

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, March 29, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## Fired VA chief tells of 'brutal' power struggle

BY NIKKI WENTLING

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — David Shulkin spoke out Thursday morning, hours after being fired as secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and blamed his ouster on White House appointees who seek to dismantle the agency.

In a searing New York Times opinion piece, Shulkin wrote that the agency, which is responsible for providing medical care to 9 million veterans, became enveloped in recent months in a "brutal power struggle."

"The advocates within the [Trump] administration for privatizing VA health services ... saw me as an obstacle to privatization who had to be removed," Shulkin wrote.

He reiterated that message later Thursday morning during an interview with NPR, when he said some political appointees at the VA thought he wasn't leading a fast enough charge toward privatization and sought to undermine him.

President Donald Trump fired Shulkin late Wednesday afternoon after weeks of internal strife at the agency that followed revelations of his questionable spending on a summer trip to Europe with his wife. The travel scandal and increased political grappling with White House insiders at the VA about the agency's direction ultimately led to Trump's disfavor with him.

An Office of Inspector General report on the travel scandal coalesced with his work in Congress to make major changes

to how the VA uses private-sector care. It was clear that the debate on private-sector health care was a touch point in Shulkin's rift with political appointees.

Beginning with his confirmation hearing 13 months ago, Shulkin repeatedly has said during the past year that he's against privatizing the department. Many lawmakers and veterans organizations also believe an aggressive expansion of veterans' health care into the private sector would erode VA resources and would dismantle the agency.

Shulkin wrote he and his family were the subject of "politically based attacks."

"I have fought to stand up for this great department and all that it embodies," he wrote. "In recent months, though, the environment in Washington has turned so toxic, chaotic, disrespectful and subversive that it became impossible for me to accomplish the important work that our veterans need and deserve."

Shulkin didn't mention in the column the travel scandal that ignited chaos within VA headquarters.

The IG released findings Feb. 14 that Shulkin violated ethical standards on an official trip that he and his wife took to Denmark and London during the summer. He improperly accepted tickets to a Wimbledon tennis match and spent much of the trip on sightseeing activities, the IG found. During the fallout, Shulkin agreed to pay back \$4,132 of taxpayer money spent on his wife's travel expenses.

He addressed the IG report Thursday with NPR, claiming the trip was "mischar-

acterized." The purpose of the trip was to attend a veterans summit with allied nations. Following the release of the IG report, the White House would not allow him to put out an official statement responding to the allegations, Shulkin said.

He vowed to be an advocate of the VA from the outside. In the NPR interview, he also said he would help his replacement if needed. Trump nominated Rear Adm. Ronny L. Jackson, the White House physician, to replace Shulkin.

Lawmakers and major veterans organizations expressed concern Wednesday night about Jackson's nomination. Jackson served as an emergency doctor in Iraq and was named White House physician in 2006. But his experience with veterans issues and management remains unknown.

Will Fischer, with VoteVets — a group critical of Trump, contended "now is not the time for people who need training wheels when it comes to managing a massive health care system."

The VA is the second-largest federal agency, with more than 360,000 employees. It operates on a nearly \$200 billion budget. Besides its vast health care system, the agency operates 135 national veterans cemeteries and is responsible for distributing monetary benefits to millions of veterans each month.

In response to a question from NPR about whether Jackson was up to the job, Shulkin said, "No one is naturally prepared to take on a task like this."

## Suspect arrested in death of airman on Guam

BY WYATT OLSON

*Stars and Stripes*

One person is in custody in connection with the apparent stabbing death of an airman at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam.

The Air Force identified the deceased as Airman 1st Class Bradley Hale, 20, who was deployed from Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

He was found unresponsive

early Tuesday at a temporary lodging facility on the base and was declared dead at 3 a.m., an Air Force statement said.

"A subject is in custody, and the cause of death is currently under investigation," the statement added.

First responders "saw a lot of blood at the scene and what appeared to be a stab wound on the victim," Linda Card, director of public affairs at the Air

Force Office of Special Investigations in Washington, told The Guam Daily Post.

The newspaper reported Wednesday that a medical examiner from the Office of Armed Forces Medical Examiner at Kadena Air Base, Japan, was expected to conduct an autopsy Friday at Naval Base Guam.

Dr. Aurelio Espinola, chief medical examiner, told the Post

that Hale "had sustained stab wounds." However, he had not yet seen the body.

The Air Force did not disclose any further information about the person in custody or the circumstances of the death.

"Our focus is on supporting the families, the affected unit, and our community," Brig. Gen. Douglas Cox, 36th Wing commander, said in a statement. "This is a very difficult loss."

# Transgender ban could cost GI her job

By KIM GAMEL

*Stars and Stripes*

PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — Just nine months ago, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Lindsey Muller was feted as a guest speaker at an Army-sponsored LGBT pride observance at Camp Humphreys.

Now she's worried she may lose her job after nearly two decades of honorable service because of a new push to ban most transgender troops from serving in the military.

Muller, a 36-year-old transgender aviator, is two months shy of beginning the lengthy process of retiring after what will have been 18 years of service. Even if she retires before the status of transgender servicemembers is finally resolved, thousands of others could be affected.

"I think they've proven their mettle in combat; they've proven their mettle in peacetime. They're there for their peers when they need them, and I think to dismiss them would be a huge disservice," she told *Stars and Stripes* in an interview Thursday.

