hockey is at its heart.

"What I think the Soviets did for sport, not just hockey, was a revolution," Polsky said. "It was like what the Beatles did for music. These guys did the same thing for sport. It was a cultural revolution. It was the most creative expression of sport we've ever seen."

The film's most touching moments chronicle Fetisov's relationship with Anatoli Tarasov, the coach who built the Red Army into a powerhouse. Tarasov was remarkably innovative for his time

and place, studying chess and dancing to foster creativity in his players.

Polsky unearthed remarkable footage of Tarasov at his dacha with Fetisov, and the defenseman's heart warmed at the reminders of the coach, who died in 1995.

"I would never forget this man," Fetisov said. "He was the best coach in the world, but he was not just my coach. He was my mentor, my teacher. I try to follow what he has done."

Fetisov's feelings are less fond for Tikhonov, who presided over the Red Army's dominant run from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. Leonid Brezhnev himself replaced Tarasov with Tikhonov, who kept his players confined to training for 11 months per year at times, refusing requests to spend time with dying parents.

Fetisov eventually fell out with Tikhonov and the Red Army team, beginning his protracted struggle to move to North America. He refused to give a large portion of his NHL contract to the government, delaying his departure until he finally won his freedom by going head-to-head with Dmitri Yazov, the Soviets' minister of defense.

Fetisov tells the whole story in "Red Army" in riveting detail.

"I thought it was important to open the gate for the Soviet hockey players, to be an ambassador and to fight the system that didn't allow you to do what you think was right," he said. "It was bigger than just to make money."

Three years after he nearly declined to participate in the documentary, Fetisov is its public face, appearing everywhere from the red carpet to "The Daily Show" to promote the story of his beloved team and the film's cultural message.

The defenseman never imagined "Red Army" would make such an impact on so many moviegoers who aren't even sports fans, but he understands its resonance.

"It's a good example of how people can be successful," Fetisov said. "When you get the right teammates, you can do lots of stuff. That's why maybe it touched people who never knew about hockey."

LA Galaxy open year with win

The Associated Press

CARSON, Calif. — Right after the LA Galaxy raised their latest championship banner and said one last farewell to Landon Donovan, they went right back to business as usual.

They dominated defensively. They infuriated captain Robbie Keane with missed opportunities.

And the Galaxy calmly rolled over the first opponent of their next title chase.

Jose Villarreal scored in the 65th minute, Keane added a late goal and the defending champs opened the 20th MLS season Friday night with a 2-0 victory over the Chicago Fire.

Brian Rowe earned the shutout with just one save in a one-sided performance by the Galaxy just three months after they raised their third MLS Cup trophy in four seasons at StubHub Center.

"It's just the first game, but I thought we were solid," defender Omar Gonzalez said. "One of our goals is to be good the whole season."

They're off to the right start, particularly at home. The Galaxy are unbeaten in 17 league games at StubHub since March 8, 2014.

The night began with another visit from the retired Donovan, who wore a suit and tie when he joined his former teammates on the field for a brief pregame ceremony honoring MLS' first five-time champion franchise in front of a sellout crowd.

The Galaxy hung a large temporary banner above the video board, but otherwise kept the night's focus on their future without the most accomplished player in U.S. history, who turned 33 years old Wednesday.

"It's very different not to see him in a jersey, but Landon is always supporting us," forward Gyasi Zardes said. "He still texts me from time to time. It's like he's still part of the team."

Coach Bruce Arena plans to try several strategies to fill the gap between Donovan's retirement and former England captain Steven Gerrard's arrival from Liverpool in July.

Villarreal and Kenney Walker started in midfield in the absence of Donovan and Marcelo Sarvas, who was traded to Colorado, but the lineup otherwise was filled with contributors to last year's title.

Villarreal, a native of nearby Inglewood, capitalized on the first chance to fill Donovan's spot on the left side of the Galaxy's midfield. After a handful of early near-misses, he buried a quick shot when two Chicago defenders failed to clear Stefan Ishizaki's cross.

Keane then delivered another score in the 81st minute with a vicious volley, picking up where he left off as last season's MLS MVP.

