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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Veterans join March for Our Lives rally

BY NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy veteran Richard Roberson, 71, stood beside the Lone Sailor statue at the United States Navy Memorial on Saturday morning — directly in the center of the massive anti-gun-violence rally March for Our Lives.

He watched as thousands of people streamed by, many of them kids — all of them urging Congress for stricter gun-control measures. Roberson broke down as he explained why he felt compelled to make the trip into Washington from his home four hours away in rural Virginia.

“If you’re 20 years old and you’re on a Navy hospital ship in Vietnam, it stays with you

forever when you see what assault rifles do,” Roberson said. “Quite frankly, my generation has made a mess of the country. These kids are the future.”

A few dozen veterans gathered at the memorial to stand together in support of March for Our Lives and the students who helped to lead it. Many more veterans were likely dispersed through the large crowd, said Air Force veteran Pam Campos, who organized the veteran contingent at the Washington march.

By noon, a mass of people stretched from the U.S. Capitol down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House. Organizers were hoping to match attendance at last year’s women’s march, which was one of the biggest protests in the capitol

and far surpassed predictions of 300,000 demonstrators.

The official mission statement for March for Our Lives claims the purpose of the rally is to demand Congress act on a “comprehensive and effective bill” to address gun reform in the wake of the 17 people killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 14.

It was the first protest Marine Corps veteran Steven Kiernan, 30, had ever attended. “I was always cynical about these kinds of things. You come home from Iraq and everyone seems so disengaged and not interested,” Kiernan said. “Seeing this, it’s given me hope for the future for the first time in a while. These kids aren’t willing to accept the world as it is

— they want to change it.”

Marine Corps veteran and Georgetown University student Cristine Pedersen, 26, also said she was hoping to push back against what she said were widely held assumptions that all veterans are against gun-control measures.

On Saturday, Pedersen carried a sign with three photos of fellow Marines. One of them, she said, had died by suicide using a gun. “This issue of access to guns is really personal to veterans,” Pedersen said. “The veteran suicide rate is really high. ... A lot of it is about access to weapons.”

According to the latest Department of Veterans Affairs statistics, an average of 20 veterans died by suicide each day in 2014.

Dunford sees shift in Afghan military’s momentum

Associated Press

TACTICAL BASE GAMBERI, Afghanistan — In fits and starts, for nearly a decade, the U.S. has talked about and struggled to make progress on building an Afghan military that can take control of its own nation’s security and lay the groundwork for a stable government.

This time, they think they have it right.

After five days criss-crossing Afghanistan, meeting with everyone from the Afghan president to the new American trainers on the ground, Gen. Joseph Dunford headed home Friday with a palpable sense of optimism.

Just months after the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan declared the war against the Taliban and other insurgents a stalemate, Dunford — chair-

man of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — said he can see the makings of a shift.

“What we’re already starting to see is, I think, momentum is going to favor the Afghan forces,” Dunford told the small group of reporters traveling with him, adding that the deployment of 800 new Army trainers “will serve as an accelerant to the Afghans being able to achieve momentum.”

One thing that gave him hope was a recent Afghan military operation in the east, where the Taliban have long been strong. It delivered, in his words, a “eureka” moment.

Dubbed Saleb 1-23, the Afghan military operation was launched in mid-February in a move to oust the Taliban from a critical stretch of valley in Laghman province.

Taliban fighters have used that area as a transit route

across the border with Pakistan, where they enjoy safe havens.

U.S. Army Maj. Marc Pfrogner, the operations adviser for the Afghans’ 201st Corps, said the complex mission took 50 days to plan. He said it lasted until March 9 and got fiercer as the Afghans moved up Sangar Valley. Four Afghan forces died in the fight, and 30 Taliban were killed.

But what impressed the Americans was the coordinated battle the Afghans waged, using their own intelligence, gathered in part from the Scan Eagle drone they got in September.

With guidance from their American advisers, Afghan commandos launched the initial assaults, supported by Afghan aircraft. The Afghan National Army forces followed, clearing the area, and National Police units moved in to hold the ground, enabling local po-

litical leaders to retake the government.

U.S. surveillance and strike aircraft provided support, but American military commanders said much of that was invisible to the local people, who saw the Afghan forces as their liberators.

The coordination between the intelligence collection, the fighting forces and the police, said Dunford, is what the U.S. has been waiting to see.

“If you want to talk about what right looks like — from the Afghan security force and the government rolling in behind it — that operation was about textbook,” said Dunford. “I’m trying to restrain my enthusiasm here, but I’m having trouble because that is the most positive observation that I’ve had over the last two days. You’re kinda like, eureka!”

Trump releases transgender military ban

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump released an order Friday night banning most transgender troops from serving in the military except under “limited circumstances,” following up on his calls last year to ban transgender individuals from serving.

The White House said retaining troops with a history or diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” — those who may require substantial medical treatment — “presents considerable risk to military effectiveness and lethality.”

