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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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West recalibrates Libya anti-terrorism plan

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC
Stars and Stripes

An assault last week on a Tunisian border town by infiltrators from Libya highlights the growing threat to North Africa by the Islamic State group, which has used years of political instability in Libya to establish a new sanctuary in Europe's backyard.

Libya descended into chaos after U.S.-backed rebels overthrew strongman Moammar

ANALYSIS

Gadhafi in 2011. Without an effective administration to succeed Gadhafi, local militias seized power in their areas, turning the country into a patchwork of warring fiefdoms.

That has opened the door to the Islamic State group. Nick Witney, a senior fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, said it appeared the Islamic State's goal was to establish a "reserve position" in Libya because it is being increasingly squeezed by U.S. and Russian bombing in Syria and Iraq, where it established a self-styled "caliphate" in 2014.

A robust Islamic State presence in Libya is now putting pressure on Tunisia.

"The challenges have continued to grow [in Libya] because of ISIS and its brand of terrorism to threaten places like Tunisia," U.S. Africa Command's Gen. David Rodriguez told a Senate committee Tuesday, using an acronym for the Islamic State group.

The March 7 attack in Ben Guerdane, Tunisia, about 20 miles from the Libyan border, shows that the threat is more than hypothetical. About 50 heavily armed attackers stormed the military barracks and a police station, triggering an hours-long gunbattle that left at least 36 attackers dead,

along with a dozen members of the Tunisian security forces and seven civilians.

"The Islamic State attack into the heart of the southeastern Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane opens up a new zone of conflict," said a report released on Wednesday by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

Faced with a growing regional threat from Libya, the U.S. military has begun to focus attention on the oil-rich country. Last month, U.S. warplanes bombed a jihadi training camp at Sabratha, a town in Libya close to the Tunisian border, killing about 40 suspected militants. Few details have emerged but U.S. military officials have acknowledged that small numbers of special operations forces have been coordinating with Libya's army. There is evidence of French and British special operations forces in Libya as well.

At the same time, the Pentagon is reportedly preparing for a more robust military role.

The New York Times reported last week that the Pentagon presented the White House with a detailed plan for extensive airstrikes in Libya aimed at delivering a crippling blow to the Islamic State group.

But the newspaper said the White House has shelved the plan for the time being while the Obama administration steps up a diplomatic initiative to help the Libyans form a government of national unity capable of confronting the Islamic State.

Some analysts fear that without diplomatic progress, a major air operation in Libya might serve only to repeat the mistakes of the Iraq War — drawing the West deeper into conflict.

"[The Islamic State] tend to be a symptom. The underlying problem is state collapse

in Libya, just as it was in Syria two years ago," said Witney, who used to head the European Union's defense agency.

Rather than focusing on a military response, Witney said, the U.S. and its European allies should work to resolve the internal problems of Libya, which has two rival governments — the Western-backed one based in the eastern town of Tobruk, and another that controls the capital, Tripoli.

But progress has been painfully slow. In the meantime the threat to Tunisia is growing.

The country launched the Arab Spring in December 2010 with a revolt that toppled longtime strongman Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. While the Arab Spring brought more repression in Egypt and war to Yemen and Syria, the Ben Ali regime was replaced by a stable, democratic government. Five years later, however, Tunisia's democratic experience is threatened by economic challenges, including high unemployment and social unrest. Three deadly terrorist attacks on tourists in the past year have left its tourist industry facing collapse.

"Tunisia has a lot of home-grown problems, which make it vulnerable" to infiltration by the Islamic State group, said Rafik Mezran, senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.

The effects of the economic downturn in Tunisia have been most intense in areas near the Libyan border, such as Ben Guerdane. Mezran said it was likely that the Ben Guerdane attackers had some support among the local, impoverished population. He noted that many Islamic State fighters inside Libya come from Tunisia.

Witney, of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said Tunisian security forces performed well in repulsing

the attack and that providing them with advisers and more equipment was a better option than an all-out air campaign.

For AFRICOM, a series of training efforts is aimed at building up the resiliency of Tunisia's armed forces as it faces growing unrest. Those efforts include counterterrorism training, developing Tunisian air power and assistance in intelligence and border security capabilities, Rodriguez said.

