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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US shoulders bulk of Islamic State fight

The Washington Post

ABOARD THE CHARLES DE GAULLE — When Gen. Martin Dempsey's plane touched down Sunday on the deck of this ship, he became the first chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in recent history — perhaps ever — to set foot on a French aircraft carrier, a sign of the nations' increasing operational unity in the campaign against the Islamic State group.

Since the ship arrived in the Persian Gulf last month, U.S. warplanes have landed on the Charles de Gaulle; French and American jets have carried out joint training missions; and the French ship has operated alongside the USS Carl Vinson, another carrier in the same waters. Both ships are now under American command.

The mission marks the first time that France has placed the Charles de Gaulle, the only non-U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier in the world and a jewel of the French military, under the operational command of a for-

ign nation, a reflection of the importance Paris has placed on combating the Islamic State militant group.

Still, the United States continues to shoulder the bulk of the military burden among members of the coalition assembled against the group, which surged out of Syria last year to capture a third of Iraq. Of the 2,738 airstrikes the coalition has conducted in Iraq and Syria since last summer, the Americans have carried out 2,203.

Great Britain, the largest contributor after the United States, had conducted about 160 strikes as of early March. Arab nations, which have launched strikes in Syria but not in Iraq, have carried out far fewer.

The picture on the ground in Iraq is similar. Although a growing number of countries have committed soldiers to train and advise Iraqi troops, the U.S. force of just less than 3,000 is by far the largest of the coalition.

Australia has made the next biggest on-the-ground troop commitment, for a force of about 500, while France has

about 120 soldiers. None of the alliance's Arab members has announced plans to send a training force, according to a coalition spokesman.

The fight against the Islamic State comes as many leaders in Europe confront major fiscal challenges and grapple with questions about what sort of militaries their societies require. In the Middle East, leaders have trod carefully in launching strikes within fellow Arab nations, mindful of precedents they create.

U.S. officials say much of that gap in air power can be explained by superior American military technology, particularly in precision munitions and intelligence collection, and greater U.S. military resources.

Seven months into the air campaign, Dempsey said the contribution of the 20 countries participating in the airstrikes and the three taking part at sea — France, Britain and the United States — have hurt the Islamic State's capabilities in Iraq.

He and other U.S. officials

reject the criticism that the alliance's use of air power has been too timid. Speaking to reporters aboard the ship, he said coalition aircraft were conducting as many strikes as they reasonably could, given the militants' efforts to avoid movement in the open, making it more difficult to target them, and the coalition's desire to prevent civilian casualties.

"We have a responsibility to be very precise in the use of air power," Dempsey said. "If I had more targets and I could be precise, we could produce more effects on the ground. ... Carpet-bombing through Iraq is not the answer."

At the same time, he said he wanted to see more participation in Iraq from neighboring countries.

"If you're asking me would I like to see more activities from the coalition, it would generally be on the ground ... in particular the nations of the region, who have both the greatest to gain and the most to lose and who also, frankly, can relate to the local populations better than we can," Dempsey said.

Minister: Iraq OK with receiving aid from Iran

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The Iraqi defense minister said Monday that his government is comfortable asking for and receiving help from Iran, a major U.S. adversary, in its fight against Islamic State militants.

"We are in a state of war," Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi said, which requires Iraq to seek foreign assistance.

He spoke at a news conference with the top U.S. general, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, who was on a brief visit to Baghdad. Iraq has been relying on military assistance from both the U.S. and Iran in its struggle against Islamic State extremists who have captured control of about one-third of Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. worries that Iran is taking too big a role in Iraqi affairs, but al-Obeidi dismissed that notion.

"I think the situation is balanced," the defense minister said, speaking through an interpreter. "The situation is ac-

ceptable to us." He said Iran has played "a very positive role" in Iraq in helping fight the Islamic State.

Dempsey was asked at the news conference if the U.S. would use air power to protect Iraqi antiquities from destruction by Islamic State.

"We will consider it, but it will have to fit into all the other things we are being asked to do on behalf of Iraq," he said.

