

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## NATO frustrates, but is vital vs. militants

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's substantial support for NATO, both in money and military aid, has long been a source of frustration for U.S. leaders, and questioned by some as a throwback to the Cold War era.

In interviews this week, Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump suggested the U.S. should scale back its role in the alliance nearly seven decades after it was launched in the aftermath of World War II. Complaining that America is spending too much money on NATO, Trump said that the financial burden has to change.

But as attacks by extremists ripped through Brussels this week, NATO rose again as a rallying point and key player in the expanding fight against Islamic State militants. The attacks underscored the need for the U.S. and its European allies to work together to counter threats ranging from groups targeting the West to the growing Russian aggression in the region.

Created in 1949, NATO has expanded from 16 members at the end of the Cold

War to 28 today.

"Given this attack, I think you will see more willingness from NATO nations to join in the coalition in real and practical ways," said James Stavridis, the retired Navy admiral who served as NATO's top military commander in Europe from 2009 to 2013.

As an example, he said Belgium may look to participate in coalition airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq or Syria, and other nations may step up their contributions of military advisers or special operations forces.

Trump's criticism, however, echoed persistent complaints from some U.S. leaders, who balk at bearing as much as 22 percent of the NATO budget.

"NATO is costing us a fortune and yes, we're protecting Europe, but we're spending a lot of money," Trump told *The Washington Post* this week. "I think the distribution of costs has to be changed. I think NATO as a concept is good, but it is not as good as it was when it first evolved."

And while he did not fully advocate pull-

ing out of the alliance, he said the U.S. can't afford the high price anymore.

The argument has dogged U.S. military and defense officials for years as they have poured millions of dollars of money, troops, equipment and other infrastructure into Europe. There are about 62,000 active-duty U.S. forces permanently stationed in Europe, and several thousand more rotate in and out for short-term deployments for military exercises, training and other programs.

In recent years, the Pentagon reduced its permanent troop presence in Europe. But as the threats from Russia and the Islamic State grew, the military expanded its rotational deployments in a broad effort to reassure European allies and to send a message to Russia that threats against NATO allies would not be tolerated.

The Pentagon has made it clear through the years that while the U.S. bears a heavy financial burden for NATO, America remains staunchly committed to its European allies, and is frequently dependent on them.

## Islamic State retreating on multiple fronts

*The Washington Post*

BEIRUT — As European governments scramble to contain the expanding terrorist threat posed by the Islamic State, on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria the group is a rapidly diminishing force.

In the latest setbacks for the militants on Thursday, Syrian government troops entered the outskirts of the historic town of Palmyra after a weeks-old offensive aided by Russian and U.S. airstrikes helped Iraqi forces overrun a string of Islamic State villages in northern Iraq that had been threatening a U.S. base nearby.

These are just two of the many fronts in both countries where the militants are being squeezed, stretched and

pushed back. Nowhere are they on the attack. They have not embarked on a successful offensive in nearly nine months. Their leaders are dying in U.S. strikes at the rate of one every three days, inhibiting their ability to launch attacks, according to U.S. military officials.

Front-line commanders no longer speak of a scarily formidable foe but of defenses that crumble within days and fighters who flee at the first sign they are under attack.

"They don't fight. They just send car bombs and then run away. And when we surround them they either surrender or infiltrate themselves among the civilians," said Lt. Gen. Abdul-Ghani al-Assadi, commander of Iraq's counterterrorism

forces, who is overseeing the latest Iraqi offensive to capture the town of Hit in the province of Anbar.

"Their morale is shaken. We listen to them on their communications devices. Their leaders are begging them to fight, but they answer that it is a lost cause. They refuse to obey orders and run away."

The group still controls big swaths of territory and potentially could prove as deadly in defeat as it was when it was on the offensive. Strikes in Belgium, Turkey and France may herald the tip of an iceberg of militant networks already infiltrated into Europe, law enforcement officials fear. Recent weeks have also seen a revival in Iraq as well as Syria of the

suicide bombings and hit-and-run assaults that don't win ground but are deadly to people otherwise living beyond their reach.