President Donald Trump issued an order last week banning most transgender troops from serving in the U.S. military except under "limited circumstances."

The decision follows his surprise declaration last year that he intended to reverse his predecessor Barack Obama's plan to allow transgender individuals to serve openly.

The Trump order has been mired in legal challenges and four federal courts ruled against it, prompting the Pentagon to allow those serving to remain and other transgender people to enlist beginning Jan. 1 until litigation runs its course.

The new directive rolls back the blanket ban announced by Trump on Twitter last year, but opponents said the changes didn't make it any less discriminatory.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, a former Marine general,

said in a memorandum cited by Trump that having transgender people in the military posed "substantial risks" to readiness and unit cohesion.

Muller, who enlisted as a male at 17 and served with the 101st Airborne Division when it rolled into Iraq in 2003, said she is living proof that's not the case.

## Serving by example

Pfc. Ryan Muller graduated with honors from his infantry class at Fort Benning, Ga. He went on to earn an Expert Infantry Badge and a Combat Infantry Badge along with numerous other commendations and rave evaluations.

Muller began pursuing flight school in 2007 and went on to become an Apache pilot.

Lindsey, who has legally changed her name and began openly identifying as a woman in 2016, is currently an aviation safety officer based at Camp Humphreys. She said she was prepared to resign when she decided to begin the process of transitioning, but her superiors talked her out of leaving.

"At each echelon I was asked to stay based on performance," she said during the interview in her off-base townhouse. "That's been a recurring theme. I put myself at the mercy of my peers and my commanders ... and they've said either we'll figure this out together, or it's not an issue."

Muller, who is originally from Poplar Bluff, Mo., saw the military as a way to escape small-town life and see the world. She said she wasn't even aware of transgender individuals until a few years into service when a friend took her to a drag show.

She was inspired to transition by former Navy SEAL Kristin Beck, who came out as a transgender woman in 2013.

At first Muller kept a low profile and stopped wearing her male-only combat badges on her uniform because they attracted too many stares and questions. But she said her identity was eating away at her,

so she put the awards back on and made a "coming-out video" when she turned 30 and shared it slowly. While most people have been supportive, she has encountered discrimination, including some co-workers who have told her they don't want her around their families.

"I've had people tell me I should do the Army a favor and commit suicide. My wife and I have both had death threats, threats of assault," she said.

Muller has no regrets and says joining the Army was the best decision of her life.

"The military is the reason I am where I am today, hands down," she said. "It's the reason that I can afford to pay for certain trips, vacations and see the world. It's the reason that my family lives so comfortably."

Having spent more than half her life in uniform, she feels obligated to speak out against the ban on behalf of the thousands of other transgender servicemembers and those seeking to sign up.

"The only way to combat something like this is to face the prejudice head-on, and I can't do that by being silent," she said, adding that her career "proves that a lot of those reservations are not justified."

"If I don't, and I just take my retirement papers, and I just fade off into the distance, what about those thousands of other troopers?" she said. "It essentially feels like jumping on a grenade for those guys."

## Legal challenges

Muller is a plaintiff in one of the legal challenges brought by civil rights organizations.

The issue was complicated after Trump said Friday that he was rescinding his previous decision after a Pentagon review and would allow transgender troops to serve in limited cases instead of barring them outright. The Justice Department immediately asked the federal judges who temporarily blocked the ban last year to dissolve their old orders as moot.

U.S. District Court Judge

Marsha Pechman hinted she had little interest in doing so and suggested during a hearing in Seattle on Tuesday that the ban could be struck down permanently, according to The Associated Press.

Pechman requested further briefs within a week about how the president's new policy might affect the case. She also insisted that both sides limit their arguments to the broader initial ban.

Natalie Nardecchia, an attorney with the plaintiffs' representative Lambda Legal, argued that the government's new policy is irrelevant.

"When the government discriminates against a group of people, they have to have a reason; they can't say, we'll go study it and come up with a reason," Nardecchia said at a press conference after the hearing. "Making slight changes in the policy in its final version does not render it constitutional."

Mattis, meanwhile, has declined to answer questions on the new policy, citing the ongoing litigation.

In his 48-page memo to the president, Mattis said allowing military personnel who seek to undertake a treatment to change their gender or who question their gender identity poses "substantial risks." He also said that exempting servicemembers from "well-established mental health, physical health and sex-based standards" could hurt "military effectiveness and lethality."

The policy includes narrow exemptions allowing some transgender members to serve.

The Pentagon has not said how many transgender people are serving, but a Rand Corp. study estimated between 1,320 and 6,630 out of 1.3 million active-duty troops are transgender.

Muller, who said she paid for most of her gender reassignment surgery out of pocket, said she wished she could sit down with Mattis and share her perspective that transgender troops who fight to serve should be honored, not dismissed.



## Okla. Legislature OKs tax hike to raise teacher pay

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — A package of Oklahoma tax increases aimed at generating hundreds of millions of new dollars for teacher pay and averting statewide school closures received final legislative approval Wednesday night.

The Senate voted 36-10 to increase taxes on oil and gas production, cigarettes, fuel and lodging — narrowly receiving the three-fourths' majority needed to pass — and the chamber broke into applause afterward. The House passed the plan Monday. It is designed to generate about \$450 million for lawmakers to spend, and Gov. Mary Fallin said she “absolutely” plans to sign the package.

