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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Self-proclaimed racist kills 49 in mosque

BY NICK PERRY AND MARK BAKER

Associated Press

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand — At least 49 people were killed in mass shootings at two mosques full of worshippers attending Friday prayers in an attack broadcast in horrifying, live video by an immigrant-hating white nationalist wielding at least two rifles.

One man was arrested and charged with murder, and two other armed suspects were taken into custody while police tried to determine what role they played.

“It is clear that this can now only be described as a terrorist attack,” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, noting that many of the victims could be migrants or refugees. Ardern pronounced it “one of New Zealand’s darkest days.”

The cold-blooded attack shocked people across the nation of 5 million people, a country that has relatively loose gun laws but few gun homicides and is so peaceful police officers rarely carry firearms.

It is also generally considered to be welcoming to migrants and refugees.

The gunman behind at least one of the mosque shootings left a 74-page manifesto

that he posted on social media under the name Brenton Tarrant, identifying himself as a 28-year-old Australian and white nationalist who was out to avenge attacks in Europe perpetrated by Muslims.

Using what may have been a helmet camera, he livestreamed to the world in graphic detail his assault on worshippers at Christchurch’s Al Noor Mosque, where at least 41 people were killed. An attack on a second mosque in the city not long after killed several more.

Police did not identify those taken into custody and gave no details except to say that none of them had been on any watch list. They did not immediately say whether the same person was responsible for both shootings.

At least 48 people, some in critical condition, were being treated at Christchurch Hospital for gunshot wounds, authorities said.

While there was no reason to believe there were any more suspects, the prime minister said the national threat level was raised from low to high. Police warned Muslims against going to a mosque anywhere in New Zealand. And Air New Zealand canceled

several flights in and out of Christchurch, saying it couldn’t properly screen customers and baggage.

Police said the investigation extended 240 miles to the south, where homes in Dunedin were evacuated around a “location of interest.” They gave no details.

World leaders condemned the attacks and offered condolences. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan and other Islamic leaders pointed to the bloodshed and other such attacks as evidence of rising hostility toward Muslims.

“I blame these increasing terror attacks on the current Islamophobia post-9/11 where Islam & 1.3 bn Muslims have collectively been blamed for any act of terror by a Muslim,” Khan tweeted.

New Zealand’s prime minister alluded to anti-immigrant sentiment as the possible motive, saying that immigrants and refugees “have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us.”

As for the suspects, Ardern said, “these are people who I would describe as having extremist views that have absolutely no place in New Zealand.”

Pompeo: US expects N. Korea not to resume tests

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea warned that it’s considering ending nuclear talks and lifting its missile-testing moratorium, saying Friday that Washington missed a “golden opportunity” at the recent summit between the two countries.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo responded by saying that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un personally promised President Donald Trump that he would not resume missile or nuclear tests.

“So that’s Chairman Kim’s word. We have every expecta-

tion he will live up to that commitment,” Pompeo said Friday during a press conference in Washington.

Fears of new tensions have risen after the Feb. 27-28 summit between Trump and Kim collapsed without agreement on ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

Recent satellite images also showed that the North has rebuilt a long-range rocket launchpad that had been partially dismantled as part of disarmament steps.

Pyongyang expressed new frustration on Friday over the U.S. refusal to bow to its demand for a reciprocal approach to the talks that would include

rewards such as sanctions relief for measures already taken.

The North suspended its missile and nuclear tests last year after it began engaging in diplomacy with the U.S.

“Whether to maintain this moratorium or not is the decision of our chairman of the state affairs commission,” Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui was quoted as saying Friday, using one of Kim’s titles.

“He will make his decision in a short period of time,” she added during a meeting with diplomats and foreign journalists in Pyongyang.

Journalists were not allowed to ask questions during the briefing, which lasted nearly an

hour, according to The Associated Press.

Kim was deeply disappointed by the failure to reach any agreements at the summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, Choe said.

“What is clear is that the U.S. has thrown away a golden opportunity this time,” she said. “I’m not sure why the U.S. came out with this different description. We never asked for the removal of sanctions in their entirety.”

Pyongyang has no plans to compromise or continue talks unless the U.S. takes measures to reciprocate for steps already taken, including the testing moratorium, Choe said.

Viral infection sickens 25 aboard the Fort McHenry

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Twenty-five sailors and Marines aboard the USS Fort McHenry became ill from a viral infection that spread throughout the ship during its current deployment, according to the Navy.

The first case of parotitis, a viral infection with symptoms similar to mumps, was detected Dec. 22, according to a statement by 5th Fleet. Since then, 25 servicemembers, including members from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit who are on the ship, were infected.

The USS Fort McHenry began its deployment Dec. 12 out of its homeport of Mayport, Fla., according to the ship's Facebook page. Ten days later, the first case of parotitis was detected. The ship is now deployed to the Middle East in the 5th Fleet area of operations.

All but one servicemember has returned to duty and there have been no active cases since March 9, the Navy said.

"None of the cases are life-threatening and all are expected to make a full recovery," according to a 5th Fleet statement.