But U.S. military officials say they believe that after more than 18 months, the military campaign has found its stride.

"As time goes on, as our systems mature, we're becoming more effective," said Col. Steve Warren, the U.S. military's spokesman for the campaign in Baghdad. "We've become much better at spotting them. Anytime they try to move, we're able to find and finish them. They can't move, haven't won any battles for a long time, and they've got difficulty leading because we're hitting their leaders."

## Military to downgrade three hospitals in Italy

BY STEVEN BEARDSLEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The military will downgrade three of its hospitals in Italy to outpatient clinics within the next three years.

Navy hospitals in Naples and Sigonella, Sicily, and the Air Force hospital at Aviano Air Base will stop providing inpatient services by fiscal 2019, Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work said in a December memo. That will send more patients to off-base hospitals.

The loss of on-base labor and delivery, and admissions for internal medicine and general surgery would appear to be the biggest changes brought about by the move, as each hospital already sends serious cases and patients requiring advanced procedures to off-base hospitals.

The changes are part of a broader Defense Department review of medical facilities and patient volumes across Europe, said Maj. Ben Sakrisson, a Defense Department spokesman.

Medical specialists working in areas with low need have a hard time maintaining their skills, he said. Off-base hospitals can fill gaps in care.

“The key point here is we’re working with local providers to continue ready access to high-quality care,” he said.

Each hospital’s medical command will implement the changes.

Navy Medicine spokeswoman Capt. Dora Lockwood said her command is in the earliest stage of the process. Changes have yet to be made in Naples and Sigonella, she said, and the process ahead is only now being mapped out.

Language and cultural barriers make local hospitals an unattractive option to some Americans, while others are concerned about the quality of care. Yet military use of local hospitals is hardly new, especially in Europe. Local providers work closely with the military, and many facilities seek to accommodate American clients.

## Powerful snowstorm heads toward Plains, Midwest

*Associated Press*

DENVER — A powerful spring snowstorm that closed Denver’s airport and stranded numerous passengers barreled east Thursday, threatening the Plains states and the Midwest with heavy snow and strong winds.

Denver International Airport was closed about midday Wednesday because wind-whipped snow made it unsafe for planes to land or take off. The airport reopened about seven hours later, but more than 1,300 of Wednesday’s 1,500 scheduled flights were canceled.

Hundreds of people with suitcases and duffel bags stood

or lay around the terminals, and airport employees handed out blankets and sleeping mats to people who were stranded.

The storm, which is moving to the northeast across the Plains and into Michigan, was bringing strong wind gusts to southeast South Dakota, creating hazardous driving conditions and reducing visibility to a quarter of a mile in some areas Wednesday evening.

Forecasters with the National Weather Service said snow accumulations in South Dakota ranged from fewer than 2 inches in Sioux Falls to up to 7 inches north of Humboldt, while gusts reached between 40 mph to 45 mph.

## Islamic State trains 400 to attack Europe

*Associated Press*

PARIS — The Islamic State group has trained at least 400 fighters to target Europe in deadly waves of attacks, deploying interlocking terror cells like the ones that struck Brussels and Paris with orders to choose the time, place and method for maximum chaos, officials have told The Associated Press.

The network of agile, semi-autonomous cells shows the reach of the extremist group in Europe even as it loses ground in Syria and Iraq.

The officials, including European and Iraqi intelligence officials and a French lawmaker who follows the jihadi networks, described camps in

Syria, Iraq and possibly the former Soviet bloc where attackers are trained to target the West. Before being killed in a police raid, the ringleader of the Nov. 13 Paris attacks claimed he had entered Europe in a multinational group of 90 fighters, who scattered “more or less everywhere.”

But the biggest break yet in the Paris attacks investigation — the arrest on Friday of fugitive Salah Abdeslam — did not thwart the multipronged attack just four days later on the Belgian capital’s airport and subway system that left 31 people dead and an estimated 270 wounded. Three suicide bombers also died.

## DOD looks to air shows to boost F-35’s reputation

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — To say the military’s futuristic F-35 Joint Strike Fighter has a marketing problem is an understatement.