Dempsey, who also met with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and senior U.S. offi-

cials during his brief visit, said the U.S.-led coalition is being careful in its use of air power to avoid civilian casualties. He said the U.S. does not want to create additional suffering as it targets Islamic State militants in Iraq.

Before arriving in the Iraqi capital, Dempsey said he wanted to press the Shiite-dominated government to deliver on its promise to reconcile with the Sunni minority and to explain how it intends to balance its relations with Iran.

Niger, Chad forces open front with Boko Haram

The Associated Press

N'DJAMENA, Chad — Forces from Chad and Niger opened a new front in the regional military fight against the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram as army vehicles full of soldiers crossed the border into northeast Nigeria, officials and witnesses said Monday.

The escalation in a joint military campaign against the Nigeria-based Boko Haram comes just weeks before Nigerians head to the polls for an election which many fear will turn violent.

Chadian Brig. Gen. Zakaria Ngobongue said Monday that his soldiers, alongside troops from Niger, had entered Nigeria. He declined to give details about the ongoing operation. Already, Chadian forces had crossed into northeastern Nigeria from Cameroon to fight the jihadis, he said.

Witnesses in the Niger town of Bosso reported about 200 military vehicles crossing over into Nigeria since Saturday.

Solar plane takes off on flight around the world

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — A Swiss solar-powered plane took off from Abu Dhabi early Monday, marking the start of the first attempt to fly around the world without a drop of fuel.

Solar Impulse founder Andr Borschberg was at the controls of the single-seater when it took off from the Al Bateen Executive Airport. Borschberg will trade off piloting with Solar Impulse co-founder Bertrand Piccard during stop-overs on a journey that will take months to complete.

The plane is expected to reach its first destination — Muscat, Oman — after about 10 hours of flight.

From The Associated Press

AFRICOM's Flintlock concludes

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. special operations forces on Monday concluded three weeks of training with regional partners in western Africa who are confronting the growing threat posed by the Islamic militant group Boko Haram, which may be seeking closer cooperation with the Islamic State group.

The Flintlock exercise, the largest conducted by Special Operations Command Africa, brought together troops from several countries to work on a range of tactics to be deployed in fighting Boko Haram, which is based in Nigeria but threatens the stability of neighboring states.

"We find this year's exercise both unique and very relevant," Africa Command Gen. David Rodriguez said during Monday's closing ceremony in Chad. "Because, as you know, here today in Ndjamen, we are not far removed from the immediate threat of Boko Haram."

Eliminating the threat of violent extremists will require a

multinational effort "involving political will, economic development and professional security forces," Rodriguez said in remarks provided by his staff.

The exercise, which was hosted by Chad with outstation training sites in several other countries, comes as Boko Haram's profile is on the rise.

On Saturday, the group's leader — Abubakar Shekau — in an unconfirmed message declared allegiance to the Islamic State group, raising concerns that the two terrorist groups might unite into a more formal alliance. Already, there have been some questions about Boko Haram's picking up on some Islamic State propaganda tactics, such as carrying out choreographed beheadings on video.

During the past year, Boko Haram's assaults have steadily intensified, both within northern Nigeria and now stretching into border areas with neighboring states such as Chad and Niger, which also participated in this year's Flintlock exercise.

A focal point of the exercise was boosting the communica-

tion capabilities of regional forces, Rodriguez said.

"For example, we have implemented a collaborative command-and-control and information-sharing system that will remain in place for our African partners to share operational information and intelligence with each other, the U.S. and other international partners," Rodriguez said. "This capability was not just effective during the exercise. It has been extremely useful in real-world application."

Boko Haram, which translates as "Western education is sinful," aims to overthrow Nigeria's secular government and install a strict form of Sharia law.

For AFRICOM, exercises such as Flintlock are a way to increase the capabilities of indigenous forces, which are at the front lines in the fight against Boko Haram. Chad, Niger and Cameroon are among the countries that have pledged to increase their operations against the group.

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3ID troops, gear head to Baltic

BY JON HARPER
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Thousands of troops and major hardware from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division are heading to the Baltic region to reassure NATO allies fearful of Russian aggression, according to the Pentagon.