Trump surprised the Pentagon’s leadership in a 2017 tweet when he declared he would reverse an Obama-era plan to allow transgender individuals to serve openly. His push for the ban has been blocked by several legal challenges, and four federal courts have ruled against the ban. The Pentagon responded by allowing those serving to stay in the military and began

allowing transgender individuals to enlist beginning Jan. 1.

“This new policy will enable the military to apply well-established mental and physical health standards — including those regarding the use of medical drugs — equally to all individuals who want to join and fight for the best military force the world has ever seen,” White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Friday.

The new policy was promptly assailed by congressional Democrats and civil rights groups. House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi tweeted, “No one with the strength & bravery to serve in the U.S. military should be turned away because of who they are. This hateful ban is purpose-built to humiliate our brave transgender members of the military who serve with honor & dignity.”

The Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest LGBT civil rights organization, accused the Trump administration of pushing “anti-transgender prejudic-

es onto the military.”

“There is simply no way to spin it: The Trump-Pence administration is going all in on its discriminatory, unconstitutional and despicable ban on transgender troops,” HRC President Chad Griffin said.

Joshua Block, a senior staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union LGBT & HIV Project, said the policy “effectively coerces transgender people who wish to serve into choosing between their humanity and their country, and makes it clear that transgender service members are not welcome.”

Trump received recommendations from Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in February for dealing with transgender individuals serving in the military. The White House said Mattis and Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen agreed with the policy.

Earlier Friday, Maj. David Eastburn, a Pentagon spokesman, said the announcement of a new policy would have no im-

mediate practical effect on the military because the Pentagon is obliged to continue to recruit and retain transgender people in accordance with current law.

The Justice Department said in a statement late Friday that it would defend the Pentagon’s authority to “implement personnel policies they have determined are necessary to best defend our nation” and would ask the courts to lift all related preliminary injunctions.

The issue has become mired in a complicated string of political statements, court decisions and policy reviews since Trump first stunned his administration with his tweets last July.

It’s unclear how much impact the court decisions will have on Trump’s decision. Activist groups had worried the administration could enact such strict enlistment and health care restrictions that it would become all but impossible for transgender troops to join or continue serving.

Pentagon key to president’s approval for spending bill

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A more than \$650 billion military spending plan was key in winning over President Donald Trump’s support for an overall budget deal mere hours after he threatened to veto it and force a potential government shutdown.

Shortly before 8 a.m. Friday, hours after the House and Senate had passed a \$1.3 trillion omnibus budget that included a more than \$60 billion funding increase for the Pentagon, Trump threatened to veto the spending plan because it didn’t address immigration issues and included insufficient funding for a border wall.

But by Friday afternoon, Trump, flanked by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and other Cabinet secretaries, announced he had signed the budget reluc-

tantly. Trump said he felt he had to because of the significant gains provided for the military in the plan.

“I looked very seriously at the veto. I was thinking about doing the veto,” Trump said during a hastily planned briefing at the White House. “But because of the incredible gains that we’ve been able to make for the military, that overrode any of our thinking.”

In his comments, Trump lauded the plan’s aim to usher through a significant hike to the Pentagon’s budget, which will now fully fund a 2.4 percent pay raise for servicemembers and pay for new ships, aircrafts and submarines, in addition to directing new spending on missile defense.

The defense budget closely follows the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, which was passed last

year and authorizes spending but doesn’t actually appropriate the money.

On Friday, Mattis praised the budget’s passage.

The budget will reverse “many years of decline and unpredictable funding, and together we are going to make our military stronger than ever,” Mattis said. “We in the military are humbled and grateful to the American people for their sacrifices. On behalf of this funding, now it’s our responsibility to spend every dollar wisely in order to keep the trust and the confidence of the American people and the Congress.”

Defense spending has seen significant cuts in recent years in large part to the Budget Control Act of 2011, which imposed budget caps. For example, the military budget would have been capped at \$549 billion this year had Congress not reached

a two-year deal to lift those limits.

With Friday’s action, the plan will direct \$23.8 billion for 14 new ships, \$10.2 billion for 90 Joint Strike Fighters and nearly \$1.8 billion for 24 F/A-18 Super Hornets. The budget also provides \$11.5 billion in spending for the Missile Defense Agency, \$1.6 billion for 30 Apache helicopters, \$1.1 billion for 56 Black Hawk helicopters and \$34.4 billion in defense health and military family programs.

Trump highlighted many of these gains in his reluctance to sign the overall bill.

“There are a lot of things that I’m unhappy about in this bill. There are a lot of things that we shouldn’t have had in this bill. But we were in a sense forced if we want to build our military,” Trump said. “I say to Congress, I will never sign another bill like this again.”

Questions surround selection of company building wall segment

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Federal officials are saying little about how they chose a Nebraska startup to build an \$11 million section of border wall in California, including whether they knew of the company's connections to a construction firm flagged in a government audit for "many potential fraud indicators."

The top Democrat on the House Committee on National Security is seeking answers from the Department of Homeland Security on what vetting was used last year to select SWF Constructors, of Omaha, for the job. The company, founded last year with only one employee, is an offshoot of Edgewood, N.Y.-based Coastal Environmental Group, which has been repeatedly sued for underpaying or failing to pay subcontractors.

