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Battle for Tikrit stalls amid casualties

BY LOVEDAY MORRIS

The Washington Post

NAJAF, Iraq — The Iraqi forces' operation to retake the city of Tikrit has stalled as troops suffer heavy casualties at the hands of Islamic State group militants, raising concerns over whether the pro-government fighters are ready for major offensives.

After two days of little activity on the battlefield, Iraq's interior minister, Mohammed al-Ghabban, confirmed on Monday that the offensive has "temporarily stopped." The steady flow of caskets arriving in Iraq's Shiite holy city of Najaf suggests a reason for the pause; cemetery workers say as many as 60 war dead have been arriving daily.

Since last week, Iraqi forces have hemmed in the Sunni militants in Tikrit, claiming control of the majority of the former Islamic State group stronghold. But the operation has come at

a cost, with soldiers saying the fight has been tougher than expected. As the momentum has slowed, some Iraqi officials have begun to publicly call for U.S.-led air support.

While Iraqi officials still express confidence that they can retake the city, the stuttering offensive does not bode well for the more complex battles for Mosul or militant-held areas of Anbar that were expected to begin in coming months.

"It's a furious fight, harder than we thought," said Taher Sabah, 25, a militiaman with the Shiite Badr Organization who arrived to lay his father to rest in Najaf on Sunday after he was killed near Tikrit the night before.

The Iraqi government is not providing casualty figures from the battle. But Najaf's Wadi al-Salaam cemetery, the largest in the world, is the final resting place for the majority of Iraq's

Shiites and, given the largely Shiite makeup of the country's security forces, a large number of the pro-government battlefield casualties.

The cemetery's reception office has recorded 127 battlefield deaths since the start of the Tikrit offensive at the beginning of the month. But it does not include numbers for the largest Shiite militias, the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Peace Brigades, who record their figures separately.

U.S. officials said last week that about 20,000 Shiite militia fighters have joined the battle for Tikrit, compared to fewer than 4,000 Iraqi military troops.

Despite the costs to Iraqi troops, the offensive has squeezed the Islamic State in Tikrit and pushed its fighters out of surrounding villages and towns that had been in their

grip for eight months. But some officials argue that more assistance is needed for a final push into the city.

Jassim al-Jabara, head of the security committee of the Salahuddin provincial council, said he remains confident that the operation could be finished in a matter of days. But he said air support from the American-led coalition was necessary.

"We desperately need it now," he said. "But some people are against it."

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman, Col. Steve Warren, told reporters that U.S. forces have not conducted airstrikes to support the Tikrit battle.

Joining the battle would put the United States in an awkward position, with the Tikrit operation dominated by militia forces and overseen by Iranian Commander Qasem Soleimani. Shiite-dominated Iran has been a key backer of the militias.

GOP looks to pad war fund to avoid spending cap

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Fiscal hawks in the House on Tuesday proposed pumping billions into the military's emergency overseas war fund as a way to circumvent a mandatory limit on base defense spending that the services warn will damage national security and readiness.

The proposal by the House Budget Committee, which is chaired by a Tea Party conservative, would stick to the \$523 billion base-budget cap for fiscal 2016 but add \$94 billion into the overseas contingency operations fund, which has been derided as a slush fund by critics.

The armed service committees in both chambers of Con-

gress had already proposed blowing the caps by increasing the base budget to \$577 billion plus \$50.9 billion for the war fund. But defense hawks such as Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, struggled to find a legislative solution that could satisfy the fiscal conservatives in their party.

Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., who chairs the House Budget Committee called the higher base budget proposed by Obama and others in the GOP irresponsible, and said it would set the country on the road to more dramatic cuts to military spending in the future.

"To avoid such a reckless and harmful scenario, our budget obeys current law," according to a summary released by the com-

mittee. "It avoids an across-the-board sequester cut that would indiscriminately slash funding for our military and their families, and it puts in motion a concerted effort to increase resources for our national defense this calendar year."