Just this week, an Australian think tank called it a “jackass of all trades” and compared Lockheed Martin’s 5th-generation fighter to a Ponzi scheme, according to a newspaper in that country.

There is also plenty of bad press in the United States. The Daily Beast website published a story last week calling the F-35 a “billion-dollar war toy” and described the dire state of the aircraft’s development with an expletive.

The Pentagon’s most expensive acquisition program is also its most lambasted.

“I have never been associated with a program in my 25-plus years of acquisition where the public perception and the reality are so different,” Lt. Gen.

Christopher Bogdan, the program executive officer at the F-35 Lightning II Joint Program Office, said Wednesday. “Part of that is our problem for not telling the story.”

The military now hopes to finally change years of negative impressions by bringing the aircraft — 15 years in development — face to face with the public in 2016, Bogdan said.

Air show crowds in New York City, Las Vegas, Chicago and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., will finally get a close look at the F-35. The Air Force Heritage Flight Foundation, a nonprofit group that performs demonstrations and supports the service, has been authorized to show off the fighter throughout the year. Its next scheduled demonstration is at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona in April.

The service also will team up with the Marine Corps to bring a handful of the fighters to an air show in England in July, Bogdan said.



# Hoosiers' turnaround inspired by tougher, stouter defense

Associated Press

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. — In those first days after Indiana's embarrassing early-season loss to Duke, the Hoosiers heard a cascade of complaints.

Some contended they were overrated. Others suggested nothing had changed during the offseason. The most biting criticism might have been that they weren't living up to the school's defensive legacy.

So instead of getting bogged down in the debate, the Hoosiers tuned it out, turned inward and found a solution in time to turn things around by winning the Big Ten regular season title and earning their first trip to the Sweet 16 since 2013.

"All negativity is a good thing sometimes and that certainly was for us," senior guard Nick Zeisloft said last weekend. "All the down times we've had this year, even if it's been one half, we've bounced back."

Resilience is the reason Zeisloft and his teammates are still hanging around Assembly Hall in late March, talking about Friday night's matchup against top-seeded North Carolina in the second East Regional semifinal.

Three months ago, nobody outside this locker room thought it was possible.

Back then, in early December, a promising season looked like it had all gone wrong.

Indiana had fallen out of the Top 25.

There were shouting matches in the middle of games.

And while the high-scoring offense continued playing well, the Hoosiers appeared to be so inept defensively in that nationally televised ACC-Big Ten Challenge game that many wondered

if the Hoosiers could find a fix quickly enough to salvage the season.

"We tried to focus on each other," senior guard Kevin "Yogi" Ferrell said when asked about the internal conversations following the 94-74 loss in Durham, N.C.

"I remember Max (Bielfeldt) saying 'We can make a run in this Big Ten if we raise this level of play' and I felt like ever since then, our level of play has changed dramatically."

Bielfeldt, a graduate transfer, understood what the Hoosiers needed to do because he had won a Big Ten title and reached the national championship game during his four seasons at Michigan. This season, he became the first player in Big Ten history to win conference titles with two schools.

What really changed?

Fans believe it's no coincidence the defensive improvement came around the same time one of Indiana's top scorers, James Blackmon Jr., went down with what turned out to be a season-ending knee injury in late December.

But there was more to it than just one player.

In Blackmon's absence, coach Tom Crean went with a bigger lineup, making 6-foot-7 Collin Hartman, the primary replacement.

Freshmen center Thomas Bryant, a McDonald's All-American, got healthy and settled in. Freshman forwards OG Anunoby and Juwan Morgan got more playing time and emerged as defensive stalwarts, and together the confidence grew.

Crean also challenged his team to get back to fundamentals for two reasons — they'd win more games and have more fun doing it.

"They like to run, they like to get out and play and you can't do that when you're just trading baskets," Crean said. "I think the defensive energy creates offensive energy, so when you're going at it defensively, it's really hard to slow it down."

The results showed. Indiana used a record-breaking 28-0 run to rout Michigan in Ann Arbor in February and played the much bigger Boilermakers to a virtual draw in the paint in Bloomington.