"It seems DHS has awarded a contract to a brand new company with questionable connec-

tions and without the proper prior performance," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson said in a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen. "In the rush to build President (Donald) Trump's wall, a portion of it may be built by a company with a history of mismanaging and wasting taxpayer funds."

Thompson's office said it had not received a reply to its request by Friday.

A wall along the Mexico-U.S. border was a central promise of Trump's campaign. The contract with SWF is for just a fraction of the larger project, about 2 miles of post-style barriers at the border in Calexico, Calif.

A 2016 Interior Department internal audit report obtained by The Associated Press through a Freedom of Information Act request found Coastal had cash flow problems and violated federal requirements to promptly pay workers. Those problems were cited even be-

fore it was hired in 2013 by the Fish and Wildlife Service to clean up two wildlife refuges following Superstorm Sandy.

If government officials had identified some of those issues, the report said, "it likely would not have contracted with [Coastal], thereby avoiding the numerous problems that occurred on these contracts."

The report also noted that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had flagged Coastal Environmental as a problem company on an earlier Superstorm Sandy cleanup contract, including underpaying or failing to pay some of 400 workers. A Corps contracting officer interviewed for the report told auditors "his advice was to never contract with [Coastal]."

Coastal has been sued in federal court a dozen times and at least three times by the federal government for failing to pay subcontractors on government jobs.

Trump announces rule banning 'bump stocks'

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Friday announced a new regulation that would outlaw "bump stocks," the mechanical device used by the Las Vegas shooter to make his rifles fire like more lethal automatic weapons.

President Donald Trump announced the regulation in a

'After the senseless attack in Las Vegas, this proposed rule is a critical step in our effort to reduce the threat of gun violence.'

Jeff Sessions
attorney general

Twitter message a day before the so-called March for Our Lives, which was organized by young people after the mass slayings at a Parkland, Fla., high school. Marches are planned

for Washington and hundreds of other locales nationwide to call for stricter gun control measures.

Congress has held hearings since the Feb. 14 Parkland shootings, but Republican leaders have shown little interest in passing new laws.

Bump stocks use a semi-automatic rifle's recoil to allow the stock to slide back and forth with each shot, dramatically accelerating the rate of fire to as much as 800 bullets per minute.

Stephen Paddock used bump stocks in October in the rampage that killed 58 people and wounded hundreds of others in Las Vegas.

"After the senseless attack in Las Vegas, this proposed rule is a critical step in our effort to reduce the threat of gun violence that is in keeping with the Constitution and the laws passed by Congress," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said.

Pa. teachers to be armed with rocks in case of a shooting

Associated Press

A rural school district in Pennsylvania is arming teachers and students with buckets of rocks as a last resort should an armed intruder burst in, the superintendent said Friday.

Every classroom in the district about 90 miles northwest of Philadelphia has a 5-gallon bucket of river stones, said Blue Mountain School District Superintendent David Helsel.

"We always strive to find new ways to keep our students safe," Helsel told The Associated Press in a telephone interview, adding that the rocks are one small part of the district's overall security plan.

Throwing rocks is more effective than just crawling under desks and waiting, and it gives students and teachers a chance to defend themselves, he said. The district has about 2,700 students at three elementary schools, a middle school and a high school.

Staff and students in the Blue Mountain district

have been trained in a program, called "ALICE," which stands for alert, lockdown, inform, counter and evacuate. Helsel said the rocks are part of the "counter" portion of training, fighting back if the intruder makes his way into the classroom.

The buckets are kept in classroom closets.

Kenneth Trump, president of the Cleveland-based National School Safety and Security Services, a K-12 security consulting firm, calls the idea illogical and irrational and said it could possibly cost lives.

He said the efforts fill an emotional security need but don't actually enhance security.

One high school senior said he supports the plan, adding that throwing rocks is better than throwing books or pencils.

Parents also have been supportive of the measure, which was implemented in the fall.

"At this point, we have to get creative, we have to protect our kids first and foremost," parent Dori Bornstein told WNEP-TV. "Throwing rocks, it's an option."

US charges 9 Iranians in hacking scheme

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration announced criminal charges and sanctions Friday against Iranians accused in a hacking scheme to pilfer sensitive information from hundreds of universities, private companies and American government agencies.

The nine defendants, accused of working at the behest of the Iranian government-tied Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, hacked the computer systems of about 320 universities in the United States and abroad to steal expensive science and engineering research that was then used by the government or sold for profit, prosecutors said.

The hackers also are accused of breaking

into the networks of government organizations, such as the Department of Labor, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the United Nations, and private-sector entities including technology companies and law and consulting firms.

The Justice Department said the hackers were affiliated with an Iranian company called the Mabna Institute, which prosecutors say contracted with the Iranian government to steal scientific research from other countries. The institute was founded by two of the defendants.

“By bringing these criminal charges, we reinforce the norm that most of the civilized world accepts: Nation-states should not steal intellectual property for the purpose of giving domestic industries an advantage,”

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said in announcing the charges.