Approximately 3,000 soldiers from the division's 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team are bringing approximately 750 vehicles and pieces of heavy equipment with them, including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery pieces and helicopters. The gear arrived Monday via ship in Riga, Latvia, Pentagon spokesman Col. Steve Warren told reporters.

The troops and equipment will participate in multinational training exercises with Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania that will kick off in May. The exercises are part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, a U.S.-Army led mission that began last year after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea region and sent troops and equipment to the eastern part of the country to support pro-Moscow separatists. NATO allies in Eastern Europe, which was under Russian domination during the Cold War, are worried the Kremlin will try to destabilize other neighboring countries.

Some servicemembers from the 1st Brigade have arrived in the region and more will follow next month, according to Maj.

James Brindle, a Pentagon spokesman.

The unit, based at Fort Stewart, Ga., will replace U.S. Army Europe's 2nd Cavalry Regiment, which has been conducting training with NATO allies in Eastern Europe since January. The regiment will return to its base in Vilseck, Germany.

The 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, is the Army's regionally aligned force for Europe. The regionally aligned forces concept is an Army initiative to build long-term ties between specific units and overseas partners and enhance troops' familiarity with regional security environments.

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Kentucky out to avoid perfect collapse

The Associated Press

Top-ranked Kentucky is the fifth team to finish the regular season undefeated since Indiana ran the table in the 1975-76 season. The Wildcats are also trying not to come up short like the others did in their quest to duplicate the Hoosiers' perfect championship campaign.

The Wildcats knocked off Florida 67-50 Saturday in a Southeastern Conference matchup and Kentucky wrapped up the season 31-0, 18-0 in the SEC.

"We all knew that we would make some noise and do something special," Kentucky forward Trey Lyles said after Saturday's victory. "We just have to go out there and if it's our day to win, then we're going to win."

It needs to be Kentucky's day nine more times if it wants to be the next undefeated team to win the national title.

A look at teams since Indiana's memorable title run to go undefeated during the regular season but stumbled either in their conference tournament or the NCAA tournament:

WICHITA STATE, 2013-14: The Shockers rolled to a 31-0 record, then became the Midwest Region's No. 1 seed after winning the Missouri Valley conference tournament. Wichita State won its second-round game in the tournament and then faced No. 8 seed Kentucky, which began the season ranked No. 1 but struggled with inconsistency and fell out of the poll by the end of the regular season. The Wildcats pulled off a 78-76 upset that was preserved when Fred VanVleet's last-ditch 3-pointer bounced off the rim and ended the Shockers' dream season. The Shockers ended the season 35-1.

ST. JOSEPH'S, 2003-04: Jameer Nelson and Delonte West led the Philadelphia school to a 27-0 regular-season record, No. 1 ranking and eventual No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. But Xavier quashed the Hawks' unbeaten hopes with a 20-point blowout — 87-67 — in the Atlantic 10 Conference tournament. St. Joe's won its next three games in the NCAA before falling 64-62 to No. 2 Oklahoma State in the regional final to finish 30-2.

UNLV, 1990-91: This group of Runnin' Rebels were a dominant, entertaining group of characters, including

Larry Johnson, Stacey Augmon and Greg Anthony. They were strong favorites to repeat as NCAA champions, especially after rolling through the regular season 27-0 and capturing the Big West tournament crown. But their run ended in a Final Four rematch with Duke — they had shellacked the Blue Devils 103-73 in the previous year's title game. With Grant Hill, Bobby Hurley and Christian Laettner leading the way, Duke upset the Rebels 79-77. UNLV finished the season 34-1.

INDIANA STATE, 1978-79. National player of the year Larry Bird, a Hoosier for about a minute, almost single-handedly led Indiana State to 26-0 regular-season record and a No. 1 ranking just three years after Indiana's run. Bird and the Sycamores won the Missouri Valley Conference tournament en route to an epic NCAA final matchup against a Michigan State squad with Magic Johnson and Greg Kelser. The Spartans won 75-64 in the most-watched college basketball game in history, which spawned one of the most memorable basketball rivalries of all time. Bird and the Sycamores finished that year 33-1.