"We are also assisting Tunisia in installing an electronic surveillance system along key portions of the border with Libya to help stem the illegal flow of people, arms and contraband," Rodriguez said in testimony to Congress.

There are also signs, however, that the Europeans are becoming more active in Libya, fearing the threat to Europe's security posed by a growing Islamic State presence in North Africa. On Wednesday, the private security firm Stratfor said satellite imagery had confirmed the arrival of French special operations forces to Benina air base near Benghazi, in eastern Libya. The base was rumored to host as many as 180 French soldiers, Stratfor said.

"Until a clearer prospective political solution emerges, U.S., British, French and Italian military forces have decided to work incrementally in both western and eastern Libya to fight the Islamic State," Stratfor said.

An AFRICOM spokesman declined to detail the U.S. military mission in Libya. "With regard to the SOF personnel, I can't address the subject due to operational security concerns," Lt. Cmdr. Anthony Falvo said. "But I'll tell you that we are committed to partnering with Libyans and local authorities on counterterrorism measures in Libya."

Renewed Russia threat among challenges for incoming EUCOM chief

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — When U.S. Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti takes up the job of NATO Supreme Allied Commander in the months ahead, he won't be facing the tranquil European security scene that greeted his most recent predecessors, who walked into the job trying to make a friend of Russia.

If confirmed, Scaparrotti will take his seat at the old desk of Dwight D. Eisenhower with a European mission transformed: Cold War-style tensions with Russia, a refugee crisis threatening Europe's political order and a NATO alliance still trying to adapt.

On Friday, the White House nominated Scaparrotti as the next chief of European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

"His experience as a commander at every echelon while facing incredibly demanding security challenges in our country's hottest spots give him the experience and skills needed for Europe and our nation at this time," current EUCOM chief Gen. Philip Breedlove said in a statement. "'Scap' is a superb match for the security situation in Europe as it is rapidly evolving and becoming more complex."

In Europe, NATO has spent the past two years adjusting to what it sees as a more aggressive and unpredictable Russia, a view formed in the wake of Moscow's 2014 intervention in Ukraine.

In response, the U.S.-led alliance has worked to enhance its presence along its eastern border with Russia, adding rotational forces and doubling the size of its quick-reaction force to 40,000.

Scaparrotti, whose nomination as SACEUR was approved Friday by allies in Brussels, is currently commander of United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea.

If his nomination is confirmed by the Senate, he will have the task of picking up where Breedlove leaves off: continuing a pivot away from counterinsurgency with a more intensive focus on conducting high-end military operations.

The U.S. military presence has grown in Europe, with pre-positioned tanks, more rotational troops and forces maneuvering in larger numbers on NATO's eastern edge. The challenge ahead will be to improve allies' overall state of readiness.

Although NATO has taken steps to streamline the political process for speedier deployments, concerns persist about whether NATO could mobilize fast enough in a crisis with Russia. That will likely be a key focus of Scaparrotti's tenure as EUCOM boss and NATO military chief.

In that regard, Scaparrotti can draw heavily from his experiences during his nearly three-year stint in South Korea, a job that in many ways matches the one into which he might soon be stepping.

During a 2014 press briefing, Scaparrotti described a mission focus in Korea that captures what NATO is working toward.

"The mission of the United States and Republic of Korea alliance is to deter aggression, and if deterrence fails, defend South Korea," Scaparrotti said. "We deter North Korean aggression by ensuring our forces are ready to fight tonight. Therefore, our focus is on readiness and sustaining and strengthening the alliance."

Trial to start in '14 death of American girl in Germany

Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The trial for three Holiday Park employees charged in the 2014 death of an American soldier's daughter is set to begin Tuesday in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, German prosecutors announced last week.

Amber Walker, 11, died after she was run over by rotating platforms on the Spinning Barrels ride.

The ride operator, a training supervisor and an operations manager will face trial for what prosecutors say were a series of careless mistakes that allowed Walker and her mother to access the platform seconds before the ride started.

Each of the three men faces

a fine or a prison sentence of up to five years if found guilty of negligent homicide.