It includes a \$1-per-pack tax on cigarettes, a 3-cent increase on gasoline, 6-cent increase on diesel and an increase on the oil and gas production tax from 2 to 5 percent. Amid a furious, last-minute lobbying effort by the hospitality industry, House and Senate leaders agreed to pass a separate measure to repeal the \$5-per-night hotel and motel tax that was projected to raise about \$45 million.

A separate bill to increase teachers' pay by an average of about \$6,100 also cleared the Senate on Wednesday.

# US-led exercise boosts policing of African seas

By SCOTT WYLAND

Stars and Stripes

A U.S.-led naval exercise that brought together 31 countries to strengthen efforts to combat piracy, drug smugglers and human traffickers ended Thursday in West Africa.

The eight-day Obangame Express in the Gulf of Guinea aimed to close gaps in policing West African waters by improving communication and teamwork between countries. The navies worked together during simulations to spot, raid and search suspicious ships.

“Our joint presence during this important exercise sends a powerful message throughout the region,” Capt. G. Robert Aguilar, commander of the USS Mount Whitney, said in a statement. “The U.S. and West African nations will work together to protect important trade and shipping routes in the Gulf of Guinea.”

The exercise gave the Mount Whitney, the 6th Fleet's command ship, a chance to use its new computerized communications systems installed during a recent \$45 million overhaul. The ship's officers helped coordinate communications among the many

participants. The Mount Whitney has 300 crewmembers — half sailors, half civilians — and can transmit large amounts of secure data to any point on Earth.

Obangame is hosted by U.S. Africa Command and is the largest of three yearly maritime-policing exercises. The other two are Cutlass Express in East Africa and Phoenix Express in the Mediterranean.

African governments and U.S. authorities created joint exercises in 2010 — when maritime crimes in the region had reached record levels — to improve African countries' ability to protect their seas.

Boosting cooperative policing to thwart crimes such as illegal fishing, which don't directly threaten U.S. national security, can also deter crimes that affect American interests, such as piracy, said Christopher Jasparro, national security affairs professor at the Naval War College.

“Illegal fishing can help spur piracy, and fishing vessels may employ forced labor or traffic drugs,” Jasparro said. “Preventing crime at one end of the spectrum can help prevent it more generally.”

## Envoy rejects US claim that Russia is arming Taliban

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The Taliban and Moscow had a good laugh together while discussing Washington's claims that Russia has been arming the extremist movement, Russia's envoy for Afghanistan said Thursday.

Envoy Zamir Kabulov said representatives of Russia and the Taliban scoffed at the allegations during their conversations, with the Taliban saying they illegally buy all the weapons they need from the Afghan government and police and just need money for that. He added that Russian negotiators jokingly said, “Sorry, we have no money.”

Kabulov said at a briefing in Moscow that Russia's contacts with the Taliban aim to ensure the safety of Russian citizens in Afghanistan and to encourage the Taliban to join peace talks.

“We established the contacts a few years ago when we became seriously worried about possible terror threats for the Russian mission and Russian citizens in Afghanistan,” he said. “It was important for us to clarify the Taliban's plans regarding our citizens, and we received assurances

that they have no hostile intentions toward Russians.”

As the dialogue went on, Kabulov added, Russia talked about the need to end the war through political means. He emphasized that it's impossible to achieve peace without engaging the Taliban, voicing hope they could join a new round of negotiations hosted by Russia.

“It's the only way to end the war in Afghanistan,” Kabulov said.

He noted that some in the Taliban leadership may favor talks, but so far they have remained in minority.

“The Taliban isn't a monolithic organization,” he said. “The high-level and midlevel field commanders believe that any attempt to hold talks with what they describe as a puppet government would mark a betrayal of their ideas and undermine their authority. They are searching for a compromise that would be acceptable to the majority.”

He noted that a conference on Afghanistan hosted by the ex-Soviet nation of Uzbekistan this week marked some progress, with its final declaration expressing sup-

port for the Afghan government's offer of direct talks with the Taliban. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who attended the conference in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, has indicated the Taliban could become a political party.

Kabulov also emphasized the key role Pakistan and Iran play in the Afghan peace efforts and warned the U.S. against trying to sideline Islamabad.

“We realize that Pakistan and Iran, not Russia or the U.S., are the two key players in the Afghan settlement,” he said. “We are trying to develop a dialogue with Pakistan and jointly search for solutions.”

Kabulov said the U.S. claims that Russia was arming the Taliban reflected an attempt to shift blame for what he described as the U.S. failure in Afghanistan.

Russian President Vladimir Putin supported Washington's action in Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. But as Russia's relations with the West grew increasingly strained in the following years, Moscow became increasingly critical of the U.S. role in Afghanistan.

## With 1 year to go, Brexit already having an impact

Associated Press

LONDON — Britain is a year away from leaving the European Union, potentially with no post-Brexit agreement with its biggest trading partner.

Thursday marks the halfway point since Prime Minister Theresa May triggered the two-year process for the country's departure from the EU.

Brexit is potentially the most seismic change the British economy will have faced since World War II. It has caused massive volatility in the currency and has eroded living standards, but also has given a boost to exporting businesses. The future remains uncertain, with a range of post-Brexit scenarios still possible.