Also Friday, the Treasury Department targeted the Mabna Institute and 10 Iranians — the nine defendants and one charged in a separate case last year — for sanctions that officials say will make it harder for them to do business outside Iran.

The defendants are unlikely to ever be prosecuted in an American courtroom since there’s no extradition treaty with Iran. But the grand jury indictment, filed in federal court in Manhattan, is part of the government’s “name and shame” strategy to publicly identify foreign hackers, block them from traveling without risk of arrest and put their countries on notice.

China says it will defend its interests after tariffs

Associated Press

BEIJING — China’s newly appointed economic czar told U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Saturday that Beijing is ready to defend its interests after President Donald Trump announced plans to slap tariffs on nearly \$50 billion in Chinese imports.

Vice Premier Liu He told Mnuchin in a phone call that the order Trump signed Thursday violates international trade rules, China’s official Xinhua News Agency reported.

The White House says the planned tariffs are aimed at punishing Beijing for allegedly stealing American technology and pressuring U.S. companies to hand it over.

Xinhua cited Liu as saying China is “ready and capable of defending its national interest and hopes both sides will remain rational.”

China said Friday that it planned to raise tariffs on a \$3 billion list of U.S. goods, including pork, apples and steel pipes, in response to the steel and aluminum duties earlier announced by Trump.

The Chinese move appeared to be a warning shot aimed at increasing domestic U.S. pressure on Trump by making

clear which exporters, including farm areas that voted for the president in 2016, might be hurt.

On Friday, American farmers from hog producers in Iowa to apple growers in Washington state and winemakers in California expressed deep disappointment over being put in the middle of a potential trade war with China by the president whom many of them helped to elect.

China’s Commerce Ministry said Beijing was considering a tariff increase of 25 percent on pork and aluminum scrap, mirroring Trump’s 25 percent charge on steel. A second list of goods, including wine, apples, ethanol and stainless-steel pipe, would be charged 15 percent, mirroring Trump’s tariff hike on aluminum.

The U.S. has complained for years about China’s sharp-elbowed trading practices, accusing it of pirating trade secrets, manipulating its currency, forcing foreign companies to hand over technology and flooding world markets with cheap steel and aluminum that drive down prices and put U.S. manufacturers out of business.

French officer in hostage swap dies of his injuries

Associated Press

TREBES, France — A French police officer who offered himself up to an Islamic extremist gunman in exchange for a hostage died of his injuries, raising the death toll in the attack to four, and the officer was honored Saturday as a national hero of “exceptional courage and selflessness.”

Lt. Col. Arnaud Beltrame, 44, was among the first officers to respond to the attack on the supermarket in the south of France on Friday.

Beltrame, who first took his place among the elite police special forces in 2003 and served in Iraq in 2005, had organized a training session in the Aude region in December for just such a hostage situation. At the time, he armed his officers with paintball guns, according to *Depeche du Midi*, the local newspaper.

“We want to be as close to real conditions as possible,” he said then. But when he went inside the supermarket on Friday, he had given up his own weapon and volunteered himself in exchange for a female hostage.

Unbeknownst to the Morocco-born captor, he left his cellphone on so police outside could hear what was happen-

ing in the store. They stormed the building when they heard gunshots, officials said. Beltrame was fatally wounded.

His death raises the toll to four. The gunman was also killed, and 15 people were injured in the attack.

“Arnaud Beltrame died in the service of the nation to which he had already given so much,” President Emmanuel Macron said in a statement. “In giving his life to end the deadly plan of a jihadi terrorist, he fell as a hero.”

According to the statement, Beltrame joined the elite police special forces in 2003 and deployed to Iraq in 2005. He served as a member of the presidential guard and, in 2012, earned one of France’s highest honors, the Order of Merit. He was married with no children.

Beltrame’s brother, Cedric Beltrame, told RTL radio Saturday his sibling died “a hero.” He added that his brother “was well aware he had almost no chance. He was very aware of what he was doing.”

Macron has said investigators will focus on establishing how the gunman, identified by prosecutors as Morocco-born Redouane Lakdim, got his weapon and how he became radicalized.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man in dispute ends up with pliers in skull

NE PLAINVIEW — Northeast Nebraska authorities said a man involved in a dispute at work ended up with rusty pliers lodged in his skull.

Station KNEN reported that the assault occurred Wednesday afternoon at a business near Plainview. The Pierce County Sheriff's Office said a deputy learned at Plainview Hospital that one handle of the pliers had penetrated the victim's skull and poked into his brain. The man was flown to Omaha for surgery. His name wasn't released.

Nebraska State troopers said the 34-year-old suspect admitted that he and the other man had quarreled earlier in the day. The suspect said he threw the pliers at the other man.

Dog saves man struggling in river

SC OKATIE — A dog saved a man whose boat capsized in a South Carolina river.

The Island Packet of Hilton Head Island reported it was pure luck that Woody was outside Wednesday when Mason Ringer, 24, was struggling in the Okatie River. The 7-year-old yellow Labrador retriever jumped into the choppy, 58-degree water and pulled Ringer toward a nearby dock.