But the Galaxy's Irish star also had his body language in midseason form, gesturing demonstratively and even kicking the goalposts once when his teammates provided poor service. After Keane scored, he skipped his usual cartwheel-somersault celebration for what appeared to be an obscene gesture.

Keane didn't speak to reporters after the game.

Wild top Hurricanes, win fifth straight

The Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Minnesota Wild are on such a roll that just hanging close in games might be enough for them to accomplish their mission.

Mikael Granlund and Zach Parise scored in a two-minute span of the third period as the Wild won their fifth game in a row, defeating the Carolina Hurricanes 3-1 Friday night.

"We didn't play our best hockey the first two periods, but we were still 1-1," Granlund said. "Then we were more detailed and we knew we could be better."

Charlie Coyle also scored for Minnesota, which won its sixth consecutive road game. Jason Pominville had two assists.

Devan Dubnyk made 37 saves for the Wild, continuing the team's strong stretch since the All-Star break. Minnesota is 16-

2-1 since the layoff.

Dubnyk said he knew there were rough spots that the Wild could sort out so they would be able to win on back-to-back nights.

"The most important thing is to keep that game (tied) and let us have a chance," Dubnyk said.

Dubnyk did his part, particularly when the Hurricanes scored only once on 16 second-period shots.

"He's playing unreal and giving us a chance," Granlund said.

The third-period efficiency was pleasing to Wild coach Mike Yeo.

"The focus that we had and how we really went after it was a really good sign," Yeo said.

Blue Jackets 3, Devils 2: Brandon Dubinsky had a goal and an assist in returning to the lineup from a

concussion, and injury-riddled Columbus snapped a seven-game losing streak by beating host New Jersey.

Senators 3, Sabres 2: Mika Zibanejad and Mark Stone scored third-period goals in host Ottawa's victory over Buffalo.

Flames 5, Red Wings 2: Jiri Hudler scored twice against his former team in visiting Calgary's victory over Detroit.

Blackhawks 2, Oilers 1 (SO): Newcomer Antoine Vermette scored the lone goal of the shootout in the third round to lead host Chicago past Edmonton.

Penguins 5, Ducks 2: Patric Hornqvist scored twice in the second period, and visiting Pittsburgh also got goals from Evgeni Malkin, Sidney Crosby and Blake Comeau in a rout of Anaheim.



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Syracuse hit hard by NCAA

The Associated Press

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Jim Boeheim has become used to the spotlight in his long career at Syracuse. It's awfully bright right now — for all the wrong reasons.

Boeheim and his men's basketball program took another hit on Friday from the NCAA, which suspended the Hall of Fame coach for nine league games next year and outlined a decade-long series of violations that included academic misconduct, improper benefits, and drug-policy failures.

The governing body of college sports said in a report that the school lost control of its athletic department and placed the Orange on probation for five years for breaking with the "most fundamental core values of the NCAA."

The bulk of the violations concerned athletic department officials interfering with academics and making sure star players stayed eligible.

"The behavior in this case, which placed the desire to achieve success on the basketball court over academic integrity, demonstrated clearly misplaced institutional priorities," the NCAA said.

The basketball team must vacate wins in which ineligible players participated. Those players competed during five seasons: 2004-2007 and 2010-2012.

Boeheim, the second-winningest coach in Division I history with 966 victories, is 70 years old and has coached at Syracuse for 39 years, having played at the school as well.

Here are five things to know as Syracuse prepares to play Saturday at North Carolina State, the Orange's final game of the year because of a self-imposed post-season ban issued last month by university Chancellor Kent Syverud:

Got off easy: Britton Banowsky, chief hearing officer for the NCAA, said in a teleconference after the report was released that because most of the violations occurred before the NCAA installed a new penalty structure last year, Syracuse and Boeheim won't have to face more severe punishment. That could have included a two-year postseason ban for the team and a season-long suspension for the coach.

Not so contrite: Boeheim, whose program was banned from the 1993 NCAA

Tournament for recruiting violations, said in a statement released by the university that he was relieved the investigation was over. He acknowledged that violations occurred, but said he was disappointed with the findings and conclusions reached by the committee.

Very appealing: Syverud said the school does not agree with certain aspects of the ruling and is considering a possible challenge. Syverud said Boeheim may choose to appeal the part of the decision that affects him personally.