As the exit process hits half-time, here's a look at how this momentous decision has shaped the British economy and markets.

■ **Lower gear.** Before the referendum of June 2016 in which a narrow majority voted to leave the EU, the British economy had been one of the fastest-growing industrial economies for years.

Now, it's one of the slowest. It grew only 1.8 percent in 2017 and is anticipated to expand at a similarly muted tick this year.

Brexit proponents would note that the predictions of recession made ahead of the vote, by authorities like the International Monetary Fund or British Treasury, failed to materialize.

There are numerous reasons why that is.

A drop of about 15 percent in the pound's value after the referendum made exporters more competitive in international markets. Bank of England Governor Mark Carney said exporters have benefited from a so-called "sweet spot" — being able to continue to trade in the tariff-free EU but at a lower cost.

Also, somewhat ironically, much stronger growth in many countries in Europe, particularly among the 19 that use the

euro currency, has shored up economic activity in Britain.

Given that the world economy is broadly healthier than at any time since the global financial crisis a decade ago, many think Britain would be doing a lot better were it not for the prospect of Brexit. Uncertainty over Brexit has hurt business investment, and household spending has been hobbled by the rise in prices stoked by the lower pound.

■ **So why increase?** One of the more unexpected developments since the Brexit vote is that the Bank of England is raising interest rates, in contrast to the European Central Bank, which is overseeing an economy that is growing — and expected to grow over coming years — at a faster clip.

In November, the Bank of England raised its benchmark rate by a quarter-point to 0.5 percent, its first increase in a decade. It has indicated that another similar increase is likely in May.

The main reason is to contain inflation, which from well below 1 percent before the referendum has spiked to about 3 percent as the lower pound pushed up the cost of imports.

■ **Market movers.** Whereas an economy is like a tanker and can take a long time to turn, financial markets are fleet of foot.

The pound was the early lightning rod for Brexit concerns, sliding after the vote to 31-year lows against the dollar below \$1.20. Crucially, it also weakened against the euro — about 40 percent of Britain's exports go to the eurozone. The pound has recovered in recent weeks, to about \$1.40.

In the stock market, Brexit did not have as big an impact. In fact, investors in the broad FTSE All-Share index have enjoyed returns of up to 20 percent. The reason is the lower pound helped exporters and boosted earnings for the many multinationals listed on the index that make most of their money outside the U.K.

## Koreas summit date set; Trump tweet optimistic

BY KIM GAMEL  
AND YOO KYONG CHANG  
*Stars and Stripes*

SEOUL, South Korea — North and South Korea will hold their first summit in more than a decade on April 27, the two sides said Thursday.

The date for the historic meeting between President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was set during a high-level meeting on the northern side of the truce village of Panmunjom in the tense border area.

It came days after North Korea's reclusive leader made a surprise train trip to China to reaffirm ties and to declare that he's committed to denuclearization.

President Donald Trump expressed optimism, saying his Chinese counterpart told him the meeting with Kim "went very well" and the North Korean leader "looks forward to his meeting with me." However, he insisted that he'll maintain punishing sanctions and other moves aimed at pressuring the North Korean regime to abandon its nuclear program.

"For years and through many administrations, everyone said that peace and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was not even a possibility," Trump said Wednesday in a tweet. "Now there is a good chance that Kim Jong Un will do what is right for his people and for humanity."

The U.S. and South Korea also plan to begin war games Sunday after a delay to ease tensions for the Olympics and the Paralympics.

The annual military exercises usually infuriate the North, which considers them a rehearsal for an invasion. But Kim reportedly said he understood they would go on as planned this year.

While many North Korea watchers remain deeply skeptical about Pyongyang's motives, Seoul and Pyongyang continued to take steps toward improving relations. The delegations that met Thursday were led by South Korean Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon and North Korea's Ri Son Gwon, chairman of a state agency that deals with inter-Korean affairs. They issued a joint statement announcing the date and saying another meeting would be held on April 4 to discuss protocol and other details.

The two leaders agreed to meet following a series of breakthroughs that began with the North's participation in the Winter Olympics, which were held in the South. That has eased tensions after months of North Korean nuclear and missile tests and saber rattling by both sides that prompted fears of a new war on the peninsula.

"For the past 80 days, there have been many historic events that we had not seen before," Ri said in remarks before the closed-door meeting began. "I believe those historic records were made because we united our minds, efforts and power."

Cho thanked Ri for what he called a warm welcome and said the two sides "should consult honestly today to ensure a successful summit" according to the will of the top leaders of the North and South.

Trump agreed to hold what would be the first-ever U.S.-North Korean summit by May after South Korean officials relayed a message that Kim had invited him to meet as soon as possible and was willing to suspend nuclear and missile tests.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Ax-throwing venue gets OK to serve beer

**UT** SALT LAKE CITY — Despite safety concerns, a recreational ax-throwing venue in Salt Lake City has been approved for a license to serve beer.

The state liquor commission approved Social Axe Throwing's request for a recreational beer license this week. The business asserted that it's "substantially similar" to other recreational businesses that serve beer.

Social Axe co-owner Mark Floyd said his company "is a recreational amenity almost identical to a bowling alley," except customers throw axes at a wooden target.