McCain's staff said late Tuesday morning that he and the Senate Armed Services Committee were still reviewing the House budget plan.

The senator has held a series of SASC hearings underscoring the need to lift the cap, and said Monday he was working with other lawmakers on an increase to the defense budget above President Barack Obama's budget, which calls for \$534.3 billion for the base budget and \$50.9 billion for the overseas

operations.

Military leaders told House lawmakers Tuesday that boosts to the OCO budget could help the military get around a painful funding crunch in the coming year.

The OCO fund was born as a way to quickly pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while sidestepping sometimes difficult and time-consuming politics in Washington. It has become an easy way to pass defense spending that is not factored into the base budget or subject to the mandatory cap, which was part of a budget agreement in Congress to reduce federal spending and debt.

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Carrier arrives in Europe on round-the-world deployment

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt entered Navy 6th Fleet waters in Europe on Monday for operations on its way to the Middle East.

The Roosevelt heads a carrier strike group that comprises five ships and more than 6,000 sailors and Marines. The group departed the East Coast last week

for an anticipated eight-month deployment. It is expected to relieve the USS Carl Vinson strike group, currently conducting airstrikes against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

The Roosevelt will end its tour in its new home station of San Diego, part of a three-carrier shift to bring the USS George Washington back from the Pacific for nuclear refueling.

The Roosevelt will take the

place of the USS Ronald Reagan, which is currently based in San Diego but will steam to Yokosuka, Japan, this summer to replace the Washington. The original Reagan crew will bring the Washington stateside for its overhaul and then rotate onto the Roosevelt in San Diego.

The rare crew shift has already inspired a “Three Presidents” logo, designed by a Reagan crewmember.

DOD mulls changes to housing allowances

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The Defense Department is considering new limits to housing allowances for civilian employees as it reviews a benefit that costs the government about \$500 million annually.

One potential new measure would take aim at the Pentagon’s five-year rule, which restricts how long government service employees can remain overseas.

Generally, overseas government service workers who want to stay beyond five years must receive an extension from their respective command. Under the current policy, living quarters allowances continue when the extension is granted.

Under the Pentagon’s proposed policy change, LQA would no longer be guaranteed upon extension of a tour. To continue receiving LQA on an extended tour, the worker would need special, higher-level approval.

“LQA for an additional 2 years beyond the 5-year limit must be approved by the Head of the DoD Component or an official at the major command or equivalent,” says the DOD policy proposal, dated February 2015. “Any subsequent extension of LQA after an initial extension beyond 5 years requires the approval of the Head of the DoD Component.”

Other potential changes would limit when LQA can be used to make a mortgage payment on a personally owned home overseas. Currently, the allowance can be used toward homes in as many areas as a person is assigned, but the proposed changes would curtail that to a one-time deal.

Also under the recommendations, employees who return to the U.S. would be required to remain stateside for two years before being eligible for a return overseas with housing allowance benefits.

General: Russia moves are not a big concern

BY JON HARPER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Russian military isn’t capable of carrying out major interventions in the Baltic States or other neighboring countries while it’s tied down in Ukraine, according to the top U.S. Army general in Europe.

For the past year, Moscow has been sending forces and equipment into Ukraine to grab territory and support pro-Russia insurgents.

Thousands of Russian troops, tanks, heavy artillery and other weapons, have moved across the border and helped rebel forces inflict heavy casualties

on the Ukrainian army.

In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. The Kremlin is now pushing for political autonomy for the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the strongholds of Moscow-backed insurgents.

Russia’s actions have stoked fears in neighboring countries worried that they too are in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s sights.

But the commander of U.S. Army Europe doesn’t believe Russia is about to launch a similar operation in other countries.

“This is not the Red Army of the ’80s,” Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges told reporters at a Tuesday breakfast in Washington. Despite recent modernization

efforts, “they do not have the capacity yet to do what they’re doing in Ukraine and up in the Baltics at the same time. I think probably three or four years [from now] they will have the capacity. But they don’t have the capacity to do that now, so I’m not worried about that sort of thing.”