The viral infection affected less than 4 percent of the ship's personnel, Lt. Chloe Morgan with 5th Fleet public affairs wrote in an email about the illnesses.

When they were symptomatic, the sailors and Marines were quarantined and treated in the ship's medical facilities, the Navy said. Their living and work areas were also cleaned and disinfected.

Everyone aboard was given a measles, mumps and rubella booster vaccination "out of an abundance of caution," according to the statement.

The illnesses caused the ship's operational schedule to be modified, the Navy said, while the crew is monitored by the ship's medical team.

21,000 GIs gone since start of 'deploy-or-get-out' policy

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has shed some 21,000 servicemembers from its list of nondeployable troops since implementing its so-called "deploy-or-get-out" policy last summer, the acting defense secretary announced Thursday.

The Pentagon is nearing its goal of reducing troops deemed unfit for combat to less than 5 percent of the force, Pat Shanahan wrote in his testimony provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Currently, the military has reduced that rate to about 5.4 percent, according to Shanahan, who has been serving as acting Pentagon chief since January.

"A key element of strengthening our military and increasing lethality is ensuring our warfighters achieve established physical, mental, and security vetting standards," he wrote in the statement provided to sena-

tors ahead of a hearing to defend the Pentagon's proposed budget of \$718.3 billion for fiscal year 2020. "War is unforgiving, and our mission demands we remain a standards-based organization."

The "deploy-or-get-out" policy was the brainchild of former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who aimed to drastically reduce the number of troops deemed unfit to serve in combat for factors including medical issues, fitness problems and administrative reasons. In January 2018, Mattis said about 11 percent of the military force, some 235,000 troops, were characterized as nondeployable.

The policy was meant to motivate the thousands of troops who remained in uniform despite being unable to deploy to take the necessary steps to return to deployable status, officials have said. Servicemembers who were unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes within 12 months

were warned that they would face selection for involuntary separation from the military.

Servicemembers can actually be removed from the military sooner if their chain of command determines they will not be able to return to a deployable status in one year.

Shanahan did not provide an explanation for how the Pentagon reduced its nondeployable troops by about 21,000 since June, though it was likely through a combination of kicking out noncompliant troops and other servicemembers taking necessary steps to return to a deployable status.

Mattis said last year that the policy change would ensure the burden of deploying was better spread throughout the military force and it would increase combat readiness because more servicemembers would be available to deploy.

Stars and Stripes reporter Claudia Grisales contributed to this report.

Wolters tapped to lead US European Command

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The White House on Friday tapped an Air Force general with experience overseeing all U.S. and NATO air forces throughout Europe to lead U.S. European Command and serve as Supreme Allied Commander.

President Donald Trump selected Air Force Gen. Tod D. Wolters to serve as the top American commander in Europe and lead all NATO forces on the continent, replacing Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, who is set to retire from the service in the coming months after serving as EUCOM chief since May 2016. Wolters must be confirmed by the Senate be-

fore assuming the new role.

Wolters serves as commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe — Air Forces Africa based at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. In his role, he also serves as chief of NATO's Allied Air Command. He has served in that position since August 2016.

Experience from his current command should be good preparation for Wolters to assume the challenges facing the top military commander in Europe — chiefly among them commanding operations alongside NATO and partner nations in Eastern Europe to deter Russian aggression. In addition, Wolters would likely be tasked with reassuring NATO allies of the U.S. commitment to the alliance that has, at times, been

maligned by Trump, who has pushed for other nations to spend more money on defense.

Wolters would not be the first general to move from commanding air forces in Europe to the top military job there. Scaparrotti's immediate predecessor, Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, made that transition in May 2013. Scaparrotti took the job after serving as the chief of U.S. Forces Korea.

Wolters is a command-rated fighter pilot who has flown more than 5,000 hours through his nearly 32-year military career, according to his Air Force biography. He is a 1982 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and a veteran of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Senate votes against border emergency

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a stunning rebuke, a dozen defecting Republicans joined Senate Democrats to block the national emergency that President Donald Trump declared so he could build his border wall with Mexico. The rejection capped a week of confrontation with the White House as both parties in Congress strained to exert their power in new ways.

The 59-41 tally Thursday, following the Senate's vote a day earlier to end U.S. involvement in the war in Yemen, promised to force Trump into the first vetoes of his presidency. White House spokeswoman Mercedes Schlapp would not say when the veto would happen, but told reporters Friday that Trump is "doing what he believes is his constitutional duty, which is to

protect the American people."

Two years into the Trump era, a defecting dozen Republicans, pushed along by Democrats, showed a willingness to take that political risk. Twelve GOP senators, including the party's 2012 presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, of Utah, joined the dissent over the emergency declaration order that would enable the president to seize for the wall billions of dollars Congress intended elsewhere.

"The Senate's waking up a little bit to our responsibilities," said Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., who said the chamber had become "a little lazy" as an equal branch of government. "I think the value of these last few weeks is to remind the Senate of our constitutional place."

Many senators said the vote was not necessarily a rejection

of the president or the wall, but protections against future presidents — namely a Democrat who might want to declare an emergency on climate change, gun control or any number of other issues.