Recruiting hit: The NCAA penalties included the reduction of three men's basketball scholarships a year for four years and recruiting restrictions will be enforced for two years.

Middling man: The NCAA said several violations involved students and staff. The report added that academic violations stemmed from the director of basketball operations, who was hand-picked by Boeheim to address academic matters and ended up violating academic integrity.

Baylor survives challenge

The Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Kenny Chery was serenaded with a senior night twist with the playing of the Canadian national anthem before his final home game for No. 14 Baylor.

The point guard from Montreal then came out hot from three-point range to help offset a career night from Texas Tech's Devaughntah Williams, and fellow senior Royce O'Neale finished a stirring rally against the last-place Red Raiders.

Taurean Prince scored a career-high 24 points, Chery and Rico Gatherers scored 18 apiece and the first of consecutive three-pointers by O'Neale gave the Bears their first lead in the final 3 minutes after trailing by 12 in the second half of a 77-74 win over Texas Tech on Friday night.

"It's real tough when you're pressing," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "Everybody wanted to win for Royce. They wanted to win for Kenny. The only thing that I really got to credit is the perseverance to stay within the game because we could have gotten more frustrated and we didn't."

Chery had three of his four three-pointers in the first half for Baylor (23-9, 11-7), which was assured no worse than the No. 4 seed for the Big 12 tournament next week. The Bears could finish as high as second.

Williams was 8-for-9 from long range and scored a career-high 28 points for the Red Raiders (13-18, 3-15), who couldn't hold on and lost their 28th consecutive road game against a ranked team in second-year coach Tubby Smith's 800th career game.

"This is the best game we've played this year as far as a complete game," said Smith, whose team was coming off an upset of Oklahoma State but is now locked into the last seed in the 10-team conference tournament. "Other than making shots when you have to, we did everything else."

The Red Raiders have been held under 50 points in six of their Big 12 defeats, including a 54-49 loss to Baylor in Lubbock less than three weeks ago. But they surpassed that with 13:15 remaining when Williams gave them their biggest lead at 51-39 on his sixth three-pointer.

Baylor battled back, though, with Prince capping a 15-4 run that pulled the Bears within 55-54. The Red Raiders were up 65-59 when Prince, who also had a game-high nine rebounds, started a 12-0 run with a pair of free throws.

No. 8 Wichita State 56, Southern Illinois 45: At St. Louis, Teke Cotton scored nine consecutive points to fuel a 17-3 run as the Shockers (28-3) beat the Salukis (12-21) in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament quarterfinals.

No. 11 Northern Iowa 71, Bradley 46: At St. Louis, Nate Buss scored a season-high 23 points as the Panthers (28-3) overwhelmed the Braves (8-24) in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament quarterfinals.

No. 25 Murray State 80, Morehead State 77: At Nashville, Tenn., Cameron Payne hit a three-point shot with 54 seconds left, and the Racers (27-4) blew an 11-point lead before beating the Eagles (17-17) in the Ohio Valley Conference tournament semifinals.

Pacers stretch winning streak to 4 games

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana keeps finding different ways to survive games without Paul George. On Friday, the Pacers simply wore down weary Chicago.

Solomon Hill scored 16 points and Ian Mahinmi finished with a season-high 14 points and 11 rebounds to help Indiana pull away late for its fourth straight victory, 98-84.

"We've got a lot of guys who can step up on this team and score some baskets, step in and play good defense," Rodney Stuckey said after scoring 12 points and grabbing seven rebounds. "Ian did a great job tonight. So anybody is capable of stepping up and doing a good job for us."

The result: Indiana (27-34) is on its longest winning streak since last March, and it couldn't come at a better time.

The Pacers have tied rival Miami for the eighth and final playoff spot in the East, and Paul George's surprising return could come as soon as next week. George has said he's targeting mid-March to make his comeback. Indiana hosts Boston on March 14 and Toronto on March 16. The team has not established an official timetable.

Even without George, Indiana has finally found a winning combination.

Six players scored in double figures Friday, including David West who joined Mahinmi in the double-double club with 10 points and 10 rebounds. Indiana also held Chicago to 36 percent shooting, seized control early in the fourth and finally pulled away with a 10-2 spurt midway through the fourth.