But Hodges noted that people in the Baltics, many of whom lived under Russian domination during the Cold War, aren’t so confident.

“If you are from that region you’ll have a completely different view of the seriousness and the credibility of the threat than if you ... live in north Florida, where I’m from,” he said.

Letter spurred arrest on murder charge

NEW ORLEANS — Robert Durst’s mumblings about how he “killed them all” provided the dramatic kick to a TV documentary about the millionaire’s troubled life and connection to three slayings, but it was words he penned that helped lead to his arrest on a murder charge, a law enforcement official said.

Analysis linking a letter Durst wrote to his friend Susan Berman a year before her death with one he said “only the killer

could have written” to point police to her body was the key new evidence in the long-dormant investigation into the 2000 killing, the official not authorized to speak publicly told The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because the investigation was ongoing.

Durst, 71, was charged Monday in Los Angeles with first-degree murder in the shooting of Berman, the daughter of a prominent Las Vegas mobster.

Presented with the two letters in the finale of the documentary “The Jinx: The Life

and Deaths of Robert Durst” that aired Sunday on HBO, the eccentric heir blinked, burped oddly, pulled his ear and briefly put his head in his hands before denying he was the killer.

Then he stepped away from the tense interview and went to the bathroom, still wearing the live microphone that recorded what he said next.

“There it is. You’re caught!” Durst whispered before the sound of running water is heard. “What the hell did I do? Killed them all, of course.”

From The Associated Press

Raiders sign free agent RB Richardson

The Associated Press

ALAMEDA, Calif. — The Oakland Raiders have signed free agent running back Trent Richardson.

The team announced the deal with the third pick in the 2012 draft on Tuesday.

The Raiders will be Richardson's third team since coming out of Alabama as one of the most heralded running backs in years. He was drafted by Cleveland and rushed for 950 yards and 11 touchdowns as a rookie.

The Browns then traded Richardson to Indianapolis for a first-round pick just two games into the 2013 season. Richardson ran for 977 yards in 29 games for the Colts before getting cut last week.

Richardson is averaging just 3.3 yards per carry in his career.

In other NFL news:

■ Longtime New England nose tackle Vince Wilfork has signed with the Houston Texans.

Wilfork announced the decision on Twitter Monday. The 33-year-old spent his entire 11-year career with the Patriots.

Now he'll join a Houston unit led by Defensive Player of the Year J.J. Watt and that features last year's No. 1 overall pick Jadeveon Clowney.

49ers' Borland retires over head trauma fear

SAN FRANCISCO — San Francisco 49ers linebacker Chris Borland is leaving football, and the promise of stardom and piles of money could not change his mind.

He was worried about head trauma.

And now at age 24, after one stellar NFL rookie season, he is retiring.

The 49ers announced his decision late Monday, without offering specifics. But Borland told ESPN's "Outside the Lines" earlier in the day he wants to do "what's best for my health."

Borland had a team-leading 108 tackles as a rookie, emerging as a punishing defender. He also had a sack and two interceptions.

"From what I've researched and what

I've experienced, I don't think it's worth the risk," Borland said in the interview. "I feel largely the same, as sharp as I've ever been. For me, it's wanting to be proactive. I'm concerned that if you wait till you have symptoms, it's too late."

49ers general manager Trent Baalke said the team was surprised by his move.

UCI wants Armstrong to drop Tour ride

LONDON — The head of world cycling urged Lance Armstrong on Tuesday to abandon "disrespectful" plans to ride part of the Tour de France route for charity a day before the professional peloton.

International Cycling Union President Brian Cookson warned cycling's showpiece event risked being undermined by the appearance of Armstrong, who was stripped of his seven Tour titles for doping on every one of his wins from 1999-2005.

Armstrong was approached with the idea by a former English soccer player,

who is trying to raise \$1.5 million for the fight against blood cancer.