"This is constitutional question, it's a question about the balance of power that is core to our constitution," Romney said. "This is not about the president," he added. "The president can certainly express his views as he has and individual senators can express theirs."

Thursday's vote was the first direct challenge to the 1976 National Emergencies Act, just as Wednesday's on Yemen was the first time Congress invoked the decades-old War Powers Act to try to rein in a president. Seven Republicans joined Democrats in halting U.S. backing for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in

the aftermath of the kingdom's role in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Even though there's not likely to be enough numbers to override a veto, the votes nevertheless sent a message from Capitol Hill.

"Today's votes cap a week of something the American people haven't seen enough of in the last two years," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, "both parties in the United States Congress standing up to Donald Trump."

The result is a role-reversal for Republicans who have been reluctant to take on Trump, bracing against his high-profile tweets and public attacks of reprimand. But now they are facing challenges from voters — in some states where senators face stiff elections — who are expecting more from Congress.

US bars entry of International Criminal Court investigators

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States will revoke or deny visas to International Criminal Court personnel who attempt to investigate or prosecute alleged abuses committed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan or elsewhere and may do the same with those who try to take action against Israel, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Friday.

Pompeo, making good on a threat delivered last September by national security adviser John Bolton, said the U.S. had already moved against some employees of The Hague-based court but declined to say how many or what cases they may have been investigating.

"We are determined to protect the American and allied military and civilian personnel from living in fear of unjust prosecution for actions taken to defend our great nation," Pompeo said.

He said any wrongdoing committed by American personnel would be dealt with in U.S. mil-

itary and criminal courts.

The visa restrictions would apply to any court employee who takes or has taken action "to request or further such an investigation," Pompeo said.

"These visa restrictions may also be used to deter ICC efforts to pursue allied personnel, including Israelis, without allies' consent," he said.

The ICC prosecutor has a pending request to look into possible war crimes in Afghanistan that may involve Americans. The Palestinians have also asked the court to bring cases against Israel.

Speaking directly to ICC employees, Pompeo said: "If you are responsible for the proposed ICC investigation of U.S. personnel in connection with the situation in Afghanistan, you should not assume that you still have or will get a visa or will be permitted to enter the United States."

Human Rights Watch called it "a thuggish attempt to penalize investigators" at the International Criminal Court.

New Arctic defense strategy looks to compete with China

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is drafting a new Arctic defense strategy focusing heavily on competition with China, whose expansion around the world has drawn increasing scrutiny from senior U.S. officials.

The document will outline how the Pentagon "can best defend U.S. national interests and support security and stability in the Arctic," said Johnny Michael, a Pentagon spokesman. It will do so, he said, within the framework of the Pentagon's national defense strategy, which last year emphasized shifting the military away from counterterrorism operations to so-called "great-power competition" with Russia and China.

Both the Defense Department and the White House's National Security Council will be involved in writing the document, which was mandated by Congress and must be delivered to lawmakers by June.

The discussions come as U.S. defense officials increasingly

turn their eyes north, noting how the receding polar sea ice is opening new paths for sea vessels. In recent months, the Pentagon sailed an aircraft carrier above the Arctic Circle for the first time in decades, added more fighter jets to Alaska and made plans to add Navy P-8s, submarine-hunting reconnaissance planes, in Iceland.

"We welcome any country to operate in the Arctic as long as that presence is in compliance with international norms and rules of behavior," Michael said.

U.S. officials have for years raised concerns about the Arctic becoming increasingly militarized as it becomes easier to navigate.

China's recent behavior in the Arctic has triggered some alarms in the Pentagon. Last year, it declared itself a "near-Arctic nation," an effort to inject Beijing into Arctic discussions and defend its desire for a "Polar Silk Road," in which Chinese goods would be delivered by sea from Asia to Europe.

Beto O'Rourke joins 2020 presidential race

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The contours of the Democratic presidential primary came into clearer focus this week with Texan Beto O'Rourke's entry into the race — one of the final puzzle pieces in a contest that will be shaped by questions about race and gender, political ideology and generational change.

The sprawling Democratic field features candidates ranging from 37 to 77 years old; liberals and moderates; senators, governors and mayors; and an unprecedented number of women and minorities. Former Vice President Joe Biden is the only major contender still on the sidelines and has suggested he could remain there for several more weeks.

The field has been awaiting O'Rourke's decision for months. He narrowly lost the Senate race in conservative Texas in November but became a political celebrity in

the process, demonstrating an easy connection with voters and an eye-popping ability to raise money from small donors.

But the anticipation over O'Rourke, who served three terms in Congress, has rankled some in the party, who contend a woman or a minority would not be seen as a viable presidential candidate on the heels of a defeat.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there was an assumption of competence, an assumption of quality and a desire for him to run again, as a man," said MJ Hegar, who lost a close congressional race in Texas in the fall. "A question for me, as a woman, is 'Why did you lose?'"

O'Rourke enters a race with no clear front-runner. Biden and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders have topped early polling, reflecting the reservoir of goodwill each has with a sizable share of the primary elector-

ate but hardly guaranteeing either an easy path to the nomination.