Tuttle, N. Iowa rally

The Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — The Missouri Valley player of the year looked the part when it counted. His Northern Iowa teammates stepped up, too, when the game looked hopeless.

Seth Tuttle had 15 points, nine rebounds and three assists, leading the 11th-ranked Panthers back from an 18-point first-half deficit to beat Illinois State 69-60 in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament championship game on Sunday.

"I knew we weren't out of it," said forward Nate Buss, who had 15 points with two blocks. "We're not ranked 11th in the country for nothing. We're not just going to lay down and die."

"We knew we were going to come back."

The Panthers (30-3) took control with a 25-4 run that erased a 36-22 halftime deficit. Jeremy Morgan had three three-pointers in the run and Tuttle, the Valley player of the year and tournament MVP, added eight points, often getting loose from constant double-teaming.

"He really exerted his will," Illinois State coach Dan Muller said. "When were in zone, they got it in to Tuttle, when we went man, they got it in to Tuttle."

Daishon Knight had 16 points for fourth-seeded Illinois State (21-12), which needed a win to make the NCAA tournament for the first time since 1998.

Northern Iowa won the title for the third time in seven years and has won 19 of 20 games.

No. 6 Wisconsin 72, No. 23 Ohio St. 48: At Columbus, Ohio, Frank Kaminsky scored 20 points and Bronson Koenig touched off a 16-0 second-half run with two three-pointers to lead the Badgers.

Wisconsin (28-3, 16-2) had already clinched the Big Ten regular-season title and top seed in the conference tournament. The Badgers tied a school record for league wins while extending the best start in team history.

D'Angelo Russell had 17 points for the Buckeyes (22-9, 11-7), who had their three-game winning streak snapped.

No. 10 Maryland 64, Nebraska 61: Melo Trimble scored 21 points and Dez Wells made a big shot with 8.8 seconds left to lift visiting Maryland.

Wells had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and Jake Layman added 11 points as the Terrapins (26-5, 14-4 Big Ten) won their seventh consecutive game.

Shavon Shields had 26 points for the Cornhuskers (13-17, 5-13), who lost their eighth straight.

No. 22 SMU 67, Tulsa 62: At Dallas, Markus Kennedy scored 12 of his 16 points in the second half and SMU won its first league title in 22 years, the American Athletic Conference regular-season championship.

The victory gave Hall of Fame coach Larry Brown and the Mustangs (24-6, 15-3) another item for their NCAA tournament résumé a year after getting snubbed and reaching the NIT championship game.

James Woodard scored all of his career-high 30 points on three-pointers for the Golden Hurricane (21-9, 14-4).

Cincinnati 77, Memphis 65: Octavius Ellis had 19 points and 11 rebounds and host Cincinnati (22-9, 13-5) solidified a No. 3 seed in the AAC tournament.

Coastal Carolina 81, Winthrop 70: Coastal Carolina coach Cliff Ellis stood atop the ladder after slipping the Big South Conference championship net around his neck. The fit was just as sweet as ever.

Now, Ellis is on another mission — gaining a higher seed in the NCAA Tournament than the No. 16 the Chanticleers had last year. Ellis said his team has proven its mettle the past two seasons, including going toe-to-toe with No. 1 seed Virginia in last season's 70-59 NCAA defeat.

North Florida 63, USC Upstate 57: Demarcus Daniels scored 22 points off the bench, and North Florida won the Atlantic Sun Conference final to earn its first NCAA Tournament berth.

Jalen Nesbitt added 16 points for the Ospreys (23-11), who snapped a five-game losing streak against the Spartans (23-11).

Boeheim says he's 'not going anywhere'

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Jim Boeheim says he's not about to leave as Syracuse's basketball coach.

The embattled coach spoke to about 700 fans Sunday night at a postseason banquet in downtown Syracuse. He noted that he came to the school in 1962 and "I'm not going anywhere."

His remarks to Syracuse's primary fundraising group for basketball came a day after he skipped a news conference following a season-ending loss at North Carolina State.

Two days earlier, the NCAA sanctioned the university in a report that lambasted the athletic department. Boeheim was suspended for nine Atlantic Coast Conference games next season.