A Beaufort County Sheriff's Office report said Ringer was one of three men who survived after the boat overturned.

One man managed to swim and get out of the river, the other was pulled out by a private community's staff.

Ringer said he owes Woody a big steak after the "miracle."

Zoo conducts contest to name penguin chick

NY SYRACUSE — Syracuse's Rosamond Gifford Zoo has a new Humboldt penguin chick that hatched in February, and the zoo is asking the public to give it a name.

The newborn chick weighed 69 grams at birth and now is just shy of 2.5 pounds. He's the 55th penguin hatchling since the zoo began breeding the threatened birds in 2006.

Animal care staff at the zoo selected five names that reflect the species' native lands. Those names are: Felix, Inigo, Oscar, Rafael, and Garcia, a common Peruvian surname.

Voting is open for the next week. The winning name will be announced March 30.

Woman arrested after coke found in gas tank

AZ TUCSON — U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers said they have arrested a Tucson woman on suspicion of trying to smuggle \$691,000 worth of cocaine into the United States hidden in her SUV's fuel tank.

The agency said Thursday that the 39-year-old was arrested Wednesday after a police dog detected a smell in the vehicle and the woman was instructed to undergo further inspection at the Nogales port of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Officials said the multiple packages of cocaine discovered inside the tank weighed nearly 61 pounds.

Hogwarts among entries for school name

UT PROVO — Thousands of submissions have been entered online to name new schools in Eagle Mountain

and Lehi.

The Daily Herald reported Thursday that some ideas aimed to honor people, some drew inspiration from geographical features in the area and some went straight for the humor.

One resident suggested the school be named Hogwarts High School.

The Alpine School District Board of Education said they'll decide between Eagle Peak High School, Cedar Valley High School and Lake Mountain High School on Tuesday.

Man in custody of girlfriend's ex-husband

NJ ELIZABETH — A man accused of biting his girlfriend's back during a domestic dispute was freed under house arrest that he will serve at the home of his girlfriend's ex-husband.

Union County prosecutors had sought to have Michael Santos detained until his trial. But a judge put him on house arrest after a hearing where the woman's former husband testified that Santos is "a good guy" who is a "positive influence" on his son.

Authorities said Santos had roughly 40 weapons at the Elizabeth apartment when he was arrested March 16. He's charged with assault, making terroristic threats and a weapons charge.

Police had gone to the apartment after a neighbor claimed Santos had threatened to shoot him and that Santos' girlfriend might be in danger.

Area hoping to set ice carousel record

ME SINCLAIR — Folks in Maine's St. John Valley are going for a world record for the largest ice

carousel.

Mike Cyr told WLBZ-TV that the idea is that you cut a giant circle on a frozen lake, then make it rotate to produce a carousel.

This year, they're making one that's 430 feet across.

Residents in Sinclair used augurs to bore more than 1,000 holes, along with chain saws and other equipment, to cut the massive hole in lake ice that's 31 inches thick.

The goal is to set a new world record. Organizers of the effort in Maine say Finland is the current record holder for largest ice carousel.

Officer accuses famous groundhog of deception

PA STROUDSBURG — Punxsutawney Phil is a wanted ... groundhog.

A Pennsylvania sheriff's officer has put up a wanted poster for Phil.

The handlers of the groundhog last month said the furry rodent called for six more weeks of winter after seeing his shadow. The Monroe County Sheriff's Office said that expired last week, yet a spring storm brought more snow to the Northeast on Wednesday and Thursday.

Cpl. Scott Martin told WBRE-TV he created the poster and placed it on the "wanted wall" because he is sick of snow in the spring.

The wanted poster claims Phil is wanted for deception. Phil is described as having "brown and grey hair, brown eyes, sharp teeth."

Records dating to 1887 show Phil has predicted more winter 103 times while forecasting an early spring just 18 times.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

East regional roundup

Villanova, Texas Tech move into final

Associated Press

BOSTON — Villanova's three-point party rolled past the intense pressure of West Virginia to bring the Wildcats to the doorstep of another Final Four two seasons after winning a national championship.

The top-seeded Wildcats continued their outside feast in the NCAA Tournament, downing the fifth-seeded Mountaineers 90-78 on Friday night to earn their second trip to the regional finals in three seasons.

Jalen Brunson led Villanova with 27 points and Omari Spellman had 18 with eight rebounds as Villanova overcame the West Virginia press by hitting 13 of 24 shots from three-point range.

Daxter Miles had 16 points to lead West Virginia. Jevon Carter and Sagaba Konate added 12 each.

Villanova (33-4) has now made 44 three-pointers for the tournament. The outside barrage helped the Wildcats

overcome 16 turnovers and played into their Sweet 16 plan for their opponents nicknamed "Press Virginia": Attack the stifling defense head-on.

"What a game, man. I hope that looked as good as it did from the bench, man," Villanova coach Jay Wright said. "That was the most physically demanding, mentally draining 40 minutes we've played in a long time. They are so relentless."

The Wildcats struggled at times, especially in the first half, but dug out of a six-point hole in the second half with an 11-0 run.