With the first primary contest still 11 months away, huge uncertainties hang over the field. Among them: Which candidates can raise enough money to sustain a long and grueling campaign?

Sanders set the pace for grassroots donations, pulling in \$6 million during his first day as a candidate, according to his campaign. In the final weeks of the first fundraising quarter of the year, many wealthy donors are waiting to make commitments.

The debates, which begin in June, also loom as the first real test of how the candidates will draw contrasts with one another. Thus far, the Democrats have refrained from challenging one another in public, arguing that party unity will be crucial in the general election campaign against President Donald Trump.

Midwest sees flooding from severe storm

Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. — Heavy rain, snow and powerful winds are barreling across the Midwest, prompting evacuations along swollen rivers in Wisconsin, Nebraska and other states, and closures along hundreds of miles of snow-swept interstates in North Dakota.

The flooding is likely to persist into the weekend in states where frozen ground is preventing rain and snowmelt from soaking into the soil.

No travel was advised Friday in areas near Fargo, N.D., as heavy snow and poor

visibility prompted officials to close two interstates. In South Dakota, schools in Rapid City were closed as authorities dug out from a blizzard, while flooding on the other side of the state prompted officials in Sioux Falls to go door-to-door and evacuate residents from homes.

Flooding made several highways impassable in Wisconsin, where rescuers in Fond du Lac had to move residents to higher ground after flooding along the Fond du Lac River. And a tornado that swept through mid-Michigan late Thursday damaged at least 21 homes and knocked out power to thousands of people, according to

state police and first-responders. No injuries were immediately reported.

The system, which moved into the Midwest after crippling parts of Colorado and Wyoming with blizzard conditions, was expected to move into Minnesota and Illinois, including Chicago, with rain later turning to snow, according to the National Weather Service.

But the effects aren't expected to be as bad as what was seen Thursday in Nebraska and Iowa, where quickly rising water washed out roads, triggered evacuations and left farmers worried that all the water would drown livestock.

Report: Pilot in plane crash quickly noticed problems

Associated Press

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — The pilot of the Ethiopian Airlines plane that crashed requested permission "in a panicky voice" to return to the airport shortly after take-off, The New York Times reported Friday, as the airline said the investigation into the flight recorders had begun.

The report cited "a person who reviewed air traffic communications" from Sunday's flight saying controllers noticed the plane was moving up and down by hundreds of feet, with its speed appearing unusually fast.

An airline spokesman has said the pilot was given permission to return. But the

plane crashed minutes later outside Addis Ababa, killing all 157 on board.

French authorities now have the plane's flight data and voice recorders for analysis. The agency in charge of the review said it was unclear whether data could be retrieved, and tweeted a photo of the data recorder that appeared to show damage. Ethiopian Airlines said an Ethiopian delegation led by its chief accident investigator had arrived there.

In Ethiopia, officials started taking DNA samples from victims' family members to assist in identifying remains.

Countries including the United States have grounded the Boeing 737 Max 8 as the U.S.-based company faces the chal-

lenge of proving the jets are safe to fly amid suspicions that faulty software might have contributed to two crashes that killed 346 people in less than six months.

The decision to send the flight recorders to France was seen as a rebuke to the United States, which held out longer than most other countries in grounding the jets. The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board sent three investigators to help French authorities.

Boeing executives announced that they had paused delivery of the Max, although the company planned to continue building the jets while it weighs the effect of the grounding on production.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Rings lost in snow at rest stop are returned

CT BRANFORD — Two rings lost in the snow at a Connecticut highway rest stop nearly month ago have been found and returned, thanks to the sharp eyes of a state trooper.

Kim Reggiannini told WFSB-TV she and her husband, Peter, were driving on Interstate 95 on a snowy night Feb. 17 when they stopped at the Branford rest stop. Kim took off her wedding and engagement rings and put them in her lap while she applied lotion to her hands. They apparently fell off her lap and the Boston couple didn't realize they were gone until 90 minutes later.

State police Sgt. Robert Derry combed through surveillance video and saw someone pick them up. He traced that person's license plate, and they turned them over.

Naked gunman arrested for suspected gun shots

PA PHILADELPHIA — Police said they have apprehended an armed naked man who is suspected of firing gunshots in a Philadelphia park.

Philadelphia police said they received multiple 911 calls Sunday evening regarding someone firing shots. Authorities said no one was injured in the shooting, but police got a description of the gunman and found the suspected shooter's clothing, ID and cell phone at the scene.

Police said the suspect fled into the woods, where they searched until they received reports of a naked man in the lobby of a nearby retirement home.

Police identified the naked man as the suspected gunman, and took him to an area hospi-

tal for observation. The man has yet to be charged and has not been identified.

Police: Runner beaten after waving at man

SC CHARLESTON — Police in South Carolina said a runner was tackled from behind and beaten after smiling and waving at a passing bicyclist.

The Post and Courier reported Charleston police have increased patrols on West Ashley Greenway since the woman was beaten Monday evening.

