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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Heat raised on Pentagon border plans

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Members of the House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday told top Pentagon officials that they are not on board with their plans to divert roughly \$1 billion in funding to help build a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Lawmakers during a congressional hearing also agreed the Pentagon's proposed budget for fiscal year 2020, as structured now, will not be approved.

The messages were two of several observations delivered by Democratic and Republican lawmakers during a hearing with acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan and other officials on the Defense Department's \$718.3 billion budget for

fiscal year 2020, which begins Oct. 1.

"The budget that was submitted by the president and the Department of Defense drastically undercuts our ability to get that deal" for the Pentagon, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., chairman of the Armed Services Committee, told the military officials. "That budget is not going to pass. There is bipartisan opposition to it, I can assure you that."

The hearing comes less than two weeks after Shanahan and other officials were hammered for similar concerns during a Republican-led Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

The lawmakers also grilled Shanahan; Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff; and acting Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist on concerns facing the Pentagon, from its budget proposal to nuclear spending to climate change preparedness.

Lawmakers also hammered military officials on their latest move to reprogram \$1 billion in Pentagon funds to support security along the southern border, an effort that was swiftly rejected by the House panel.

"The committee denies this request," Smith wrote in a letter to Norquist. "This committee does not approve the proposed use of Department of Defense funds to construct additional physical barriers and roads or install lighting in the vicinity of the United States border."

Late Monday, Shanahan said

he authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to begin plans to install 57 miles of 18-foot-high fencing along the border in Yuma, Ariz., and El Paso, Texas, along with related road and lighting fixes in those areas.

The effort is in support of President Donald Trump's Feb. 15 national emergency declaration to move Pentagon funds to border wall construction.

Trump's national emergency is now the subject of several lawsuits looking to stop the move, and Congress also passed a resolution rejecting it. However, Trump vetoed the measure earlier this month, and a congressional move to override that rejection seems likely to fail.

Truman's early retirement could affect carriers' futures

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

The USS Harry S. Truman will retire two decades early if Congress approves the Navy's 2020 proposed budget as is, a move some say could indicate a questionable future for aircraft carriers.

The Navy's proposed budget — published this month — calls for dismantling the Truman in 2024 instead of funding the planned refueling of its nuclear reactor core that year.

Commissioned in 1998, the carrier is 20 years old, making it the fourth-youngest of the Navy's 11 active carriers, according to the service.

Canceling the Truman's refueling would open up funding for other capabilities, Rear Adm. Randy Crites, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for management and budget,

said during a Pentagon presentation March 12.

In its 30-year shipbuilding plan submitted to Congress this month, the Navy said the change "is in concert with the Defense Department's pursuit of a more lethal balance of high-end, survivable platforms (e.g. CVNs) and complementary capabilities from emerging technologies." CVN is Navy shorthand for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

"Persistent threat analysis and ongoing warfighting studies will continue to inform the requirements for specific battle force ships in the context of an evolving capability force mix, and the Navy is postured to respond to these studies," the service said in the shipbuilding report.

Nixing the Truman's midlife refueling overhaul will save the Navy about \$6.5 billion, according to a Feb. 27 Breaking

Defense article. Add in the savings associated with the carrier's annual \$1 billion operating costs and "total savings could exceed \$30 billion" over the next two decades, it said.

But the service has already spent \$537 million on two nuclear reactor cores for the carrier's future refueling, according to a March 21 Bloomberg report.

The move is seemingly contradictory to the U.S. goal of a 12-carrier Navy. The service on Jan. 31 awarded a \$14.9 billion contract to build two new carriers, but those ships won't be ready until at least the mid-2030s, according to a Defense Department announcement.

The purchase of the two new Ford-class carriers "represents Navy's enduring commitment to the aircraft carrier new-construction industrial base," the service said in its shipbuilding plan.

Losing the Truman would reduce the U.S. fleet to 10 carriers, still the greatest number of aircraft carriers of any navy in the world, by far. Russia has just one; China has two, with a third under construction.