The Mountaineers (26-11) stayed close throughout, ramping up the pressure and making Villanova play faster than it wanted to early. But foul trouble throughout the second half was too much for West Virginia to overcome after it gave up the lead.

Carter was called for his third with 17:33 left in the game. That was followed by Miles being whistled for his

third and fourth fouls over a two minute stretch that sent him to the bench with 15 minutes remaining.

Texas Tech 78, Purdue 65: Chris Beard did it to the Boiler-makers again.

The Texas Tech coach knocked Purdue out of the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three years, this time leading the third-seeded Red Raiders past the Sweet 16 for the first time in the basketball program's 93-year history.

"We just made the — what's it called? The Great Eight?" Beard asked his players at the postgame news conference.

"Elite," guard Keenan Evans corrected him.

"The Elite Eight our second year together," said Beard, who was with Arkansas-Little Rock when it beat Purdue in the first round of the 2016 NCAA tournament. "Why shouldn't we? We've got a great university. We play in the best league in college basketball. We've got really great players. We're

blessed to be here, but I think we've earned the right to be here."

Evans had 12 of his 16 points in the second half, when Texas Tech scored 11 in a row to pull away. The Red Raiders (27-9) will play on Sunday for a spot in the Final Four against No. 1 seed Villanova, which advanced earlier Friday night with a 90-78 victory over West Virginia.

"They've been the No. 1 team the whole season and are great all-around," Evans said. "They have a great point guard and great bigs that can shoot the ball, so we will just have to get back in the film room and study up on them and get some rest."

Beard is in his second year in Lubbock after leaving Little Rock, which he left shortly after leading the Trojans to a double overtime upset of fifth-seeded Purdue two years ago. This one wasn't close, thanks to a 52 percent second-half shooting percentage and a 34-30 rebounding edge.

Midwest regional roundup

Kansas, Duke restore order to upset-filled tournament

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — For the third year in a row, Kansas made it through the Sweet 16 — although not before Clemson tried to add another wild chapter to an already unbelievable tournament.

The top-seeded Jayhawks brought at least a temporary halt to the insanity of this March, withstanding a ferocious rally by fifth-seeded Clemson on Friday for a too-close-for-comfort, 80-76 victory.

Malik Newman led the Jayhawks (30-7) with 17 points in a one-time runaway that got much closer and, quite frankly, won't mean much to KU fans if their team can't finish the job in the

Midwest Region final Sunday. The Jayhawks will play Duke in what will be the nation's only 1 vs. 2 regional final; the Blue Devils beat Syracuse 69-65.

As a top seed the last two seasons, Kansas made it through the regional semifinals, only to flop a game shy of the Final Four both times. In fact, this marks the sixth time Bill Self's team has been seeded first since KU won it all in 2008; the Jayhawks haven't made the Final Four one of those times.

"I think about it all the time. I just told the guys in the locker room...this year, we've got to get over the hump," said senior Devonte' Graham, who had 16 points.

Duke 69, Syracuse 65: All

that talk about busted brackets and the maddest March ever — not happening in the Midwest.

What started as a chess match turned into a free-throw-shooting contest. When it was over, Duke won.

Grayson Allen and Gary Trent Jr., made four clutch free throws down the stretch to help Duke hold off Syracuse and land the Blue Devils in a 1 vs. 2 regional final against Kansas.

"A great game to win, a very difficult game to lose," Blue Devils coach Mike Krzyzewski said.

Freshman Marvin Bagley III scored 22 points to help Krzyzewski's second-seeded Blue Devils (29-7) pull away from Jim Boenheim's Orange

— the last at-large team to make it into the field, and one looking for a near-repeat of two seasons ago when it made the Final Four as a 10 seed.

This year, Syracuse (23-14) is an 11, but in an NCAA Tournament turned upside down, the Elite Eight already has one of those — Loyola-Chicago in the South.

Syracuse is no typical 11, and this was a zone-centric battle of wits between two of the most renowned coaches in the game.

No lead ever reached double digits, and not until Trent Jr. swished two from the line with 6.3 seconds left was the game sealed for Duke, which is one win away from taking Krzyzewski to his 13th Final Four.

NCAA women's roundup

UCLA holds off Texas; Miss. State rolls

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Jordan Canada was struggling with her shot, Texas had emerged from the locker room on a run and UCLA was suddenly reeling in a game that was shaping up a lot like their Sweet 16 matchup two years ago.

This time, Canada and the Bruins rose to the occasion.

Canada finished with 22 points, often putting the second-seeded Bruins on her back, and UCLA held on for an 84-75 victory Friday night to avenge that frustrating loss to the Longhorns.

Monique Billings added 17 points and Kennedy Burke had 15 for the Bruins (27-7), who finally made it to the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament after falling a game short the past two seasons.

They'll face top-seeded Mississippi State on Sunday night for their first Final Four trip.

Mississippi State 71, North Carolina State 57: The Wolfpack tried to push Teaira Mc-

Cowan off the block, then tried double-teaming the Bulldogs star, before ultimately trying to deny her the ball altogether.