Although the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, which imposed a life ban from cycling on Armstrong, has no objection to the plan, the UCI wants the disgraced rider to stay away from the sport.

"It's an ill-advised plan... it's disrespectful to the current riders in the peloton, it's disrespectful to the Tour de France," Cookson told The Associated Press.

ASU's top football recruit suspended

TEMPE, Ariz. — Junior college transfer Davon Durant has been suspended from the Arizona State football team.

Coach Todd Graham announced at the start of spring practice Monday that Durant was suspended for violation of team rules but didn't get into specifics.

A police report shows the linebacker was arrested March 7 on allegations of domestic violence and aggravated assault.

Heat block Cavaliers again

The Associated Press

MIAMI — Dwyane Wade scored 21 of his 32 points in the first half, Goran Dragic added 20 and the Miami Heat handed LeBron James another loss on his former home floor with a 106-92 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers on Monday night.

Hassan Whiteside had 16 points and 11 rebounds and Mario Chalmers finished with 16 points off the bench for the Heat, who won both of James' regular-season trips to Miami this season — his first two games back since leaving the team and returning to Cleveland last summer.

Miami closed the first half on a 19-5 run to take a 56-38 lead and pushed the margin to 25 in the third.

James scored 16 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter for Cleveland, which had its four-game winning streak snapped. Kyrie Irving added 21.

Mavericks 119, Thunder 115: Chandler Parsons scored 31 points, Dirk Nowitzki added 22 with some big three-pointers and host Dallas rallied from 15 down in the third quarter to beat Oklahoma City.

Russell Westbrook just missed his seventh triple-double in 10 games, finishing with 24 points, 12 assists and eight rebounds. But he picked up his fifth and sixth fouls 0.6 seconds apart trying to bring the Thunder back in the final minute.

The Mavericks moved into fifth place in the Western Conference and put a little more distance between themselves and the Thunder and New Orleans Pelicans, who are a half-game apart in the race for the final playoff spot.

Warriors 108, Lakers 105: Klay Thompson scored 26 points, Stephen Curry had 19 points and nine assists and host Golden State secured a playoff spot before beating the depleted Lakers.

The Warriors sealed their postseason berth during a timeout late in the second quarter when they learned Oklahoma City lost 119-115 at Dallas. The videoboards above halfcourt displayed "CLINCHED," and fans inside the sold-out arena gave the home team a standing ovation.

Hawks 110, Kings 103: Jeff Teague scored 23 points and Paul Millsap added 19 points and 10 rebounds to help Atlanta set a franchise record with its 23rd road win of the season.

DeMarre Carroll added 16 points and Shelvin Mack had 14 for the Eastern Conference-leading Hawks, who have won 10 of 12 games overall and 14 straight against Sacramento.

Raptors 117, Pacers 98: Kyle Lowry had 20 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists, Lou Williams scored 24 points, and visiting Toronto pulled away from Indiana.

Wizards 105, Trail Blazers 97: John Wall had 21 points, 11 assists, nine rebounds and two blocks, and host Washington let a 25-point lead dwindle to three before beating Portland.

The Wizards held on for their fourth straight win, a streak that began right after a 4-13 stretch.

LaMarcus Aldridge had 24 points and 12 rebounds for Portland, which had won three games in a row and eight of its last nine.

Celtics 108, 76ers 89: Tyler Zeller scored a career-high 26 points, Avery Bradley had 20 and host Boston won its season-high fifth straight game.

Brandon Bass added 12 points and Marcus Smart 11 for Boston, which entered the day in a group of four teams separated by one game for the Eastern Conference's final two playoff spots.

Grizzlies 92, Nuggets 81: Zach Randolph had 21 points and 16 rebounds, and host Memphis thwarted a fourth-quarter rally by Denver.

Marc Gasol and Tony Allen each added 14 points as Memphis won its second straight.

Nets 122, Timberwolves 106: Joe Johnson scored 22 points, rookie Bojan Bogdanovic had 21 and visiting Brooklyn beat short-handed Minnesota.