The Pacers see that as a perfect foundation for the final quarter of the season.

"I would say that it (positive energy) is as strong as it has been since the beginning of last year," coach Frank Vogel said. "Very different teams, very different seasons but we're very positive we can achieve some great things down the stretch here."

Chicago (39-24) was led by Pau Gasol with 18 points and 10 rebounds and rookie Doug McDermott, who had a season high 16 points in 16½ minutes.

Grizzlies 97, Lakers 90: Zach

Randolph had 24 points and 13 rebounds, Marc Gasol scored nine of his 18 points in the fourth quarter and Memphis rallied to beat visiting Los Angeles.

Jordan Clarkson had a career-high 25 points for the Lakers.

Spurs 120, Nuggets 111: Kawhi Leonard had 25 points and Tony Parker added 24 to help host San Antonio beat Denver for its fourth straight victory.

Tim Duncan added 15 points for San Antonio, The Spurs have won 11 of their past 12 home games.

Hornets 103, Raptors 94: Al Jefferson had 23 points and 13 rebounds and Charlotte beat visiting Toronto in a game that had six technical fouls.

Mo Williams added 23 points, and Lance Stephenson had 11 points and eight rebounds to help Charlotte win its fourth straight.

Celtics 104, Pelicans 98: Isaiah Thomas scored 14 of his 27 points in the fourth quarter and Boston beat host New Orleans for its fifth victory in seven games.

Anthony Davis had 29 points, 14 rebounds and three blocks for New Orleans, which lost for just the second time in eight games and missed an opportunity to pull into a tie with Oklahoma City for the last playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Suns 108, Nets 100 (OT): Marcus Morris made the tiebreaking basket and scored 19 points, twin brother Markieff Morris and Eric Bledsoe also had 19, and Phoenix beat host Brooklyn.

Brandon Knight shook off a poor shooting night to make two baskets in overtime for the Suns, who flirted with NBA infamy by missing their first 21 three-point attempts and trailed by 15 points midway through the fourth quarter. They were down by nine with about 4 minutes to play, but shut Brooklyn out for the remainder of regulation, then took the lead for good at 102-100 on Marcus Morris' basket with 1:30 to go.

Magic 119, Kings 114: Victor Oladipo had 32 points, 10 assists and five steals and Orlando held on to beat visiting Sacramento.

Channing Frye added 22 points and 10 rebounds, and Elfrid Payton had 10 points and 12 assists to help the Magic snap a four-game losing streak.

Wizards 99, Heat 97: Nene scored 20 points, Marcin Gorat added 14 points and 17 rebounds and host Washington blew all but one point of a 35-point lead before holding off short-handed Miami.

Miami played without starters Dwyane Wade (sore right hip) and Luol Deng (right thigh contusion). Goran Dragic had 18 points, but left the game after a hard fall late in the third quarter.

Jazz 89, 76ers 83: Gordon Hayward scored 25 points to lead Utah past host Philadelphia.

Derrick Favors had 15 points and 10 rebounds for Utah. The Jazz have won eight of 11.

Warriors 104, Mavericks 89: Stephen Curry had 22 points and seven assists, Klay Thompson scored 16 points and Golden State beat visiting Dallas.

Curry wasn't as dominant as he was earlier this year when he scored a season-high 51 points against the Mavericks, but did score 16 points in the first half when the Warriors began to pull away and finished with five of his team's 11 three-pointers.

Hawks 106, Cavaliers 97: Al Horford scored 19 points and Kyle Korver hit two big three-pointers in the fourth quarter after struggling much of the night, leading host Atlanta past Cleveland in a game that could be a preview of what's to come in the playoffs.

LeBron James and the Cavaliers entered the season as the overwhelming favorite in the Eastern Conference, but the Hawks (49-12) are running away in the standings. They won their sixth in a row and for the 42nd time in the last 48 games.

Rockets 103, Pistons 93: James Harden had 38 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for his third triple-double this season and host Houston snapped a two-game skid with a win over Detroit.

It was the 27th 30-point game this season for Harden, who entered the game second in the NBA in scoring.