The NCAA also penalized Syracuse for academic, drug and gifts violations committed primarily by the men's basketball team. The school also faces financial penalties, scholarship reductions and five years of probation.

Pitino named to coach Puerto Rico team

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Puerto Rico has named Louisville coach Rick Pitino to coach its national team in two international tournaments this summer.

The Hall of Fame coach will lead Puerto Rico during the Pan American Games in Toronto July 21-25. He will also coach the squad in a 10-team, pre-Olympic FIBA qualifying tournament Aug. 25-Sept. 5 in Monterrey, Mexico.

Jets RB Johnson shot in Orlando

ORLANDO, Fla. — New York Jets running back Chris Johnson and another passenger were shot in their shoulders while stopped at a traffic light in Orlando early Sunday morning, and the driver of the vehicle they were in was killed.

The NFL player and the other passenger, Reggie Johnson, were in stable condition at a hospital Sunday. A person close to Johnson confirmed it was the running back who was involved. The person spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on Johnson's behalf.

Sheriff's deputies said another vehicle pulled up to the Jeep the men were in and opened fire. The Jeep's driver, Dreekius Oricko Johnson, was killed.

Span has surgery, will miss Nats opener

VIERA, Fla. — Washington center fielder Denard Span had surgery Monday to repair a right core muscle injury and will miss the Nationals' opener next month.

Manager Matt Williams said the projected time for Span's return is uncertain and added "you're looking at four-to-six weeks before he can start doing baseball activity again."

Span had surgery to repair a sports hernia injury in December and reported discomfort at the start of spring training.

Manfred: Too early to judge new pace rules

PORT ST. LUCIE, Fla. — New baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred says it is too early to draw conclusions about baseball's latest attempt to speed the pace of games.

Baseball is requiring batters to keep one foot in the batter's box in many instances and installed clocks to count down the time between innings and during pitching changes. The penalties are warnings and fines, which will start May 1.

"I thought the feedback on pace of play was positive," Manfred said Monday after meeting with New York Mets players. "I think they understand what it is we're trying to accomplish. I think they appreciate the fact we've taken kind of a measured approach to the problem to make sure we don't unintentionally change the game in a way that may not be positive."



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Westbrook again posts triple-double

The Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Even against a fellow All-Star, Russell Westbrook's dominance continued.

Oklahoma City's dynamic point guard posted his fifth triple-double in six games to help the Thunder beat the Toronto Raptors 108-104 on Sunday night.

Westbrook, the NBA's leading scorer, had 30 points, matched a career high with 17 assists and grabbed 11 rebounds for his seventh triple-double of the season and 15th of his career. He did much of the damage against Kyle Lowry, the starting point guard for the Eastern Conference All-Stars.

"He's playing unbelievable basketball right now," said Lowry, who finished with 14 points on 5-for-15 shooting. "The man is unbelievable, and he's pretty much carrying their team right now."

Westbrook, the All-Star MVP and reigning Western Conference player of the month, said he's aware of how special triple-doubles are.

"It crosses my mind when we win, which is the most important thing," he said.

Enes Kanter had 21 points and 12 rebounds and Serge Ibaka had 21 points and five blocks for the Thunder, who remained alone in eighth place in the Western Conference standings.

The Thunder shot 51 percent from the field and out-rebounded the Raptors 49-33.

"It's not like we didn't play hard, but they took it to another

level and we didn't meet it, especially in the paint with rebounding," Toronto coach Dwane Casey said.

DeMar DeRozan scored 24 points and Terrence Ross added 20 for the Raptors, who lost their third straight.

Warriors 106, Clippers 98: Draymond Green had 23 points and six assists and Golden State beat Los Angeles for its sixth straight home victory.

Klay Thompson added 21 points on 9-for-13 shooting.

Shaun Livingston gave Golden State another nice lift off the bench with a season-best 21 points and eight rebounds in 28 minutes to help the supporting cast take some pressure off do-everything point guard Stephen Curry. Curry didn't score his first field goal until 5:16 before halftime and finished with 12 points and four assists.

Austin Rivers had 22 points for Los Angeles.