Jazz 94, Hornets 66: Rookie swingman Rodney Hood scored 24 points, setting a career high for the second time in three games, and host Utah extended its season-best win streak to six with a victory over Charlotte.

Stamkos, Tampa get past Canadiens

The Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Steven Stamkos had two goals and added an assist and the Lightning beat the Montreal Canadiens 4-2 Monday night in a matchup of the Atlantic Division's top teams.

Both have 93 points, but Montreal has played one fewer game. "It's definitely a confidence booster when you get the offense going in a game like this, especially down the stretch," Stamkos said.

Valtteri Filppula and Victor Hedman also scored for the Lightning, who have outscored Montreal 16-5 in winning all four games between the teams this season.

Montreal, which lost for the sixth time in eight games (2-4-2), got goals from Tomas Plekanec and Pierre-Alexandre Parenteau.

"We started off slow," Montreal center Alex Galchenyuk said. "We didn't play a full 60 minutes and that cost us."

Stamkos secured the win with his 39th goal, an empty-net power-play goal with 1:05 to play.

Filppula opened the scoring during a power play at 10:07 of the first when his right circle shot was redirected by a sliding Montreal defenseman Andrei Markov past Carey Price.

Capitals 4, Sabres 3 (SO): Evgeny Kuznetsov scored in regulation and the lone goal in the shootout to lead visiting Washington over last-place Buffalo.

Matt Niskanen had two assists for the Capitals, who overcame a pair of one-goal deficits. Curtis Glencross and Mike Green also scored for Washington, which matched last season's win total and opened a four-point edge over eighth-place Boston in the Eastern Conference standings.

Kings 1, Coyotes 0: Andy Andreoff scored his first NHL goal late in the second period and Jonathan Quick earned his sixth shutout of the season, leading host Los Angeles to a vital victory.

The defending Stanley Cup champions, who are 13-4-1 since an 0-3 road trip through Boston, Washington and Florida, climbed back into the second and final Western Conference wild-card spot. They have 13 games left to hold onto it.

Oilers 4, Maple Leafs 1: Benoit Pouliot scored two goals and Jordan Eberle had a goal and two assists as host Edmonton came away with a victory over Toronto.

Anton Lander also scored for the Oilers, who snapped a seven-game skid.



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Women's title expected to be defending champions' to lose

The Associated Press

Geno Auriemma and his UConn Huskies are such heavy favorites to win another women's national title that they've already been penciled in as the inevitable champs. So it seems all they need to do is just roll out the ball to hoist the trophy.

Don't count the Hall of Fame coach among those who believe the top-seeded Huskies are a lock to three-peat.

"The fact that everybody thinks it's a done deal, that we're going to win the whole thing," Auriemma said, "are probably people who have never coached, or haven't coached in a Final Four or have won a national championship."

Maybe, but it's hard to envision UConn not cutting down the nets on April 7 in Tampa, Fla. The top overall seed in the women's NCAA tournament has already handily beaten No. 1 seeds South Carolina and Notre Dame this season.

"They've been at the top of their game for over a decade and no one's been able to dethrone them year in and year out," South Carolina coach Dawn Staley said. "If they're the best our game has, you do have to talk about them. But I do think there is a little bit more parity than there's been in a long time."

If UConn does win the title again this year, Auriemma will tie UCLA men's coach John Wooden for the most all-time in college basketball.

Notre Dame and Connecticut, former Big East rivals, met in the national championship game last season as undefeated teams, with the Huskies coming away with the victory. The pair played earlier this season in South Bend, Ind., and the Huskies won by 18 points. UConn also beat South Carolina on Feb. 9 by 25.

The Huskies, who are led by Breanna Stewart, seem to be improving and have been rolling — winning games by an average of 42 points this season.

UConn, the top team in the Albany Region, will open on Saturday in Storrs, Conn., against St. Francis, Brooklyn, which is making its first tournament appearance. The Terriers (15-18) are the 10th team to enter the NCAAs with a losing record.