But that nature of the business does have some members of the state commission worried. The commission asked the company to return in six months and report on any problems.

## Possible Trump visit could thwart egg drop

**FL** WEST PALM BEACH — A potential visit to Mar-a-Lago this weekend by President Donald Trump could thwart a church's plans to drop 40,000 Easter eggs from a helicopter.

NewSound Church has two helicopter egg drops lined up for Saturday and Sunday, but an FAA notice posted online warns pilots that temporary flight restrictions will go into effect Thursday and remain through Sunday.

Church organizers told the Palm Beach Post they're holding out until the last minute. If the helicopter is grounded, they'll hide tens of thousands of treat-filled eggs the old fashioned way.

## Father Jesus arrested for disturbing peace

**MS** GULFPORT — A Mississippi man who calls himself Father Jesus was arrested for disturbing the peace after allegedly pointing a weapon at a woman.

Gulfport Police said Jesus, 42, was arrested Sunday after a woman said he pointed a weapon at her.

Authorities said officers made contact with Jesus at a Gulfport house and he was wearing a white robe, gold-colored crown and a plainly visible shoulder holster.

A 12-gauge flare gun was recovered along with flares.

## Cavern visitors are stranded in elevator

**NM** CARLSBAD — It took a rescue team more than three hours to hoist up three visitors who were stranded after one of the elevators at Carlsbad Caverns National Park malfunctioned.

Park officials said the team set up rigging in the elevator hoist way and used harnesses to pull each visitor through the escape hatch and transfer them to another working elevator.

There were no injuries reported.

## Winner in contest to prevent carp named

**MI** TRAVERSE CITY — The state of Michigan has declared a winner in its contest to find new ideas for preventing Asian carp from invading the Great Lakes.

The top award of \$200,000 in the "Carp Tank" competition goes to Edem Tsikata, a software consultant at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

He proposed using specially

designed propellers to generate a wall of bubbles that the fish would find noisy and painful, causing them to turn away.

Three other proposals also received cash awards.

## Coyote found on 4th floor of museum

**NY** ALBANY — Authorities said a coyote that was found on an outdoor mezzanine at the New York State Museum in Albany was tranquilized and removed from the building.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation tweeted that its wildlife officers shot the animal with a tranquilizer dart on the museum's fourth-floor mezzanine.

Officials said the coyote was taken to the DEC's wildlife health lab outside Albany for evaluation.

## 3 boys find part of a mastodon jawbone

**MS** VICKSBURG — Three boys on spring break found a part of a mastodon jawbone while exploring family property in Mississippi.

The Vicksburg Post reported that two brothers and a cousin made the discovery near Bovina, a small community about 11 miles east of the Mississippi River.

Seventh-grader Caid Sellers, fifth-grader Shawn Sellers and third-grader Michael Mahalite found something they initially thought was a log, but then saw that it had teeth.

The Sellers' father took it to the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science in Jackson, where paleontology curator George Phillips confirmed it was a lower left jawbone from a mastodon.

## Police say victim hit, then car is stolen

**OH** CLEVELAND — Police say a man killed in a hit-and-run in Cleveland had his own vehicle stolen by one of the suspects.

Authorities were called to the scene where they found the 68-year-old victim in the street. The man was taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Police said witnesses saw the man run out of his house and get into his car. The man tried to drive away, but hit a parked car.

The man got out of his car and was hit by another vehicle. Police said one of the vehicle's occupants stole the man's idling car and drove away.

## Team raises money for championship rings

**MN** NEW HOPE — A crowdfunding campaign helped a Twin Cities area high school basketball team acquire lasting reminders of its state championship.

Cooper High School football coach Willie Howard started a GoFundMe campaign in hopes of buying championship rings for the girls' basketball team to commemorate the win earlier this month, KARE-TV reported.

The girls thought they'd receive the rings for free after being given a catalog of ring options to choose from. They were upset to learn the rings cost \$300 each because many couldn't afford the price, said senior T.T. Longs.

The community quickly rallied around the group. The campaign passed its goal of \$5,000 on Tuesday, with more than 100 people donating.

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# Final Four features favorites, underdogs

*Los Angeles Times*

LOS ANGELES — Two weeks of mayhem — a tumult of historic upsets, buzzer-beaters and at least one celebrity nun — have brought the NCAA Tournament to a crossroads.

The Final Four in San Antonio this weekend will feature favorites and underdogs, traditional programs and a brash upstart.

Which begs the question: Will this tournament ultimately revert to form or deliver true madness?

As the coach of surprising contender Loyola Chicago put it: “Why not us?”

In the aftermath of last weekend’s regional finals, the oddsmakers apparently can think of a few reasons. They have made third-seeded Michigan an early favorite over the 11th-seeded Ramblers and figure Villanova should handle Kansas in a more conventional matchup of No. 1 seeds.

But the past two weeks have proved that seedings and pedigree don’t necessarily matter.

“Just if you look at the story of teams,” Michigan coach John Beilein said, “they just get hot.”

Saturday, one side of the bracket — East versus Midwest — will represent the status quo.

Villanova looks like the team to beat if only because the Wildcats, in the Final Four for the second time in three seasons, have found a variety of ways to win.

After racing through much of the tournament with offensive punch, Villanova made

only 33 percent of its shots — and about 17 percent of its threes — against Texas Tech on Sunday.