Located outside Hassloch, Holiday Park is one of Germany's most popular theme parks, a frequent destination for American servicemembers and their families.

Prosecutors allege that the operator left an entrance door to the ride open and failed to make an announcement that the ride was about to start. His supervisors are being faulted for improperly training him and monitoring the ride.

Walker died from traumatic injuries after the ride started moving without warning before she was seated, knocking her underneath the rotating platforms.

Commander of patrol ship USS Typhoon relieved

MANAMA, Bahrain — The commanding officer of the coastal patrol ship USS Typhoon, Lt. Cmdr. Jeremiah Daley, was relieved of his duties Saturday due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command, the Navy said.

The commander of Patrol Coastal Squadron One, Cmdr. Jake Douglas, relieved Daley after an investigation into unsatisfactory performance and a poor command climate, the

Navy said in a statement. It did not offer any further details.

Until a new commander is named, Lt. Cmdr. Scott Whitworth, Patrol Coastal Squadron One's operations officer, has temporarily assumed command of the ship, which is based at Naval Support Activity Bahrain, home of the 5th Fleet.

Daley, who commanded the USS Typhoon since May 2015, has been reassigned to commander, Task Force 55 in Bahrain, the statement said.

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Trump could pay legal fees for supporter

ATLANTA — Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump said he will consider paying the legal fees of a North Carolina man captured on video sucker-punching a protester at one of the billionaire's rallies.

"I don't accept responsibility. I do not condone violence in any shape," Trump told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

But when asked whether he'd financially back the supporter, who was arrested and charged

with assault, Trump says he's "instructed my people to look into it, yes."

Trump, meanwhile, rejected calls to modify his campaign rhetoric amid increasing instances of violence at his events. Instead, he accused Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders for sending supporters to disrupt Trump events and noted that many of the protesters who clashed with Trump supporters in Chicago on Friday night carried Sanders signs.

Sanders on Sunday vehemently denied Trump's accusations.

From The Associated Press

Some rise, some fall on college hoops' biggest day

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sunday is the day some college basketball fans can't wait for every year: it's almost time to put the words "bubble" and "bracketology" back in the dictionary until at least next January.

This year, there were five conference tournament championships before brackets were released on Selection Sunday. Most conferences played their title games on Saturday night.

Only one game on Sunday — the American Athletic Conference final between Connecticut and Memphis — had a participant on the bubble for the NCAA Tournament. Memphis lacks the résumé to earn an at-large bid, so teams on the bubble were hoping for a Connecticut victory.

Most of the real action took place Saturday, when 14 conference champions were crowned — and 14 tickets to the NCAA tournament punched.

Here's a look at the winners — and losers — from a thrilling day of action:

Good Saturdays: Stony Brook, the America East champion, and Cal State-Bakersfield, the Western Athletic Conference winner, both earned their first NCAA Tournament berths.

"We'll worry about next week later on down the road," Stony Brook coach Steve Pikiell said as he and his players celebrated.

Dedrick Basile hit a three-pointer with two-tenths of a second remaining in WAC title game.

"It was our night, our turn, our time," coach Rod Barnes said. "It's been a fantastic year."

Connecticut won its American Athletic Conference semifinal over Temple and likely locked up a tournament spot whether it beats Memphis or not.

Kansas, which beat West Virginia to sweep the Big 12 titles, solidified its very probable status as the overall No. 1 seed.

"I'd like to say there's a lot of correlation between success this weekend and success next weekend, but I'm not sure there is," Jayhawks coach Bill Self said.

Stephen F. Austin beat Texas A&M-Corpus Christi in the Southland Conference championship game to increase its winning streak to 20 games.

"There's nothing greater than Selection Sunday," SFA coach Brad Underwood said. "I am an old-school guy, and when they call your name, the hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I get goose bumps."

Bad Saturdays: Villanova lost to Seton Hall for the Big East title and probably cost itself a No. 1 seed. The Wildcats could have made it a couple weekends of bus rides by being sent to Brooklyn (which they probably still will) and Philadelphia (it would have been nice to

play two tournament games on their second homecourt).