None of it worked.

McCowan still scored 24 points on perfect shooting, pulled down 15 rebounds and generally made life miserable for North Carolina State, and helped top-seeded Mississippi State breeze to a 71-57 win Friday night and a spot in the Elite Eight of the women's NCAA Tournament.

"You don't see 6-foot-7 every day," Wolfpack coach Wes Moore said. "When they're just lobbing it up to her, there's not a whole lot you can do at times. You feel pretty helpless."

McCowan didn't do it alone, though.

Victoria Vivians added 14 points, Morgan William had 13 and Roshunda Johnson finished with 12, helping the Bulldogs (35-1) break their school record for wins in a season.

Oregon State 72, Baylor 67: Aggressive rebounding

and timely baskets certainly helped the sixth-seeded Beavers against the No. 2 seed Lady Bears.

More impressive was Oregon State's poise throughout as they handed Baylor its first loss since November and earned a second Elite Eight appearance in three seasons.

Marie Gulich had 26 points, Kat Tudor added 16 and Oregon State shot 58 percent in the second half to upset Baylor 72-67 on Friday in the Lexington Region semifinal. The Beavers will face Louisville on Sunday for a spot in the Final Four.

Two years after upsetting Baylor in the Dallas Regional final, Oregon State (26-7) followed up with a steady performance to improve to 4-0 against Baylor while ending its 30-game winning streak. The Beavers had to withstand nine consecutive points by Alexis Morris that got the Lady Bears (33-2) to 69-67 with 42 seconds remaining before Katie McWilliams' left-corner three-pointer

30 seconds later provided a five-point edge.

Louisville 86, Stanford 59: The Cardinals quelled concerns about handling the Cardinal's tough defense with a fast tempo and athleticism that consistently converted opportunities.

Top-seeded Louisville also imposed its will defensively on Stanford, resulting in yet another decisive victory to move within a win of reaching the Final Four.

Asia Durr had 24 points, Myisha Hines-Allen added 17 and Louisville rolled past No. 4 seed Stanford in the Lexington Region semifinal.

Arica Carter had 13 points and Jazmine Jones 10 for the Cardinals (35-2), who trailed for just 53 seconds to win their 10th consecutive game and advance to their first regional final since 2014 and fourth since 2009. Louisville thrived offensively, shooting 52 percent and building a lead that reached 27 points with 1:24 remaining to finish its third consecutive NCAA Tournament rout.

Reed topples Spieth as top seeds fall in Match Play

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — One shot into the match, Jordan Spieth already was in a golf cart being driven back to the tee.

It took three holes before Patrick Reed had to putt.

The most anticipated match turned into a sloppy affair Friday when Spieth hit one shot out-of-bounds, two shots into a hazard and three times gave away a chance to win the hole by three-putting.

And right when it looked as though Spieth might still have a chance, Reed buried him with a 40-foot birdie putt from behind the 17th green for a 2-and-1 victory in the Dell Technologies Match Play that sent Reed into the weekend and Spieth searching for answers.

"I don't think it would have been that tough to beat me today," Spieth said.

Reed was tough enough when it mattered. He seized control with the prettiest shot of the match, a knockdown wedge into the wind that grazed the front edge of the cup on the 13th for a 2-up lead. He ended it with a putt that looked as though it might go 8 feet by until the hole got in the way.

"Just happened to be the perfect line," Reed said. "Thank God, because that thing was moving."

Reed is among 16 players who won their group on Friday at Austin Country Club and advanced to single-elimination on the weekend, all of them from matches away from a World Golf Championships title.

That group includes Justin Thomas, at No. 2 the top seed remaining, who can go to No. 1 in the world by winning.

It doesn't include Dustin Johnson, the defending champion who played so poorly that none of the three matches he lost made it to the 18th hole. Johnson left the gallery with one parting shot, a 489-yard drive that would be the longest in PGA Tour history except that stats from Match Play are not official.

Rory McIlroy had a chance to advance except that he was beaten soundly by Brian Harman.

And it doesn't include Spieth, who now has gone seven tournaments since his last top 10.

Thomas and Sergio Garcia (No. 7) were the only top-10

seeds to advance to the fourth round. Thomas had the easiest time, a 7-and-5 victory over Francesco Molinari. Asked how he felt going into the weekend, Thomas replied, "The same as the other 16 guys. We all start at the same place."

Phil Mickelson was eliminated when Charles Howell III, who beat Lefty on Wednesday, completed a 3-0 mark in group play by beating Satoshi Kodaira.

Howell and Ian Poulter, who swept his matches when Kevin Chappell conceded at the turn with a back injury, still have a chance to earn a spot in the Masters by getting into the top 50 at the end of the week. They both need to win at least one more match.

NBA roundup

Curry returns, suffers another injury

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Stephen Curry returned from a six-game absence with a right ankle injury only to strain his left knee after scoring 29 points, and the beat-up, undermanned Golden State Warriors held off the Atlanta Hawks 106-94 on Friday night.