Police said the woman smiled and waved at the man, who then screamed and asked what she was looking at. Police said he tackled her from behind and began punching her, leaving lacerations on her neck, chest and right ear. The man fled and dropped several items from a grocery bag.

Refuge provides home for Albatross chicks

HI LIHUE — A wildlife refuge on the Hawaiian island of Oahu is providing a new home for endangered albatross chicks.

The Garden Island reported Tuesday that researchers recently translocated 25 chicks to the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge on Oahu from their birthplace on Midway Atoll 1,300 miles away.

Conservationists said moving the chicks will help foster new colonies on Oahu and contribute to a growing population.

Birthday billboard leads to flood of well-wishers

FL WEST PALM BEACH — A New Jersey man had to get a new phone number after he was overwhelmed with birthday wishes when his

sons put up a billboard asking people to call him.

The SunSentinel reported Chris Ferry doesn't turn 62 until Saturday. But he's received some 15,000 Facebook messages and phone calls from people who saw the sign along a highway in Linwood, N.J.

The sign has Ferry's phone number, his photograph and the words "WISH MY DAD HAPPY BIRTHDAY."

Ferry's son, who shares his name, lives in Boynton Beach, Fla. He told station WPBF he and his brother Michael never thought the sign would be such a hit. The elder Ferry took a selfie in front of the billboard, but he's looking forward to the day it comes down.

Cache of weapons found under building

CT NEW HAVEN — Police in New Haven said they discovered a cache of weapons underneath the floor of a vacant clock factory.

Police said Monday that they discovered a handgun, sawed-off shotgun and three rifles including an AK-47 rifle. Police Capt. Anthony Duff said the weapons will be held for further investigation.

Authorities said the weapons were found in the basement of the former New Haven Clock Co. factory, which is under construction.

Motorist driving wrong way on highway stopped

OH COLUMBUS — Police in Ohio successfully stopped a motorist who was driving the wrong way on a highway.

Columbus Police responded early Tuesday after being alerted to the situation on a freeway. Patrol car video showed the vehicle swerving between lanes before the motorist, who

appeared to be on a cellphone, stopped. The 26-year-old motorist kept talking and put the car into reverse before she was boxed in by a police van.

She was charged with driving under the influence.

Cat that went missing 5 years ago is found

MA ESSEX — A Massachusetts family said a pet cat who went missing five years ago has returned home after the feline was unexpectedly found.

Elinore Repucci had let her tabby cat Larry out for a walk in August 2013, but he didn't come back after walking out the door. Repucci told the Newburyport Daily News she and her family spent the next few weeks frantically searching for Larry.

Repucci said she eventually resigned herself to thinking an animal killed Larry, as her home was near the woods. But an animal rescue shelter in Salisbury, Mass., about 20 miles from her home, called her Thursday and said they found a cat with a microchip registered to her. Shelter director Britt Fox Hover said Larry is pretty healthy, but is missing part of a paw.

TSA: Don't leave loaded guns in carry-on bags

WA SPOKANE — The Transportation Security Administration is reminding flyers to not leave guns in their carry-ons after seeing a sudden uptick in firearms found in luggage in eastern Washington state.

The Spokesman-Review reported Tuesday the TSA has caught eight people with loaded handguns in carry-on bags in the past three weeks at the Spokane International Airport.

From wire reports

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and Military News

Nats' Soto mature beyond his years

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — It might seem as if Juan Soto has a big hole to fill in the Washington Nationals' lineup, what with Bryce Harper gone.

Soto is not the sort to worry about that type of thing, though. Last season's surprise runner-up as NL Rookie of the Year at age 19, he's carefree and self-believing as can be, by all accounts.

Which is good, because he could very well be the No. 3 hitter for Washington, counted on to make the offense go. Everyone around Soto seems to think he'll be up for whatever challenges Year 2 brings.

"He's as ready as you could possibly be at, shoot, 20 years old," Nationals closer Sean Doolittle said Thursday, before Soto homered for the second consecutive exhibition game. "He has a very mature approach — the way he prepares. He loves doing all the work behind the scenes. He's always in the cage or in the weight room. Keeps his head down. He's a quiet guy, by nature, and he doesn't seek out the spotlight."

Young as he is, Soto sounds like an old soul, speaking about the "process" of spring training during his first taste of big league camp — he started last season, believe it or not, at low-A ball — and getting ready for the regular season "step by step, every day."

Asked whether he can improve on what he showed last year, Soto crossed his arms and replied: "My approach with that is: just the same."

The Nationals certainly would take more of the same.

Soto made his debut last May after all of eight games at Double-A and he hit .292 with 22 homers, 25 doubles and 70 RBIs in only 116 games. He walked a whopping 79 times, helping produce a .406 on-base percentage. His slugging percentage was .517. His three multihomer

games were the most by a teenager in big league history.

"I don't see any difference from where he was last year to where he is this year. If I had to say anything, maybe a little bit more confident, that he knows he belongs here," manager Dave Martinez said. "And that's a good feeling."

No one is too worried about Soto's hitting. The two key areas that need shoring up: defense and baserunning.