Spurs 116, Bulls 105: Tony Parker had a season-high 32 points as San Antonio beat visiting Chicago for its fifth straight victory.

Tim Duncan failed to make a basket for the first time in his career, ending his NBA-record streak at 1,310 games. He was 0-for-8 and finished with three points.

Kawhi Leonard added 20 points, Patty Mills had 15 points and Manu Ginobili 14 for the Spurs.

Pau Gasol had 23 points and Aaron Brooks added 22 for Chicago.

Mavericks 100, Lakers 93: Monta Ellis scored 18 of his 31 points in the third quarter and host Dallas closed with a 16-3 spurt in the final 6:36 to beat Los Angeles.

Dirk Nowitzki had 12 points for the Mavericks. They played without point guard Devin Harris for the second straight game because of an injured right hand, but Chandler Parsons had 11 points and six rebounds in 35 minutes after missing seven games with a sprained left ankle.

Carlos Boozer had 17 points and eight rebounds for the Lakers.

Magic 103, Celtics 98: Tobias Harris and Maurice Harkless combined for 16 points in the fourth quarter to help Orlando rally to beat visiting Boston.

Victor Oladipo scored 22 points for the Magic, Harris had 21 and rookie Elfrid Payton added 19 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists.

Isaiah Thomas scored 21 points for Boston. Brandon Bass added 19 points and 16 rebounds.

Hornets 108, Pistons 101: Al Jefferson scored 24 points and streaking Charlotte beat host Detroit in a matchup of Eastern Conference playoff hopefuls.

Mo Williams had 19 points and nine assists for the Hornets. They have won five straight to strengthen their bid for a postseason berth, while Detroit has dropped six in a row.

Reggie Jackson led the Pistons with 25 points.

Jazz 95, Nets 88: Gordon Hayward scored 24 points, including five straight to stop a Brooklyn rally, as visiting Utah beat the Nets.

Former Nets forward Derrick Favors added 22 points and eight rebounds for the Jazz.

Rangers top Blackhawks

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Derick Brassard scored 32 seconds into overtime and Cam Talbot made 29 saves for his fifth shutout of the season in the New York Rangers' 1-0 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks on Sunday night.

Brassard swooped in from left wing and fired a shot past Corey Crawford on the stick side after taking a cross-ice feed from Mats Zuccarello.

The Rangers moved within a point of the first-place New York Islanders in the Metropolitan Division.

Talbot was sharp in his 15th start in 16 games since No. 1 goalie Henrik Lundqvist has been sidelined with a neck injury. Talbot has eight career shutouts.

Crawford finished with 35 saves.

Bruins 5, Red Wings 3: Daniel Paille scored two goals, one short-handed, and Brad Marchand added a short-handed goal in Boston's victory over visiting Detroit.

Clinging to the Eastern Conference's eighth and final playoff spot, Boston is 5-1-1 in its last seven.

Avanche 3, Wild 2: Semyon Varlamov stopped 29 shots and Zach Redmond had a goal and an assist as Colorado beat host Minnesota.

Devils 5, Flyers 2: Adam Henrique scored two goals and Keith Kinkaid had 25 saves in his return to the lineup to lead New Jersey past visiting Philadelphia.

Hurricanes 7, Oilers 4: Elias Lindholm had three goals for his first hat trick and added two assists as host Carolina rallied from three goals down to beat Edmonton.

Senators 5, Flames 4 (SO): Erik Karlsson scored the winner in the sixth round of the shootout as Ottawa beat visiting Calgary after blowing a big lead in regulation.

The Senators led 4-0 in the third period before giving up four straight goals to allow the Flames to tie it.

Harvick earns Cup win in Vegas

The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — It sure looks as though Kevin Harvick hasn't missed a beat since wrapping up his first career Sprint Cup title three months ago.

The 2014 champion grabbed his first win of the season on Sunday at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, where he continued his hot start to his sophomore season at Stewart-Haas Racing. Harvick finished second in the season-opening Daytona 500, was second last week at Atlanta and, dating to last season, has six consecutive top-two finishes.

He also has won three of the last six races dating to last season.