The Hoosiers forced Iowa into 13 turnovers in their conference-clinching win at Iowa City and limited Maryland to 41.4 percent shooting in their home finale at Assembly Hall.

Last weekend, against Kentucky, Indiana forced 16 turnovers and limited the Wildcats to 28.6 percent shooting on three-pointers, which came as no surprise to a team that stopped giving up open lanes to the basket months ago.

"It was us just being relentless against them defensively," forward Troy Williams said after Saturday's 73-67 victory.

And they don't believe they're finished this yet.

On Friday, they'll take on North Carolina (30-6), their first ACC foe since Duke, with a lot to prove.

The Tar Heels were the preseason favorite to win the national championship.

But the Hoosiers have been here before. In 1976, they used a staunch defense to beat Michigan and complete a perfect season in Philly. Five years later, they won Bob Knight's second national title in Philly, against the Tar Heels on the night President Ronald Reagan was shot.

Now they have a chance to add to that Indiana basketball legacy — if they can continue defending at an elite level.

# NFL agrees to 1-year trial for ejection rule

Associated Press

BOCA RATON, Fla. — The NFL is putting some bite in its on-field discipline.

NFL owners on Wednesday approved as a one-year trial ejecting a player who draws two unsportsmanlike conduct penalties from specific categories. Those categories include throwing a punch at or kicking an opponent; taunting; and using abusive, threatening or insulting language or gestures.

It's not quite as strong as what Commissioner Roger Goodell suggested during Super Bowl week when asked about players committing flagrant fouls. But it's a step in trying to curb unsportsmanlike conduct penalties, which hit a high of 75 in 2015.

Atlanta Falcons President Rich McKay, co-chairman of the competition committee that proposed the change, said the rule was amended from permanent to one season after feedback from coaches.

Also approved Wednesday as a one-year trial was placing the ball at the 25-yard line after touchbacks on kickoffs instead of at the 20. The league is seeking ways to reduce injuries on kickoff returns, which it says statistically are the most dangerous plays in the game.

In other NFL news:

■ The Browns have signed free-agent quarterback Robert Griffin III, who hasn't been the same since his dazzling rookie season in Washington.

Griffin didn't play a snap in 2015 and was recently released by the Redskins.

## Catcher, broadcaster Garagiola dies at 90

PHOENIX — Joe Garagiola's nine-year baseball career was a modest one. His 57 years in broadcasting that followed made him one of the most popular figures in the sports world and beyond.

The man Arizona Diamondbacks President Derrick Hall called "one of the biggest personalities this game has ever seen" died Wednesday, aged 90.

Arizona announced Garagiola's death before their exhibition game against San Francisco. He had been in ill health in recent years.

Garagiola hit .257 during nine years in the majors. His highlight came early, getting a four-hit game in the 1946 World Series and helping the hometown Cardinals win the championship as a 20-year-old rookie.

It was after he stopped playing that his fortunes took off. He thrived as a glib baseball broadcaster and fixture on the Today show, leading to a nearly 30-year association with NBC.

Garagiola played for the Cardinals, New York Giants, Pittsburgh Pirates and Chicago Cubs.

— The Associated Press

## Plenty of statistical quirks in this year's tourney

Associated Press

The short sample size of NCAA Tournament play can create some statistical oddities.

A team that has struggled to rebound all season can suddenly dominate on the boards for a game or two. A role player can see his minutes increase or have a major scoring surge just in time for the postseason. Players and entire teams can heat up or fall into shooting slumps.

Here are some unusual NCAA Tournament statistics we've discovered involving teams whose national title hopes are still alive:

**Syracuse rebounding:** Syracuse has a negative rebound margin this season and ranks 14th out of 15 Atlantic Coast Conference teams in that category. But the Orange outrebounded Dayton 48-28 and Middle Tennessee 37-35 in its first two tournament games. Syracuse faces a much tougher task on the boards against

Gonzaga, which ranks 20th among all Division I teams in rebound margin. Gonzaga's Domantas Sabonis is averaging 20 points and 13 rebounds in two tournament games.