Martinez knows it. So does Soto, who learned left field on the fly in Washington a year ago, having played only seven games there in the minors, where he usually was in right or center.

Every morning in Florida, Soto said, he puts in extra work with his glove.

"It was almost borderline unfair that we put him out in left field, but it was by necessity," general manager Mike Rizzo said. "What he has shown us, in so many different ways, is the mental maturity and the outstanding makeup of a superstar player. And he is not satisfied."

The quality that stands out to everyone is Soto's discipline at the plate, something he began honing at the prompting of a hitting coach in the minors.

"He doesn't swing unless it's a strike. That's pretty impressive. Pretty hard to do at the highest level when you're a teenager," Nationals shortstop Trea Turner said.

Turner thinks that skill will help Soto "counteract" whatever adjustments opposing pitchers make when facing him this season.

"We saw last year that his approach at the plate is really, really advanced. You don't see him over-swing and get outside of his mechanics and try to do too much," Doolittle said. "You see him use the whole field. You see him really dial it in with two strikes. It lends itself to giving himself a good chance to follow up and pick up where he left off. I'm excited to see what he does next."

Briefly

NCAA finds 'severe' recruiting violations at Georgia Tech

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The NCAA has informed Georgia Tech it has found major recruiting violations committed by former men's basketball assistant coach Darryl LaBarrie and a former friend of coach Josh Pastner.

The school released the notice of allegations from the NCAA on Friday. Of the three allegations, the NCAA says two are considered a "severe breach of conduct," considered the highest "Level 1" violations.

In a statement that accompanied the notice of allegations, most names were redacted. However, Pastner's former friend, Ron Bell, identified by the NCAA as a "representative of the institution's athletic interests," was said to have provided more than \$2,000 in impermissible benefits to players in 2016 and 2017.

The NCAA says LaBarrie gave \$300 to a recruit for a visit to an Atlanta strip club and provided false or misleading statements to the NCAA about the visit. The NCAA also says LaBarrie attempted to influence a team member to provide false information about the visit.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution first reported the details of the notice of allegations.

Georgia Tech must respond to the allegations by May 16.

The NCAA alleges a recruit received about \$664 in inducements and benefits, including the money at the strip club. The NCAA said it is a "Level 1" violation because it was "intended to provide a substantial or extensive recruiting advantage."

The NCAA said LaBarrie's false statements about the violations and attempt to influence a team member to provide false statements also rank as top-level violations because they "involved failure of the responsibility to cooperate and unethical or dishonest conduct."

LaBarrie did not immediately respond to a request from The Associated Press for comment.

The NCAA classified the alleged violations involving Bell as "Level 2" and a "significant breach of conduct" because they were not isolated and were "intended to provide more than a minimal recruiting or other advantage."

The school said in a statement that accompanied its disclosure of the allegations it would not have further comment "because the NCAA process remains open."

NFL suspends Browns' Hunt for eight games

CLEVELAND — The NFL suspended Browns running back Kareem Hunt for eight games after a video showed him kicking a woman and his involvement in a fight at a resort.

The league on Friday cited a violation of its personal conduct policy "for physical altercations at his residence in Cleveland last February and at a resort in Ohio last June." Hunt will not be paid during the half-season suspension, which he will not appeal.

The league recently completed an investigation that included a review of law enforcement records, video and electronic communications and interviews with witnesses as well as Hunt, who said he met with Commissioner Roger Goodell last week.

The 23-year-old said he wants to "again apologize for my actions."

Hunt will be allowed to practice with the Browns through training camp until the suspension begins Aug. 31 after the final roster reduction. Hunt has been working out at the Browns' facility in Berea, Ohio, and is scheduled to take part in the team's offseason program starting April 1.

Williamson returns and Blue Devils roll

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Zion Williamson said he never listened to the analysts who suggested he should forgo the remainder of his college career at Duke and focus on the NBA.

“I knew I was going to be back,” Williamson said. “Everybody has their right to their own opinion, but I knew I was coming back the whole time.”

With each soaring dunk Thursday night, Williamson sent a resounding message to the rest of the college basketball world that he is back — and so are the Blue Devils.

In his first game since a bizarre shoe blowout cost him almost six full games with a sprained knee, Williamson was

electrifying, breaking a 66-year-old Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament record by going 13-for-13 from the field — with five soaring dunks — and scoring 29 points to propel No. 5 Duke over Syracuse 84-72.

“He was himself,” Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said of Williamson’s return.

Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim went a step further, calling Williamson a “different player” than he’s ever seen in his 50 years of coaching college basketball.

He said Williamson is a stronger version of Charles Barkley and unstoppable in the low post.

“He can do things that nobody has done in this game,”

Boeheim said. “I mean Charles was close, but this guy’s bigger, stronger. And I mean he’s a crazy different type of player. There aren’t guys like him.”

The Associated Press player and newcomer of the year in the ACC added 14 rebounds, two assists and a block.

Williamson’s night got off to a rousing start two minutes into the game when he stole a pass and drove the length of the floor before cocking his right hand back and throwing down a highlight-reel dunk that brought the crowd to its feet. He added three more soaring dunks in the first half — including one off an alley-oop pass from Barrett — and finished the first half with 21 points on

9-for-9 shooting and nine rebounds as Duke built a 34-28 lead.