Curry grimaced as he hopped around and made it to the bench on a tender left side with 3:09 left in third after Javale McGee fell into Curry's left knee. The two-time MVP immediately sat in a chair and put his head down before going into the locker room.

"Kind of a strange, cruel twist of fate," coach Steve Kerr said. "He rehabs his ankle for the last couple weeks, he gets that strong and then the knee goes. So we'll see what happens and we'll keep our fingers crossed."

Nick Young scored 24 points with six three-pointers as the defending champions were already down their other All-Stars — Kevin Durant, Draymond Green and Klay

Thompson.

Young, Patrick McCaw, Jordan Bell and Zaza Pachulia joined Curry in the starting lineup. Pachulia had nine rebounds, while Bell scored 12 points.

Raptors 116, Nets 112: Kyle Lowry had 25 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds in his 10th triple-double with his current team, Jonas Valanciunas scored 23 points and host Toronto beat Brooklyn for the 12th straight time.

DeMar DeRozan scored 21 points, and Fred VanVleet had 16 to help the Eastern Conference leaders bounce back from a loss at Cleveland on Wednesday. The Raptors improved to an NBA-best 30-6 at home.

Spurs 124, Jazz 120 (OT): LaMarcus Aldridge had a career-high 45 points, helping host San Antonio overcome Donovan Mitchell's 35-point performance for Utah to win its sixth straight.

Utah's 12-game road winning streak came to an end, but only after Mitchell had 14 points in the fourth quarter, including three three-pointers in the final

two minutes to force overtime.

Timberwolves 108, Knicks 104: Karl-Anthony Towns had 24 points and 13 rebounds, and visiting Minnesota beat New York to clinch its first winning record in 13 years.

Tim Hardaway Jr. scored a career-high 39 points for New York.

Cavaliers 120, Suns 95: LeBron James scored 27 points in three quarters, Kevin Love added 20 and host Cleveland welcomed back three players from injury in a blowout victory over Phoenix.

James added nine assists and six rebounds before watching and cheering from the bench in the fourth. Forwards Tristan Thompson, Larry Nance Jr. and Rodney Hood all returned from injuries.

Celtics 105, Trail Blazers 100: Marcus Morris scored 30 points and short-handed Boston handed host Portland its second straight loss following a 13-game winning streak.

Terry Rozier added 16 points for the Celtics. They are second in the Eastern Conference behind Toronto but have had

to deal with recent injuries to Kyrie Irving and Jaylen Brown.

Thunder 105, Heat 99: Russell Westbrook scored 17 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter to help host Oklahoma City beat Miami.

Steven Adams added 24 points and 12 rebounds for the Thunder. They have won seven of eight.

Bucks 118, Bulls 105: Shabazz Muhammad scored 21 points and visiting Milwaukee overcame a sluggish start to beat Chicago.

Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo missed the game because of a sprained right ankle.

Pacers 109, Cippers 104: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 28 points and host Indiana used a late 9-0 run to hold off Los Angeles and put themselves on the brink of clinching a playoff spot.

Nuggets 108, Wizards 100: Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray each scored 25 points and visiting Denver beat Washington to keep its playoff hopes alive.

NHL roundup

Hall scores in overtime to lead Devils past Penguins

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The New Jersey Devils and their roster stuffed with speed and youth haven't made the playoffs in six years. The drought for Taylor Hall is even longer. Eight years after being taken with the top pick in the draft, the Devils forward is still waiting for his first taste of the NHL postseason.

It may almost be over.

Hall raced in alone and beat Matt Murray on a breakaway 27 seconds into overtime to lift the Devils to a 4-3 victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday night and give their

push for the last wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference a boost. New Jersey is now three points clear of ninth-place Florida with just over two weeks to go in the regular season.

Pittsburgh's Brian Dumoulin and Phil Kessel scored in the third to erase a two-goal deficit and force overtime but Hall handed the Penguins just their second loss in their last 17 home games when he loitered near the Penguins' blue line, waited for an outlet pass from 19-year-old Nico Hischier then slipped a shot between Murray's legs for his 33rd goal of the season.

Bruins 3, Stars 2: David Pastrnak broke a tie with 12 seconds left and visiting Boston scored three straight goals in the third period to rally past Dallas.

A scramble followed a faceoff in the Dallas end, and Brad Marchand passed to Pastrnak in front. While falling down, he put the puck past Stars goalie Kari Lehtonen.

Jets 3, Ducks 2 (OT): Kyle Connor scored 3:16 into overtime and host Winnipeg edged Anaheim to set a franchise record for points in a season.

Mark Scheifele and Nikolaj Ehlers also scored for the Jets

(45-19-10), who won their fourth straight to reach the 100-point plateau for the first time. Winnipeg had 99 points in the 2014-15 season before being swept in the first round of the playoffs by the Ducks.

Blues 4, Canucks 1: Patrik Berglund scored twice and surging St. Louis beat visiting Vancouver for its fourth consecutive victory.

Canadiens 3, Sabres 0: Antti Niemi stopped 35 shots for his first shutout in 27 months, and visiting Montreal beat Buffalo to snap a seven-game road skid.