**Scoring outbursts:** Miami's Angel Rodriguez scored 24 points against Buffalo and had a career-high 28 against Wichita State. Rodriguez, a senior guard and team leader, averages 12.6 points per game and didn't score 20 or more in any game the entire regular season. Texas A&M's Alex Caruso is coming off a 25-point performance in a double-overtime victory over Northern Iowa. Caruso averages 8.1 points per game and had scored in double figures just once in the eight games leading up to the Northern Iowa game.

**Hot-shooting teams:** Iowa State ranks third among all Division I teams in field-goal percentage (50.3 percent) and Virginia ranks seventh (49.1 percent), but both teams have taken it to another level in the NCAA Tournament. Iowa State shot

56.6 percent from the floor in its second-round victory over Little Rock. Virginia shot 55.2 percent against Hampton and 55.8 percent against Butler. The Cavaliers hadn't shot as high as 55 percent in a game since making 57.8 percent of their shots Jan. 30 against Louisville. Virginia shot 73.1 percent in the second half against Butler. The teams meet Friday in a Midwest Region semifinal.

**Matt's minutes:** Notre Dame's first and second round games have been the first two career starts for sophomore Matt Farrell. The 6-foot-1 guard has played 26.5 minutes per game in the NCAA Tournament, which is more than twice his season average of 12.3. Farrell didn't play at all in eight games this season. Fighting Irish coach Mike Brey says he wanted to have an extra ball handler on the floor to help out star guard Demetrius Jackson. Having an additional ball handler helps settle a team that became turnover prone late in the season.



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# Warriors stay on record pace

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — When Stephen Curry pulls out his mouth guard and lets it fly in the very way he shoots from anywhere on the court, you know the MVP is really mad.

"That's kind of the impulse because I want to talk and I can't talk with a mouthpiece in," Curry said.

Curry scored 33 points and drew a rare technical a few hours after coach Steve Kerr declared Golden State is all about the NBA wins record, and the Warriors stayed right on track to make more history Wednesday night with a 114-98 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers.

Klay Thompson added 32 points with seven three-pointers, Curry drew his T in the fourth — "I thought I played great defense that possession" — and Harrison Barnes had 11 points and six rebounds as Golden State (64-7) stayed one game ahead of the 1995-96 Bulls' pace in their record 72-win season.

Curry, Kerr and Draymond Green all used the word "weird" to describe this game.

"It was kind of a dead atmosphere in there and it didn't seem to have the same energy of the rivalry," Kerr said. "For whatever reason tonight didn't have the same juice."

Yet all was right afterward for the Splash Brothers, with Curry signing a pair of red sneakers for Thompson to gift to a boy with him.

The Warriors won their 51st straight regular-season home game, improving to 33-0 this season at rockin' Oracle Arena — where the fans let the rival Clippers have it at every opportunity.

DeAndre Jordan scored 19 points for the Clippers, swept by Golden State for the first time since dropping all six meetings in 1985-86.

Thompson was 7-for-10 on threes. Curry was 4-for-10 — putting him at 7-for-31 over the past three games after he was just 3-for-21 from long range in a loss Saturday at San Antonio and Monday's win at Minnesota.

Andrew Bogut started and had four points, 10 rebounds and four assists in 20 minutes after he had been questionable coming into the game with left foot inflammation.

Shaun Livingston added 11 points off the bench in the Warriors' sixth straight victory against the Clippers and ninth straight at home, which matched their franchise-best home winning streak against Los Angeles set from Jan. 15, 1988, to Jan. 31, 1991.

**Spurs 112, Heat 88:** Kawhi Leonard matched his career high with 32 points before leaving with a bruised quadriceps as San Antonio beat Miami to remain perfect at home.

San Antonio has won its first 36 home games, leaving the Spurs a game shy of matching the record set by Chicago in 1995-96. The Spurs have won 45 consecutive regular-season games at home over two seasons.