Williamson said he wasn’t trying to make a statement on his initial dunk, but only trying to help his team set the tone on defense. He also chuckled at the notion that his return was perfect, citing his 2-for-9 performance from the foul line.

“I couldn’t really throw a tennis ball into the ocean with my free throws, so I wouldn’t say perfect,” Williamson said.

Williamson, who wore modified Nike Kyrie 4’s this time specifically designed to lend extra support to his 6-foot-7, 285-pound frame, said he felt fine physically and there appeared to be no lingering knee issues.

College basketball roundup

WVU knocks off Texas Tech in Big 12 Tournament

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Two down, two to go.

That’s the mindset of West Virginia coach Bob Huggins after his Mountaineers upset No. 7 Texas Tech 79-74 on Thursday night.

The Mountaineers are 80 minutes away from making the NCAA Tournament as the 10th seed in the Big 12 Tournament.

“We’re playing to be in the NCAA Tournament, that’s what we’re doing,” Huggins said. “We had a meeting and sat down and talked about it and this is our chance.”

West Virginia (14-19) advanced to the semifinals on Friday night to face No. 17 Kansas (24-9), which defeated Texas 65-57.

The Mountaineers were led in scoring by Emmitt Matthews, who had a career-high 28 points. This is only the fourth game this season he’s scored in double figures.

“I think my teammates do a really good job of getting me the ball,” Matthews said. “Without them I would be nothing. Coach Huggins does a really good job

of getting me in the good spots to get the right shots off.”

Jarrett Culver scored 26 points, Tariq Owens had 14, and Matt Mooney had 12 for Texas Tech (26-6).

No. 2 Virginia 76, North Carolina State 56: At Charlotte, N.C., Kyle Guy scored 29 points, including seven three-pointers, and the Cavaliers rallied to beat the Wolfpack in the Atlantic Coast Conference quarterfinals.

No. 3 North Carolina 83, Louisville 70: At Charlotte, N.C., Luke Maye had 19 points and nine rebounds, Coby White added 17 points, seven rebounds and six assists and the Tar Heels beat the Cardinals in the Atlantic Coast Conference quarterfinals.

No. 14 Nevada 77, Boise State 69: At Las Vegas, Jazz Johnson scored 20 points, Caleb Martin had 19 and the Wolf Pack rallied to beat the Broncos in the Mountain West Conference Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 15 Kansas State 70, TCU 61: At Kansas City, Mo., Xavier Snead scored 19 points, none bigger than a three-pointer

as the shot clock sounded in the final minute, and the Wildcats rallied from a slow start to beat the Horned Frogs in the Big 12 Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 17 Kansas 65, Texas 57: At Kansas City, Mo., Devon Dotson scored 17 points, Detric Lawson added 16 and the Jayhawks pulled away in the second half to beat the Longhorns in the Big 12 Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 18 Buffalo 82, Akron 46: At Cleveland, Jeremy Harris scored 23 points and the Bulls routed the Zips in the Mid-American Conference Tournament quarterfinals.

Nebraska 69, No. 21 Maryland 61: At Chicago, James Palmer scored 24 points and the Cornhuskers shut down the Terrapins for the first big surprise of the Big Ten Tournament.

No. 22 Auburn 81, Missouri 71: At Nashville, Tenn., Bryce Brown scored all 17 of his points in the second half and Auburn beat Missouri in the second round of the Southeastern Conference Tournament.

No. 23 Marquette 86, St. John’s 54: At New York,

Markus Howard scored 12 of his 30 points in a game-breaking 23-2 second-half run, and the Golden Eagles snapped a four-game losing streak with the rout of the Red Storm in the Big East Tournament quarterfinals.

No. 25 Villanova 73, Providence 62: At New York, Eric Paschall had 20 points and 10 rebounds and the Wildcats took control in final nine minutes to beat the Friars in the Big East Conference Tournament quarterfinals.

Service academies

Fresno State 76, Air Force 50: At Las Vegas, Deshon Taylor recorded 18 points and 10 assists to carry the Bulldogs past the Falcons in the quarterfinals of the Mountain West Conference Tournament.

Aguir Agau had 16 points for Fresno State (23-8). Nate Grimes added 13 points. New Williams had 12 points and eight rebounds for Fresno State.

Lavelle Scottie had 13 points for Air Force (14-18).

NBA roundup

Irving's triple-double powers Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Kyrie Irving had 31 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds and the Boston Celtics overcame a 17-point first-half deficit to beat the Sacramento Kings 126-120 on Thursday night.

It was Irving's second career triple-double. His first was with Cleveland on Feb. 28, 2014, against Utah.

Jaylen Brown added 22 points, and Marcus Morris had 21 points and 13 rebounds.

It was Boston's second victory over Sacramento in eight days, and the Celtics' fourth win in five games overall.

Buddy Hield led Sacramento with 34 points. The Kings lost

for the 11th straight time in Boston.