"We really don't care about that," coach Jay Wright said. "I know we have a chance to play in the East. We would love to play in the East. But if we don't, we're so happy to be playing in the NCAA Tournament. We'll take whatever we get."

Michigan went from its feel-good moment of a buzzer-beater to knock off top-seeded Indiana in the Big Ten to wondering if it's in the field after a solid thumping by Purdue in the semifinals.

San Diego State lost to Fresno State in the Mountain West championship and immediately became one of the teams that has reason to be nervous.

"I thought we had an excellent season," Aztecs forward Winston Shepard said. "I think we're definitely one of the best teams in the country. I don't think this is a team that many people would want to play. So this is the hard part. We have to leave it up to a bunch of people who will go to the metrics and things like that, so we just have to wait and see."

LSU needed to do much better than its 71-38 SEC semifinals loss to Texas A&M. Unless Ben Simmons shocks the world and returns to school rather than enter the NBA draft, he'll leave college basketball without an NCAA Tournament appearance.

Army women beat Loyola

Associated Press

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Kelsey Minato and Army are headed back to the NCAA Tournament.

Minato scored 25 points to help the top-seeded Black Knights beat Loyola, Md. 69-51 on Saturday night and win the Patriot League tournament, earning the conference's NCAA bid.

"It feels awesome," Minato said. "It's something we've been working towards since the end of last season. We found missing pieces of the puzzle. People have embraced their role. Each girl has contributed to what we've been able to accomplish. I'm so proud of this team."

Aimee Oertner added 14 points, 11 rebounds and four blocks for the Black Knights, who are making their second trip to the NCAA Tournament in the past three seasons. They went in 2014, their first appearance since 2006 when Maggie Dixon led them to the NCAAs.

The victory was the 19th straight for the Black Knights (29-2), who matched Lehigh's team from 2009-10 for most wins in a season for a Patriot League school.

"This team never ceased to amaze me this year," Army coach Dave Magarity said. "Sort of mind blowing we're 29-2. The way we got there. The teams we beat along the way."

The Black Knights jumped out to a quick lead behind their star Minato, who won the tournament MVP. She had 10 points in the opening quarter as Army used a 9-0 run to open up a double-digit lead. The Black Knights led 20-9 after the first period, much to the delight of the strong home crowd.

But the Greyhounds rallied behind Diana Logan. The senior, who only averaged 3.8 points in conference play, scored seven straight to open the second quarter. She capped the team's 12-0 run with another 3-pointer to give Loyola a 21-20 advantage.

That was the Greyhounds' final lead of the game as the Black Knights scored the next 10 points, during a 13-2 run to close the half.

Army led 33-23 at the break and upped its advantage to 47-30 after four straight points by Janae McNeal. Loyola scored the final seven points of the third to get within 47-37, but could get no closer.

"They are a great team," Loyola coach Joe Logan said. "We knew we couldn't let them get out to a big lead and be able to recover."

Oregon tops Utah for Pac-12 title

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The Pac-12 championship got its marquee matchup, pitting the top two teams from the regular season against each other in the electric atmosphere of MGM Grand Garden Arena.

Oregon turned it into a Duck dynasty. Tyler Dorsey scored 23 points, Dillon Brooks added 18 and No. 8 Oregon made it an early rout, rolling over No. 12 Utah 88-57 on Saturday night.

Oregon (28-6) won the regular-season title and Utah (26-8) was right behind. They held up through the conference tournament, setting up a matchup worthy of a neon marquee on the Strip.

The Ducks turned it into a flyaway, putting on a defensive show to sweep conference regular-season and tournament titles for the first time.

Stony Brook 80, Vermont 74: Jameel Warney scored 43 points and host Stony Brook reached the NCAA Tournament for the first time by coming from behind to win the America East Tournament championship over Vermont.

Hampton 81, South Carolina St. 69: At Norfolk, Va., Reginald Johnson Jr. had 21 points and eight assists and top-seeded Hampton beat South Carolina State to

win its second consecutive Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Tournament.

Middle Tennessee 55, Old Dominion 53: At Birmingham, Ala., Reggie Upshaw made two free throws with 2.9 seconds left to lift Middle Tennessee to a victory over Old Dominion in the finals of the Conference USA tournament.