The Irish are the top seed in the Oklahoma City Region.

Notre Dame has played in the past four Final Fours, but has come up short of a title each time. Baylor, Iowa and Stanford are the other high seeds in the region that will try to derail the Irish.

The Gamecocks will face Savannah State in the first round, a team they beat by 62 points earlier this year.

Florida State, Arizona State and North Carolina will try to stop South Carolina in the Greensboro Region. Last season the Gamecocks lost to North Carolina in the regional semifinals.

Maryland is the top seed in the Spokane Region. The Terrapins became the second team to go unbeaten in the Big Ten, the conference they just joined this year. They will open up against New Mexico State on Saturday.

Undefeated Princeton, the 15th team to enter the NCAA Tournament unbeaten, is an 8 seed — the highest in Ivy League history. The Tigers will face Green Bay. It's the third time in five tournament appearances that the Tigers will play in the 8 vs. 9 game.

"They had a historic year," NCAA women's basketball committee chair Dru Hancock said. "When it came to where to seed them, they didn't have any wins in the Top 25. Their strength of schedule wasn't great. Twenty one of the 30 wins came with an RPI over 100."

"The committee is very excited about the Green Bay-Princeton matchup. ... They'll have a chance to show the entire country what they can do."

Other teams in Spokane include No. 2 seed Tennessee and third-seeded Oregon

State.

This season the women's tournament moved its games up one day in the first two rounds and the regionals. The Final Four will still be played on Sunday (semifinals) and Tuesday (title game).

The NCAA also decided to go back to rewarding the top 16 seeds with home games in the opening two rounds for the first time since 2003.

By awarding the sites on merit, the Gamecocks were allowed to host the first two rounds despite the state flying the Confederate flag on Statehouse grounds. The NCAA banned South Carolina and other schools in the state from hosting championships held at predetermined sites because of the state's decision to fly the Confederate flag. Mississippi schools also face the same NCAA rules.

Third-seeded Louisville is the only one of the top 16 teams not hosting, as the school's home arena is being used for the men's NCAA Tournament. The Cardinals will head to South Florida to face BYU in the opener.

Louisville has played some tough road games this season; it is one of eight Atlantic Coast Conference teams in the tournament. The Big Ten, led by former ACC member Maryland, has seven teams in the field. South Carolina is one of seven SEC teams in the tournament. The SEC hasn't had a team reach the Final Four since Tennessee won the title in Tampa in 2008.

The Lady Vols will be making their 34th straight appearance in the NCAA Tournament, getting into the field every year. Three teams will be making their first trip — American, St. Francis, Brooklyn, and Savannah State.

Monday's bracket didn't include Georgia, which saw its 20-year run of appearances end. Earlier in the day, coach Andy Landers announced his retirement.

Shockers should be allowed to 'play angry'

The Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. — Wichita State, the program whose mantra of "play angry" carried it to the Final Four two years ago, and to a perfect regular-season record last year, was handed a No. 7 seed by the NCAA tournament selection committee Sunday and given a tough opening matchup against Indiana.

Hardly a reward for winning another regular-season Missouri Valley Conference title, spending much of the season ranked in the top 10 and having one of the nation's best backcourts.

But if anybody is a master manipulator when it comes to using a perceived slight to his advantage, it just may be Wichita State coach Gregg Marshall. He thrives on playing the underdog role, and the Shockers have come to embody that over the years.

"It is what it is," Marshall said Monday. "We don't get to vote on where they seed us."

That may constitute a verbal shrug, but you can bet the uber-competitive Marshall will have his guys playing as if they have been treated unfairly against the Hoosiers on Friday.

"Bottom line is our region is tough," Marshall said. "We have four of the top 10 winningest programs in the history of college basketball — and we're not one of them — in our region. Kentucky is one, Kansas is two, Indiana and Notre Dame. We've got four in our region. We have to make it through those guys to get to the Final Four."