The Wildcats’ 71-59 win had everything to do with defense and free throws.

“We played a really tough basketball team that had us scouted extremely well, took away our threes, really tested our ability to play tough and ugly,” coach Jay Wright said.

They now face a Kansas squad that defeated Duke, 85-81, in a battle of blue bloods that stretched into overtime, the Jayhawks advancing beyond their region after near-misses the past two seasons.

Their matchup at the Alamodome pits two of the nation’s top players — Villanova junior Jalen Brunson versus Kansas senior Devonte Graham — in a game that will send one team to the final as a clear favorite.

Kansas coach Bill Self said he was “happy for these guys because they deserve to experience what the best of college basketball is.”

The other side of the bracket — West versus South — is more unorthodox, thanks to a string of upsets that left countless office pools in tatters.

Though Michigan is a reasonably high seed, the Wolverines spent much of the season looking ordinary. Turning things around after a February loss at Northwestern, they have forged a 13-game winning streak on equal parts hustle and grit.

That type of effort was essential in the West final against a Florida State team that

deploys wave upon wave of bench players, hoping to exhaust opponents.

“We understood we can’t control if shots go in or not, but we’ve got to control our energy and effort,” sophomore Charles Matthews said. “And we did that on the defensive end.”

If there has been anything traditional about this tournament, it has been the notion that defense wins championships.

Even after Virginia — surrendering a national-best 53.4 points a game — lost a first-round shocker to Maryland Baltimore County, becoming the first top seed to fall to a No. 16 in NCAA history, the idea of shutting down opponents remained a popular theme.

Villanova and Michigan weren’t the only teams crediting defense for their regional wins. Loyola Chicago, which shot a healthy 57 percent in the South final, talked about limiting Kansas State to 35 percent.

“Our defense dictates everything,” coach Porter Moser said.

Only three other 11th seeds have made the Final Four; none has made it to the championship game. So the Wolverines understand that much of the nation is rooting for this unusual tournament to produce a fittingly quirky end.

They also appreciate that anything can happen.

“I don’t think any of us cares about rankings, seedings or none of that,” forward Moritz Wagner said. “It’s about who is going to play better.”

## Notre Dame’s Westbeld returns home for semis

*Associated Press*

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — About five hours after returning to Notre Dame after winning the Spokane Regional, Kathryn Westbeld limped Tuesday into her business class at Notre Dame — quantitative decision modeling.

No one would have blamed the 6-foot-2 senior forward if she had made her way to the back of the room to find a seat and get more sleep.

“I should have, but I was front and center,” Westbeld laughed a little more than 14 hours after she scored 20 points to lead the top-seeded Irish to an 84-74 win over Oregon on Monday night, earning a trip to the Final Four.

Now the senior post player

will see her collegiate career come to an end in Columbus, Ohio, a 75-minute trip from her hometown of Kettering, where she led Fairmont High School to a state championship.

“My family has been blowing up my phone trying to get tickets,” Westbeld said. “It means the world to me to be able to go home for my last games here at Notre Dame.”

The fact that Westbeld is even still playing after spraining her ankle is a bit of a miracle. She wears a walking boot on her left foot after injuring it in the opening round of the NCAAs.

Westbeld didn’t start the first half of Notre Dame’s second-round game with Villanova, which was tied 45-45 at half-time. But she came out and played 16 minutes, scoring two

points and pulling down six rebounds as the Irish ran away for a 98-72 victory. Then at Spokane, Westbeld had four points, six rebounds and three assists in a 90-84 Elite Eight victory over Texas A&M.

Now she’s helped the Irish get back to the Final Four for the first time in a few years.

Their next opponent is a familiar one in UConn. The Irish-Huskies semifinal follows another matching No. 1 seeds: Kansas City winner Mississippi State (36-1) and Lexington winner Louisville (36-2). The winners meet Easter Sunday.

Two of Notre Dame’s losses came at the hands of the Cardinals — 100-67 on Jan. 11 in Louisville and then 74-72 March 4 in the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament cham-

pionship game in Greensboro, N.C.

The other was an 80-71 setback Dec. 3 in Hartford’s XL Center to Geno Auriemma’s crew. The Irish, then No. 2, led that one by 11 points early in the fourth quarter, but the top-ranked Huskies finished on a 26-6 run for an 80-71 victory in which Westbeld, still rounding herself into shape from off-season right ankle surgery, scored four points.

That was the seventh straight victory by UConn over Notre Dame, a string that includes three Irish losses in the Final Four, including two in the 2014 and ’15 championship games, the last one a 63-53 setback in Tampa, Fla., during Westbeld’s freshman season.



# Fine line between rebuilding, tanking

Associated Press

Spring training was just starting for the Pittsburgh Pirates under a splendid Florida sky. It was the time of year when any team can feel optimistic, but on this morning, the team was still coming to terms with an offseason shakeup. Stars Andrew McCutchen and Gerrit Cole had been traded, and Josh Harrison — one of the team's top remaining players — was talking through his concerns with reporters.

"You just want to know where we stand as a team, where you stand as a player — what's expected of you, what's expected of the team. Sometimes that gets lost in translation, the human side of this game," Harrison said. "We all want to win. I'm not saying nobody wants to win, but when you feel it's not the main goal of everybody, whether it's in the clubhouse or dealing with the organization, that's hard to be a part of."