Fresno State 68, San Diego State 63: At Las Vegas, Marvella Harris scored 18 points to lead Fresno State to a victory over San Diego State to win the Mountain West title and earn its first NCAA Tournament berth since 2001.

Southern 54, Jackson St. 53: At Houston, Adrian Rodgers made a jump shot with 17 seconds left to lift Southern University to a win over Jackson State in the Southwestern Athletic Conference championship game, clinching the Jaguars' first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2013.

Buffalo 64, Akron 61: At Cleveland, Blake Hamilton made a three-pointer with 2 seconds left as Buffalo defended its Mid-American Conference title — and pulled off a rare double for the school — with a win over Akron in the title game.

Weber St. 62, Montana 59: At Reno, Nev., Jeremy Senglin scored 20 points and top-seeded Weber State beat sec-

ond-seeded Montana in the Big Sky Conference Tournament championship game and earned an NCAA Tournament berth.

Stephen F. Austin 82, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi 60: At Katy, Texas, Thomas Walkup had 19 points and six rebounds to lead Stephen F. Austin to its third straight NCAA Tournament appearance with a win over Texas A&M-Corpus Christi — its 20th consecutive victory — in the Southland Conference Tournament championship Saturday night.

CS Bakersfield 57, New Mexico State 54: At Las Vegas, Dedrick Basile's three-pointer with two-tenths of a second remaining lifted Cal State Bakersfield to a victory over No. 1 seed New Mexico State in the Western Athletic Conference Tournament title game, sending the Roadrunners to their first NCAA Tournament appearance.

Hawaii 64, Long Beach State 60: At Anaheim, Calif., Aaron Valdes scored 14 points, Stefan Jankovic scored all 10 of his points in the second half, and Hawaii hung on late to beat Long Beach State in the Big West Conference Tournament championship game Saturday night.



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Spurs rally past Thunder

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Kawhi Leonard scored 26 points and the San Antonio Spurs beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 93-85 on Saturday night for their 41st straight home victory, the third-longest streak in NBA history.

The Spurs avenged a season-opening loss to the Thunder and made it 32 straight wins to open this season at home, where they haven't lost in the regular season since last March.

Only Golden State, which has won 48 in a row after beating Phoenix on Saturday, and the Chicago teams that won 44 straight in 1995-96 had longer streaks.

LaMarcus Aldridge added 24 points and Tim Duncan had 11 for San Antonio, which extended its lead over Oklahoma City (44-22) to 12 games for the second seed in the Western Conference.

Kevin Durant had 28 points for the Thunder.

The Spurs (56-10) rallied to extend their franchise best start, trailing entering the fourth quarter for just the fourth time in 32 home games this season. Leonard scored nine in the final period.

David West ignited the rally, scoring six straight points to tie the game at 72 with 9 minutes remaining. The veteran forward shouted encouragement to the team after his second basket and closed the run by rushing in to tip in his own missed short jumper.

West finished with eight points.

Leonard continued the momentum, going 4 for 7 in the fourth quarter. He faked a pass that Russell Westbrook didn't react to, so the Spurs forward rose and drained an 18-foot jumper on the Oklahoma City point guard. Following a 3-pointer by Danny Green, Leonard crossed over Andre Roberson at the 3-point line and drained a 3 that gave San Antonio an

82-76 lead with 6:30 remaining.

The Thunder had a 15-5 run in the second quarter and handed San Antonio just its fourth halftime deficit of the season at home.

Westbrook finished with 19 points on 5-for-16 shooting.

Warriors 123, Suns 116: Stephen Curry scored 17 of his 35 points in the fourth quarter and host Golden State rallied from a nine-point deficit over the final 12 minutes to beat Phoenix.

Curry, who spent most of the third quarter on the bench in foul trouble, made three of his seven three-pointers in the fourth, including two as part of an 18-8 run to close out the game.

Hornets 125, Rockets 109: Kemba Walker scored 17 of his 26 points in the second half and host Charlotte used a 27-8 run to open the fourth quarter and beat Houston for its seventh straight win.