**Cavaliers 113, Bucks 104:** LeBron James scored 26 points and Kevin Love added 24 in host Cleveland's victory.

Kyrie Irving flirted with a triple-double on his 24th birthday, finishing with 16 points, eight rebounds and eight assists. Tristan Thompson added 13 points and 10 rebounds to help Cleveland maintain its grip on the top seed in the Eastern

Conference.

**Suns 119, Lakers 107:** Kobe Bryant said farewell to host Phoenix, scoring 17 points while being cheered on by a loud, pro-Los Angeles crowd in a loss.

**Pistons 118, Magic 102:** Andre Drummond had 30 points and 14 rebounds, as host Detroit led all the way to beat Orlando.

**Trail Blazers 109, Mavericks 103:** Damian Lillard had 27 points and six assists and Ed Davis scored all of his 16 points in the first half to help host Portland beat Dallas.

**Jazz 89, Rockets 87:** Derrick Favors' dunk with 1.6 seconds left lifted Utah past host Houston.

**Celtics 91, Raptors 79:** Isaiah Thomas scored 23 points and Evan Turner added 17 as host Boston beat Toronto.

**Knicks 115, Bulls 107:** Rookie Kristaps Porzingis matched his season high with 29 points and grabbed 10 rebounds while Carmelo Anthony added 24 to help New York beat host Chicago.

**Nuggets 104, 76ers 103:** Emmanuel Mudiay made a 35-footer at the buzzer to finish with 27 points and give host Denver a victory over Philadelphia.

**Hawks 122, Wizards 101:** Reserve Dennis Schroder scored 23 points and Kyle Korver connected on five three-pointers as visiting Atlanta beat Washington to split the home-and-home series.

**Timberwolves 113, Kings 104:** Karl-Anthony Towns had 26 points, 11 rebounds and four blocks to lead host Minnesota past Sacramento.

# Rangers roll over Bruins

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York Rangers had one of those games where almost everything went right: The passes, the goals, the officials' calls, the video replays and, of course, Henrik Lundqvist in goal.

It was par for the course for the Boston Bruins.

Keith Yandle set up two first-period power-play goals and Lundqvist made 39 saves in a 5-2 win on Wednesday night that sent the Bruins to a season-high fourth straight loss.

"It's a tight game and for a couple of games it was going against us," Lundqvist said. "The last two games we've been getting a couple of bounces, and you need it."

"When you get them, a lot of times you saw you earned them. When they go against us, you say you have bad luck. But it was a good game for us, a good test and this was exactly the type of response we needed."

Mats Zuccarello, Derek Stepan, Derick Brassard, J.T. Miller and Rick Nash scored for New York, which won its second straight and inched a little closer to securing a spot in the playoffs with eight games left in the regular season.

Lee Stempniak, who had a first-period tally disallowed after an offside review and another shot gloved off the line by Lundqvist in the third period, scored for the Bruins along with Frank Vatrano. The Bruins have five goals in their skid.

The Bruins could not catch a break in this one, either with the replays or the officials. They gave the Rangers the first five man-power advantages, and New York converted on two of the first three in a game in which it was outshot 41-24.

"I said this morning we control our own destiny and right now we are giving teams below us some hope," Bruins coach Claude Julien said. "We have to turn this around quick."

**Islanders 3, Senators 1:** Brock Nelson and Matt Martin scored 21 seconds apart in the second period and host New York beat Ottawa to snap a season-high four-game losing streak.

John Tavares also scored in the Islanders' three-goal second period and rookie goalie Jean-Francois Berube, making just his fourth career start, stopped 22 shots.

New York, holding the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, got a needed victory in its playoff push after going 1-4-2 in its previous seven games while getting outscored 22-11.

The Islanders pulled within one point of Pittsburgh for third place in the Metropolitan Division and moved four points ahead of Philadelphia and Detroit, who are tied for the East's second and final wild card.

Mark Stone scored and Andrew Hammond finished with 20 saves for Ottawa, which lost its second straight after winning three of four.

The Senators were 0-for-1 on the power play and have not scored in 28 chances over their past 11 games.