Later that day, general manager Neal Huntington held his own session with the media, saying of course the Pirates want to win — and indicating they weren't planning any sort of drastic roster teardown. But this offseason, Pittsburgh was one of a handful of teams facing a bit of a backlash.

Rebuilding — or, to use the

less euphemistic term, tanking — has become one of baseball's most polarizing topics in 2018. When the Astros won the World Series last season, four years after a 111-loss debacle, they became a shining example of how short-term pain can lead to long-term gain, but as other teams try to follow Houston's lead, they're being met with varying degrees of skepticism.

Even from one of the key members of the champion Astros.

"It's a hard path to follow, I think. Both the Cubs and ourselves, we had some really good players in house. It's not easy to just hit on draft picks year after year," Houston left-hander Dallas Keuchel said recently. "Some of these teams you're going to see crumble because it's not going to work for everybody."

When the Astros won the World Series, it wasn't just a victory for Houston. It was victory for those who embrace patient rebuilding — or, to steal a line from Philadelphia 76ers fans, a victory for trusting the process.

From 2011-13, the Astros lost 106, 107 and then 111 games. Attendance dropped, but that awful stretch yielded high draft picks — and a chance to work with a clean slate with minimal financial commitments.

Now Houston has a championship, plus a core of players in their 20s who could keep this team in contention for years. The Astros' blueprint worked.

"If you have a longer-term perspective, it probably makes some sense," said Sandy Alderson, general manager of the New York Mets. "The greatest deterrent to that strategy in the past were the fans, and the fans have become more knowledgeable, more appreciative of farm systems, and they have a longer-term view as well. So at least with respect to some period of time, fans have accepted the [idea] that that's the best way to get better in the long run."

Rebuilding isn't a new phenomenon, of course. Some teams have little choice, like the Phillies when their stars declined earlier this decade. Or the Tigers, who have faced a similar predicament of late.

"We had to go all-in in a full rebuild. I think the majority of people understood that," Detroit general manager Al Avila said. "I think the majority of people wanted that — wanted to see that. I think the shock came when it became true."

Detroit has credibility with fans after spending big for a decade. Payroll is a touchier subject in Miami. The Marlins have won two World Series but are probably best known for

dismantling their roster with alarming frequency.

A new ownership group in Miami is under pressure to show the future will be different, but this past offseason felt like more of the same. The Marlins slashed payroll, trading slugger Giancarlo Stanton to the Yankees.

With the season now starting, Commissioner Rob Manfred can hope the reality on the field will calm concerns about any proliferation of rebuilding teams.

"I looked a year ago about what people were saying about who was trying to win," Manfred said. "If you go back and look at the newspaper articles at that time, you will find articles saying that Arizona, Colorado, Milwaukee and Minnesota all did not do enough during the offseason to try to win."

All four of those teams contended for the postseason, and three of them made it.

But this offseason certainly felt different. In February, the players' union filed a grievance against the Pirates, Marlins, Athletics and Rays, accusing them of failing to spend revenue-sharing money appropriately. Major League Baseball said it believed the complaint was without merit, but trust is clearly in short supply.

## Astros open as champs; fresh starts for others

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Houston Astros will take the field as World Series champions for the first time. Giancarlo Stanton, J.D. Martinez and Eric Hosmer will wear new uniforms following an odd offseason when tanking teams helped sink the free agent market. First-time managers will fill out lineup cards, home run and strikeout totals will be watched closely, and out West, a Japanese import will try to do it all.

Opening day is here. The 162-game grind of the regular season starts Thursday.

"It's a full-circle moment," Astros ace Justin Verlander said ahead of Houston's opener at Texas. "Just being out there Game 1 of the season, everybody is so high on expectations and so excited about the

upcoming season, the unknown, what's going to happen with their team. It's a unique atmosphere."

The March 29 start date is the earliest in Major League Baseball's history excluding international openers, and all teams were scheduled to play on opening day for the first time since 1968 — the last year before the American and National Leagues split into divisions.

Cincinnati's traditional NL opener was postponed a day in advance because rain is forecast, and so the Reds will begin against Washington on Friday. Cincinnati had not called off its opener because of weather since 1966.

"I'm just excited about standing out for the anthem and getting it started," Washington manager Dave Martinez said before

the Nationals arrived in the rainy city. "The boys are ready. I'm ready."

Martinez is among six new managers, joined by fellow rookie skippers Alex Cora of Boston, Aaron Boone of the New York Yankees, Mickey Callaway of the New York Mets and Gabe Kapler of Philadelphia.

Detroit's Ron Gardenhire is the lone retro hiring, joining the Tigers after leading Minnesota from 2002-14. Baseball has undergone a quick evolution since he left the Twins dugout, favoring upper cuts, long balls and a quicker hook for starting pitchers.

A record 6,105 home runs were hit last season, topping the 5,963 in 2000 at the height of the Steroids Era. Strikeouts set a record for the 10th straight season at 40,104 and sacrifice bunts fell to their lowest level since 1900 at 925.

## NBA roundup

## Brown's 3 pushes Celtics past Jazz

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Jaylen Brown's 3-pointer gave the short-handed Boston Celtics more than just a perfect road trip.

It gave him some much-needed rest.