Marvin Williams added 25 points, Jeremy Lin had 16, and Al Jefferson added 10 rebounds and 10 assists for the Hornets. They have won 13 of their last 15 games.

Raptors 112, Heat 104 (OT): DeMar DeRozan matched his season high with 38 points and added 10 rebounds and Toronto outlasted visiting Miami in overtime.

Jonas Valanciunas added 20 points and 10 rebounds, while Kyle Lowry chipped in with 16 points for the Raptors. They secured the season series against the Heat for the second straight season, as well as a potential playoff tiebreaker should they finish with the same record.

Trail Blazers 121, Magic 84: Damian Lillard scored 19 points and had 10 of host Portland's season-high 34 assists in the Trail Blazers' victory over Orlando.

C.J. McCollum and Allen Crabbe each had 18 points for the Blazers. They won for the sixth time in their last seven home

games.

Pacers 112, Mavericks 105: Monta Ellis scored 17 points in his return to Dallas, Paul George had 18 of his 20 in the second half and Indiana extended the Mavericks' longest losing streak of the season to five games.

Ellis got a warm greeting in his first visit since the end of last season, when he was the first leading scorer not named Dirk Nowitzki for Dallas since 2000. He signed with Indiana as a free agent.

Pistons 125, 76ers 111: Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored 23 points, Tobias Harris added 21 and Detroit used a big second half to beat host Philadelphia.

Trailing 57-52 at halftime, the Pistons shot 15 for 20 in a 38-point third quarter and finished with 73 points over the final two periods while erasing two 10-point deficits.

Nuggets 116, Wizards 100: Jusuf Nurkic scored all of his season-high 17 points in the second half and Denver rallied in the fourth quarter to beat visiting Washington.

Gary Harris, D.J. Augustin and Darrell Arthur also scored 17 points and Will Barton finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds for Denver.

Hawks 95, Grizzlies 83: Paul Millsap scored 21 points to help host Atlanta beat depleted Memphis.

Al Horford had 19 points, and Jeff Teague 18. The Hawks closed the first half with a 30-10 run.

Bucks 103, Pelicans 92: Khris Middleton scored 19 points and Giannis Antetokounmpo added 18 in Milwaukee's victory over visiting New Orleans.

Jerryd Bayless had 17 points to help Milwaukee end a six-game losing streak to New Orleans that dated to 2012.

Kyle Busch races to 3rd straight Xfinity win

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — Kyle Busch cruised to a win at Phoenix International Raceway on Saturday, his third straight Xfinity Series victory this season.

A week after leading all but one lap at Las Vegas, Busch led 175 of 200 laps on the mile oval to win for the record 79th time in the second-tier series.

Busch also posted a dominating win at Atlanta. He didn't race in the opener at Daytona.

In the past three weeks, Busch has led 493 of 563 laps.

"Some people will say I'm a failure for just joining this field," the Sprint Cup regular said. "I get plenty of criticism, whether I'm winning, losing or participating. For me, I don't really pay attention to any of that. I do what I need to do to help support my team."

Busch's biggest obstacle was lapped traffic and the lone competition from his Joe Gibbs Racing teammates. Busch and series rookie Erik Jones raced side-by-side for several laps before their green-flag pitstops with 24 laps left. Busch beat Jones to the line and built as much as a 3-second edge.

When Brad Keselowski finally pitted with 13 laps left, Busch took the lead for good and secured his ninth Xfinity Series win in 20 races at Phoenix.

"A knack for this place, I guess," Busch said. "We've been off a little bit on the (Sprint) Cup side for years, but this year we seem to be a lot better. ... The Xfinity Series program has always been good. I'm not sure why."

Jones finished second, 2.3 seconds back. But his car failed the post-race laser inspection and his team could be fined.

Daniel Suarez, who scraped the wall early, was third. It gave JGR a top-three sweep for the second straight week.

"That pit stop we lost a lot of ground to him," Jones said about Busch. "It just got too tight after that and he ran away."

Busch started third behind Jones and Suarez on the sunny and breezy day and shot to the lead on the sixth lap. He worked his way from fourth to first after three drivers took only two tires on a mid-race pitstop.