But he fretted through the offseason that his career year last season was an anomaly, and the results would not be the same as he tries to defend his title.

"I have been absolutely terrified that we would never sit up (on the podium) again," Harvick said. "You have to figure out ways to motivate yourself and motivate our team, and for us, it's just that motivation of trying to be the best you can in every practice and be the best that you can in qualifying."

"We're going to celebrate it like it's the last one. We're going to approach next week like we've never won a race because that's what keeps it fun and that's what keeps us motivated."

Except next up for Harvick? A stop at Phoenix, where Harvick has won four of the last five races. His November win pushed him into the championship race.

Harvick on Sunday led 142 of the 267 laps, and beat Martin Truex Jr. to the finish while battling a vibration that developed after his final pit stop.

"It got to be a handful there at the end," Harvick said. "For whatever reason, we got really, really loose the last run. Tires started vibrating and we were just kind of hanging on. Glad the race is over for our own good."

Harvick now has a win that gives him a near-certain berth in the Chase for the Sprint Cup championship, where he'd be guaranteed a shot to defend his title. The

Chase format awards slots into the play-off via regular-season wins.

"It feels pretty good. I'm pretty excited about it," Harvick said. "This whole Chase thing, there is a lot of strategy to get in to it. The best strategy is to go out and win races."

Kasey Kahne thought he might have had a chance to challenge Harvick for the win, but a scrape with Carl Edwards ruined his day.

Edwards slid up the track and into Kahne on lap 192, and the contact shoved Kahne into the outside wall. Kahne seemed to be retaliating in the next corner when he drove low onto the track and appeared to help Edwards spin.

Edwards had to go to the garage for repairs and finished 42nd. He also took blame for the accident.

"It's completely my fault," Edwards said. "Kasey did a good job. I just got sucked up into him coming off of Turn 4. I feel bad for Kasey."

Kahne, who finished 17th, was frustrated.

"He just stayed in the gas," Kahne said. "We just needed a full other car worth of racing room there, and he just plowed us into the wall. That was discouraging."

Busch return? Stewart-Haas Racing co-owner Gene Haas doesn't know when suspended driver Kurt Busch will be reinstated by NASCAR.

But Haas seemed to indicate Sunday that Busch will be back in the No. 41 when he's cleared to compete. Haas said the organization wants to know if Busch will be eligible to race for the championship when he returns.

Busch was suspended two days before last month's season-opening Daytona 500 for an alleged domestic assault against a former girlfriend. He was not criminally charged, and NASCAR said Busch is working with them toward reinstatement.

He's missed three races, and would only be eligible for the Chase if NASCAR granted him a waiver.

Haas said after Harvick gave SHR its first win of the season on Sunday that

he has no indication when Busch will be back in the car.

"At this time, that's really up to NASCAR," Haas said. "Some of our concerns are obviously does he come back, could he get into the Chase? Those issues really reside with NASCAR."

Another strong Truex run. Truex continued his hot start to the season with a runner-up finish to Harvick on Sunday.

It was Truex's best finish since he joined Furniture Row Racing last year, and he's opened 2015 with three top-eight finishes.

Truex was also second and fifth in a pair of exhibition races at Daytona last month.

"It was just a solid weekend," Truex said. "We were strong on Friday, and after two outstanding practices on Saturday we knew we had a hot rod that would contend for the win. We came up a little short, but there will be more opportunities to get that win."

Two blown tires. Jimmie Johnson won last week at Atlanta and gave every indication he'd challenge for the win at Las Vegas.

But two blown tires led to a 41st-place finish for the six-time champion. He had led two different times for 45 laps before his race unraveled.

"The first one, they said the bead blew on it ... that's kind of a freak deal," Johnson said. "The second one, it went soft. So there could have been some damage that caused it or some rub or something like that, and it went soft going into Turn 3 and I hit the wall, unfortunately."

Ganassi good day. It was a strong day for Chip Ganassi Racing, which put both its drivers in the top-11.

Kyle Larson finished eighth and Jamie McMurray was 11th in the most solid day this year for the organization.

"We can definitely build off this," Larson said. "The first two weeks we were strong, but didn't get the finishes we deserved."