Brown's basket with 0.3 seconds left gave the Celtics a 97-94 victory Wednesday night over the Utah Jazz.

"I was just hoping it went in there, man," Brown said. "I had nothing left for OT, so I'm just happy to win."

Boston did not allow the Jazz to score over the final 2:25 and ended the game on a 9-0 run. Brown's winner from straight-away came after Joe Ingles missed a potential go-ahead shot for the Jazz with 16 seconds remaining.

Jayson Tatum added 16 for the Celtics, who won their fifth straight despite their injuries. Terry Rozier chipped in 13 points.

With Kyrie Irving out after knee surgery, and Marcus Morris and Al Horford both sidelined with ankle injuries, the Celtics finished a 4-0 trip to the West in what would have

been Gordon Hayward's return to Utah had he not been injured in the season opener.

This latest winning effort came because of Boston's ability to get stops late in the game. Utah didn't score again after Jae Crowder cut to the hoop to put the Jazz up 94-88.

"We played more zone tonight than we have in two years," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said. "Their high pick-and-rolls were giving us fits and we had to play some double bigs there for a while. Guys just kind of battled and hung around."

Donovan Mitchell scored 22 points for Utah. Ricky Rubio tallied 14 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds, and Crowder added 16 points off the bench. The Jazz (42-33) lost for the third time in five games.

**Timberwolves 126, Hawks 114:** Karl-Anthony Towns scored a franchise-record 56 points and grabbed 15 rebounds for his league-leading 63rd double-double, leading host Minnesota.

Towns was 6-for-8 from three-point range for Minnesota, which recovered after a disappointing loss Monday to Memphis.

Andrew Wiggins added 17 points and Jeff Teague had 11 points and eight assists for the Timberwolves (43-33).

**Cavaliers 118, Hornets 105:** LeBron James matched Michael Jordan's streak of 866 consecutive double-digit scoring games with 41 points, leading Cleveland to the road win.

James finished 14-for-26 from the field and had 10 rebounds and eight assists for the Cavaliers, who remained ahead of Philadelphia for the third-best record in the Eastern Conference.

**76ers 118, Knicks 101:** Dario Saric had 26 points and 14 rebounds, and the host Sixers won their eighth straight game despite losing All-Star Joel Embiid to a facial injury.

J.J. Redick scored 21 points for Philadelphia (44-30), which stayed a half-game behind Cleveland for third in the Eastern Conference. The 76ers, who already clinched their first playoff appearance since 2012, have the franchise's most victories since the 2002-03 club won 48 games.

Embiid was taken to a hospital for precautionary testing after a nasty collision with

teammate Markelle Fultz early in the second quarter. The team said he had a facial contusion, but did not have a concussion.

**Grizzlies 108, Trail Blazers 103:** MarShon Brooks scored 14 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter in his first game with host Memphis, helping the Grizzlies to their second straight win.

**Lakers 103, Mavericks 93:** Brook Lopez scored 22 points and Julius Randle added 20 points and 10 rebounds, leading the host Lakers to the victory.

Los Angeles' Brandon Ingram had 13 points, seven rebounds and four assists in 23 minutes in his return after missing 12 games with a groin strain.

**Clippers 111, Suns 99:** Tobias Harris scored 27 points, and the visiting Clippers gained a little ground in the Western Conference playoff race.

**Nets 111, Magic 104:** D'Angelo Russell and Caris LeVert each scored 16 points to lead visiting Brooklyn to the victory.

Jarrett Allen added 15 points and DeMarre Carroll had 14 points for the Nets, who stopped a three-game losing streak.

## NHL roundup

## Maple Leafs set franchise record with 46th victory

Associated Press

TORONTO — Mitch Marner led the charge on a night full of milestones for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Marner had a goal and an assist to extend his point streak to 10 games and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Florida Panthers 4-3 on Wednesday night to set a franchise record with their 46th win.

Toronto also set a high-water mark with its 27th home win. The Philadelphia Flyers held off the Colorado Avalanche 2-1 later Wednesday, keeping the

Leafs from clinching a playoff spot for at least one more night.

"Those things are all nice to get," Toronto coach Mike Babcock said of the records. "But we've got bigger plans. We're just moving along and trying to get better. This is a good win, it gives you confidence."

James van Riemsdyk added his 35th goal — and 200th career — for Toronto, while Auston Matthews and Patrick Marleau added their 30th and 25th goals, respectively.

Frederik Andersen made

30 saves and set a career high with his 36th victory.

Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice, and Evgenii Dadonov also scored for Florida, which got 31 stops from Roberto Luongo, including a couple of big ones early.

Both Huberdeau and Dadonov hit the 25-goal mark.

Florida, meanwhile, remains three points back of New Jersey for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference, with one game in hand.

"These are the games you're judged on," Florida coach Bob

Boughner said.

**Capitals 3, Rangers 2 (OT):** Evgeny Kuznetsov scored 38 seconds into overtime to help host Washington move closer to its fourth consecutive playoff appearance.

**Flyers 2, Avalanche 1:** Ivan Provorov had a goal and an assist, Petr Mrazek stopped all 17 shots he faced in relief of starter Michal Neuvirth and visiting Philadelphia held off Colorado.

**Coyotes 3, Golden Knights 2:** Kevin Connauton scored twice to lead visiting Arizona over playoff-bound Vegas.