Justin Allgaier finished fourth and Chase Elliott fifth.

With Elliott winning at Daytona, a Sprint Cup regular has won every Xfinity race this season.

The series switched to a playoff format similar to the Sprint Cup this season. But Jones and Suarez haven't been able to take advantage of the win-and-you're-in format, not with their teammate dominating.

"They made me run hard all day long," Busch said about his JGR mates. "There's nothing left in this car."

Suarez opened an eight-point lead over Elliott Sadler in the season standings. Sadler finished eighth.

Pietrangelo, Blues edge Stars in OT

Associated Press

DALLAS — A back-to-back battle for the Western Conference lead in Dallas ended the way it started — with two teams tied. It's just not the same two teams.

Alex Pietrangelo scored 2:11 into overtime after Jamie Benn pulled Dallas even late in regulation and St. Louis ended up tied with the Stars atop the Western Conference after the Blues' 5-4 win Saturday night.

It was the second straight night that the top spot in the West was on the line in Dallas after the Stars beat Chicago 5-2 with both teams tied atop the conference Friday night.

The Stars forced overtime with a 6-on-4 advantage in the final 2 minutes of the third period when Benn redirected Tyler Seguin's shot past Jake Allen.

The point for Dallas left both teams with 91 points with 12 games remaining. The Blackhawks have 88 points with 13 games to play.

Dallas' Jason Spezza had two goals for a six-game goal streak, the longest of his career.

"I've said all along this year that we're going to benefit by playing these tough games against good teams," Spezza said. "Nobody's going to surprise you come playoff time."

Vladimir Tarasenko had a goal and an assist for the Blues.

The Stars had pulled goalie Antti Niemi

while Robby Fabbri was off for hooking late in regulation when Seguin sent a shot from just inside the blue line that Benn tipped past Allen for his 34th goal with 1:12 remaining and the power play about to end.

"The boys played a hell of a hockey game," Stars coach Lindy Ruff said. "It's been a hell of a weekend for us, getting three out of four (points) and how hard they competed."

On Pietrangelo's overtime goal, he took a pass from Paul Stastny on the left side, skated across the top of the faceoff circle toward the middle and beat Niemi from about 30 feet with no interference in front of the goalie.

Sharks 5, Capitals 2: Joe Pavelski scored a tiebreaking power-play goal in the opening minute of the third period and Martin Jones stopped a key penalty shot to help San Jose beat visiting Washington.

T.J. Oshie and Justin Williams scored for the Capitals, who missed an opportunity to become the first team to clinch a playoff berth.

Panthers 5, Flyers 4 (SO): Aleksander Barkov scored the winning goal in a shootout to lift host Florida over Philadelphia.

Red Wings 3, Rangers 2 (OT): Brad Richards tied the game with 31.8 seconds left in the third period, and then Darren Helm scored in overtime to give host Detroit a victory over New York.

Devils 2, Kings 1 (OT): John Moore cir-

cled the net and scored with 15.2 seconds left in overtime and New Jersey beat host Los Angeles for its second straight victory over a Western Conference power.

Sabres 3, Hurricanes 2 (OT): Jack Eichel scored his second goal on a breakaway at 4:59 of overtime, lifting host Buffalo to the victory.

Bruins 3, Islanders 1: David Pastrnak scored two goals and Tuukka Rask made 25 saves, leading host Boston to the win.

Wild 4, Canadiens 1: Mikael Granlund scored twice, Devan Dubnyk made 30 saves and Minnesota beat host Montreal.

Jets 3, Avalanche 2: Mark Scheifele had a goal and an assist to extend his point streak to seven games and Winnipeg erased a two-goal deficit to beat visiting Colorado.

Coyotes 4, Oilers 0: Mike Smith made 44 saves in his return from a 40-game injury absence and Antoine Vermette had two goals and an assist to help Arizona beat host Edmonton.

Canucks 4, Predators 2: Bo Horvat had a goal and an assist and host Vancouver won to snap Nashville's franchise-record 14-game point streak.

Senators 4, Maple Leafs 0: Craig Anderson made 29 saves for his fourth shutout of the season and host Ottawa beat Toronto to sweep the season series.