Raptors 111, Lakers 98: Kawhi Leonard scored 25 points, Norman Powell had 20 and Toronto beat visiting Los Angeles.

LeBron James scored 29 points and Alex Caruso had a career-high 16 for Los Angeles. The struggling Lakers lost for the sixth time in seven games, further denting their playoff hopes.

Nuggets 100, Mavericks 99: Nikola Jokic hit a falling, one-handed shot as time expired to lift host Denver over weary Dallas.

Jokic rescued Denver after the Nuggets trailed by 12

early in the fourth quarter. He finished with 11 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists, hitting all four of his field goals in the fourth.

Pacers 108, Thunder 106: Wesley Matthews tipped in a basket with 1.8 seconds left and Indiana overcame an 18-point deficit to beat visiting Oklahoma City.

Domantas Sabonis scored 26 points against his former team, and the Pacers won their second straight by erasing the Thunder's lead in the final 15 minutes. Indiana's magic number for clinching a playoff spot is one.

Jazz 120, Timberwolves 100: Donovan Mitchell scored

24 points, Jae Crowder had 18 and host Utah beat travel-weary Minnesota.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 26 points for Minnesota. The Timberwolves didn't arrive in Salt Lake City until Thursday morning due to a snowstorm in Denver.

Magic 120, Cavaliers 91: Aaron Gordon scored 21 points, D.J. Augustin added 20 points and seven assists and Orlando routed visiting Cleveland.

Nikola Vucevic had 19 points and 11 rebounds for the Magic. They won for only the second time in six games while chasing the final Eastern Conference playoff spot. Collin Sexton scored 23 points for Cleveland.

NHL roundup

Stamkos ties team record for goals in Lightning's win

Associated Press

DETROIT — Steven Stamkos and the Tampa Bay Lightning turned a three-goal deficit into a milestone night.

Stamkos tied Vincent Lecavalier for Tampa Bay's career lead in goals, Nikita Kucherov scored twice in the third period and the Lightning rallied to beat the Detroit Red Wings 5-4 on Thursday. Tampa Bay equaled its franchise record of 54 wins, set last season.

The Red Wings led 3-0 in the second when Stamkos scored on the power play to start Tampa Bay's comeback. His 383rd goal pulled him even with Lecavalier.

"It feels a lot better now than it did when it happened — to do it in a win," Stamkos said. "It's something you probably process a little later, but just a huge honor to be sharing that with Vinny right now. He was so instrumental to me in my career and what he meant to this organization."

Stamkos made it 3-1, and the

NHL-leading Lightning weren't done. The league's highest-scoring team added four goals in the third, with Kucherov and Tyler Johnson scoring 26 seconds apart to give Tampa Bay the lead with 11:10 remaining. Kucherov made it 5-3 with 3:22 left.

Brayden Point also scored for the Lightning, early in the third. Madison Bowey, Darren Helm, Justin Abdelkader and Michael Rasmussen scored for the Red Wings, who lost for the 12th time in 13 games.

"I thought it was a bit deceiving with a 3-0 lead. We had a 3-0 lead, which is great. You're putting yourself in position to win. But it wasn't like we were dominating the game," Detroit coach Jeff Blashill said. "If anything, they started to carry the play at 2-0. Especially in the first I thought we got hemmed in our zone a bunch."

Bowey opened the scoring in the first with a shot from just inside the blue line. It was only the second goal of the young

defenseman's career and his first since arriving last month in a trade with Washington.

The Lightning had plenty of time in the offensive zone in the first period, but the Red Wings were dangerous on the counter. Helm struck while Detroit was short-handed, breaking in on a 2-on-1 and beating goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy for his 100th career goal.

Penguins 5, Sabres 0: Phil Kessel had a goal and an assist, Sidney Crosby added two assists and visiting Pittsburgh blanked Buffalo.

Stars 4, Wild 1: Radek Faksa, Roope Hintz and Joel L'Esperance scored in a span of 2:22 early in the second period, and visiting Dallas hung on to beat Minnesota after goalie Ben Bishop got hurt.

Islanders 2, Canadiens 1: Anders Lee scored the tie-breaking goal late in the third period and Thomas Greiss stopped 33 shots as host New York beat Montreal.

Jets 4, Bruins 3: Mark

Scheifele had a goal and two assists to help host Winnipeg hand Boston its third straight loss.

Capitals 5, Flyers 2: Brett Connolly had two goals and an assist to help visiting Washington maintain its lead atop the Metropolitan Division.

Senators 2, Blues 0: Anders Nilsson stopped 34 shots for his second shutout to lead host Ottawa past St. Louis.

Coyotes 6, Ducks 1: Vinnie Hinostroza's first career hat trick sent host Arizona past Anaheim.

Panthers 4, Sharks 2: Mike Hoffman scored a tiebreaking goal on the power play late in the second period and visiting Florida denied San Jose a chance to clinch a playoff berth.

Predators 3, Kings 1: Colton Sissons had a goal and an assist, Pekka Rinne made 25 saves and visiting Nashville kept pace in the Central Division race with a victory over Los Angeles.