Ah, yes — Kansas. Don't forget the Shockers could earn a third-round date with the Jayhawks if both win, finally getting a chance to play the school that refuses to schedule them.

That fact surely wasn't lost on Kansas coach Bill Self, who was stunned to see the Shockers fall to the 7 line when the bracket flashed on the television screen.

"How in the world they're a 7 seed blows my mind," he said. "I thought the Missouri Valley, to be honest, deserved a little more credit than what they got. I thought they would be a higher seed and Northern Iowa would be a higher seed, too."

This is hardly the first time Wichita State got stuck with a tough seed.

After its perfect run last season, it was rewarded with a No. 1 seed — and a third-round date with eventual runner-up Kentucky, which was given the eighth seed in the region. The year before that, the Shockers were dealt a No. 9 seed before going all the way to the Final Four.

Indiana should be able to build a scouting report on the Shockers pretty easily considering junior guard Nick Zeisloft started his career at Valley rival Illinois State. He faced Ron Baker, Tekele Cotton and Co. twice each his freshman and sophomore seasons.

Wichita State's "play angry" mantra was born a couple of years ago, when former stars Xavier McDaniel and Antoine Carr visited the team. They asked the Shockers how it would feel if someone came into their house and tried to steal something. The response was quite natural: They'd be angry. So McDaniel and Carr encouraged the Shockers to play that way every time on the court, and it stuck.

Now, it's emblazoned on T-shirts worn around town, bumper stickers on cars, flags flying in front of houses. It's not just a mantra anymore, it's a state of mind.

Don't overlook Big East's power

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Entering this season, there were plenty of people ready to eliminate the Big East from the list of power conferences.

No longer a football league, no reason it would be mentioned in the same breath as the Big Ten, Big 12, Atlantic Coast Conference, Pac-12 and Southeastern Conference.

But back when Butler, Creighton and Xavier joined the seven remaining members after eight schools with top-tier football programs headed for other leagues, the Big East started calling itself a "basketball-centric" conference.

Good description of what is still a very good basketball conference.

When the field of 68 was released Sunday night, six Big East schools were in the bracket: Villanova, Georgetown, Butler, Providence, Xavier and St. John's. All except ninth-seeded St. John's were seeded sixth or better. Villanova, the regular-season and tournament champion, was the second overall No. 1 seed behind Kentucky.

Georgetown was a No. 4 seed and Providence, Butler and Xavier were all on the No. 6 line.

Not bad for a conference that wasn't supposed to stay near the top when the new college basketball order was created two seasons ago.

Last year the Big East had four teams in the NCAA tournament — Villanova, Xavier, Creighton and Providence — and this year the number grew by two.

"This is such a tough conference," Villanova coach Jay Wright said. "This tournament is a killer but you play it in Madison Square Garden, in New York, where other conferences all want to move their tournaments. You make it through the Big East, you are ready for the rest of the country."

The Big Ten and ACC will both be playing their conference tournaments in New York in the next few years.

The Big East has had an incredible run since it was founded by the late Dave Gavitt in 1979. He took his Providence program and joined six other schools to create a league that took off to heights older conferences soon became envious of.

The Big East is still the only conference to have three schools in one Final Four — Villanova, Georgetown and St. John's in 1985. It holds the record for most teams in an NCAA tournament, 11 in 2010-11 when it had 16 teams. Connecticut won it all that year.

"It's hard to believe people could ever think schools with this kind of tradition wouldn't be one of the best leagues in the country," St. John's coach Steve Lavin said. "Every game has a tournament feel. All of us have a tough nonconference schedule. This is a basketball conference, only a basketball conference."

For most of the season, the Big East was ranked second to the Big 12 in the conference RPI rankings. Not bad for a league that wasn't supposed to be able to keep up with the power conferences.

"We had an outstanding and highly competitive season and are very excited to see many of our teams rewarded with a tournament berth," commissioner Val Ackerman said Sunday. "Like everyone else, we can't wait for the games to begin."