Stone spoiled Berube's shutout bid at 6:21 of the third period as he took a pass from Erik Karlsson on a 2-on-1 break and scored on a backhand. It was Karlsson's NHL-leading 62nd assist and he is fourth in the NHL with 75 points.

Neither team had much intensity for most of a scoreless first period. The Islanders had two power plays in the first five minutes, but got just two shots on goal and three others that were wide.

# NASCAR's new policy may reduce drama

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — NASCAR heads into its first weekend off this season hoping fans are thrilled with the improved on-track product and exciting race finishes.

It's a fair ask: The racing over the first five events of the season has been better, and since Denny Hamlin's victory by mere inches in the Daytona 500, there have been some decent races to the checkered flag.

Alas, it doesn't translate into a buzz capable of carrying NASCAR into mainstream conversation every week.

What does? The drama.

But a new behavioral policy could curb much of the excitement that comes with controversy.

NASCAR's brass faced a handful of behavioral reviews following a three-week West Coast road trip that ended Sunday at California with some unhappy competitors.

Kyle Busch was annoyed with NASCAR for failing to call a caution when his tire failed on the last lap while leading the Xfinity Series race on Saturday. Austin Dillon passed Busch on the last corner to win, Busch finished second and sarcastically thanked NASCAR over his in-car radio for "fixing races."

Under a behavioral policy announced days before the season-opening Daytona 500, Busch could be subject to a fine between \$10,000 and \$50,000 for "disparaging the sport and/or NASCAR's leadership."

Busch could also be penalized for skipping his post-race media obligations as the second-place finisher. Strangely,

though, Kevin Harvick was told by NASCAR he wasn't needed for a news conference after he finished second in the Sprint Cup race on Sunday, but isn't under any scrutiny.

NASCAR executive Steve O'Donnell told SiriusXM NASCAR Radio after California the series was "disappointed" by both Busch's comments and for failing to complete his media obligations.

Also under review this week, according to O'Donnell, is a tweet sent out by Martin Truex Jr.'s crew chief after Sunday's race. Cole Pearn was upset with contact between Truex and Joey Logano, and he posted a derogatory tweet toward Logano.

Pearn issued an apology through his race team several hours later, but is still under review by NASCAR.

"We certainly want to be liberal in terms of allowing drivers and competitors to express their opinions, but there's absolutely a line," O'Donnell said. "That's another one we'll have to take a look at."

Lastly, NASCAR is reviewing Danica Patrick walking toward the track to gesture at Kasey Kahne after Kahne caused her to crash.

If NASCAR does indeed punish anyone this week, it should be Patrick, who broke a clearly defined rule that has been in place since 2014. The rule was put into place after Tony Stewart's car struck and killed a sprint car driver who had exited his vehicle to confront the NASCAR driver on the track.

So Patrick actually did break a rule. The rest of it? Eh.

As the reigning Sprint Cup champion — and a driver who has made considerable gains in terms of maturity and per-

sonal growth — Busch should probably hold himself to a higher standard of professionalism. But Busch has never been one to bite his tongue, and his negative comments toward NASCAR over his team radio are not uncommon.

He indicated on Twitter he expects a fine, and said skipping all post-race interviews Saturday will likely get him "a discount" on the sanction. In other words, he said nothing rather than dig a deeper hole.

But if NASCAR excused Harvick from post-race obligations a day later, it's hard to justify Busch for failing to give any interviews. Drivers either have to speak to the media or they don't. There shouldn't be exceptions to who is and is not expected to meet media obligations.

And as for Pearn's tweet, well, that's the kind of stuff fans talk about. They won't spend the next week discussing the passes of drivers racing inside the top 10. But they will remember Pearn took a public shot at Logano, and that Busch is mad at NASCAR, and that Patrick is mad at Kahne.

Trying to stifle the personalities and raw emotion from competitors is going to hurt NASCAR in the long run. The sport is fortunate right now that its 2016 rules package has been embraced by drivers and indeed has made the racing more watchable.

But for 38 events over nearly 10 months, the racing alone is not going to carry the sport. NASCAR needs its personalities, its drama, its feuds, to build any sort of sustainable momentum.

Without that drama, it's just cars going in circles.