The development of new technologies by U.S. competitors makes the carrier platform vulnerable, some critics have said. For example, China's DF-21D guided missile is said to be theoretically capable of striking a moving aircraft carrier, and its DF-26 has a reputed range far enough to reach U.S. bases on Guam.

The issue has been a concern for some time. According to a March 1 report in Foreign Policy magazine, then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis last year debated with his staff about the relevancy of carriers "as Russia and China develop long-range missiles and sophisticated overhead satellites."

USS Stennis returns to 5th Fleet

BY JOSHUA KARSTEN
Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — The aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis arrived in Bahrain this week for some rest, relaxation and replenishment after more than a month with the 7th Fleet.

The Stennis first entered the Gulf in December and has since moved in and out of the 5th and 7th fleets in keeping with the Pentagon's Dynamic Force Employment strategy meant to introduce an element of unpredictability in ship movements to confuse possible U.S. adversaries.

The carrier's time in the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf was dictated by wherever it was needed to demonstrate presence and support different missions, said Capt. Patrick Thompson, the carrier's executive officer.

"There was a need in 7th Fleet for us to be back there and then coming back this way on our way to our new homeport, it makes sense to come in and maintain our ability to keep the waterways open in the Arabian Gulf," said Thompson, referring to an upcoming homeport shift from Washington to Virginia. "It's a good time to come and show our presence on our way back through the area."

When the Stennis first arrived in the Gulf in December it was shadowed by Iranian vessels, which trailed the ship and even filmed it using a drone. Thompson confirmed the Stennis had been directly involved in Operation Inherent Resolve in December, supporting ground troops in Syria and Iraq, but provided no further details.

For the crew, Bahrain is a welcome break from the shipboard life. One sailor mentioned taking a long shower with bare feet — a no-no onboard the ship, she said. Another sailor said she wanted to get to a hotel and order food.

Navy soon to end use of red stripe 'misconduct' uniform

BY JOSHUA KARSTEN
Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — The Navy is doing away with "misconduct" red stripes for senior sailors, among other changes outlined in a new uniform policy released Monday.

The 13 changes are a result of feedback received from the fleet, according to the message signed by Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Robert Burke.

Starting June 1, all sailors over the 12-year service mark will be authorized to wear gold chevrons on their dress and service uniforms, a stark contrast to the "red stripe" that senior enlisted sailors wear as a visible sign of misconduct from some point in their careers.

The current policy mandates that sailors who have received nonjudicial punishment or

court-martial within the last 12 years wear red stripes. Sailors who have already reached the milestone had to restart the 12-year clock if they had further infractions. Each stripe represents four years of service, with the gold previously indicating good conduct.

While multiple enlisted sailors welcomed removal of the stigma associated with red stripes, others online cried foul on the CNP Facebook page, viewing their gold stripes as a badge of honor.

"Gold stripes mean something," one user commented. "Some traditions are worth keeping, this was one of them," another said.

"It says you did the right things for over a decade and it was reflected on your uniform," Chief Petty Officer Steve Owsley, who has gold stripes and

has been in the Navy just shy of 20 years, told Stars and Stripes. "Many times, when service-members make a mistake in the Navy, the most important part is to own that mistake and accept responsibility for it."

Another change is the authorization of the command patch to replace the left-shoulder "Don't Tread On Me" patch, currently a standard across the fleet since the Navy transitioned to the Type III green digital camouflage uniform in 2016. Although the command patches will be considered optional, sailors have pushed for this change as a source of pride and distinction between commands.

Other updates include information on mandatory sea bag items. The full message can be found at <https://www.public.navy.mil>.

McConville tapped for Army chief of staff

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON—The White House has nominated Army Gen. James McConville to become the service's next chief of staff, officials announced Tuesday during an Association of the United States Army event.

McConville's nomination was sent to the Senate Armed Services Committee late Monday, retired Army Gen. Carter Ham, the president of AUSA, told an audience attending the association's annual Global Force Symposium in Huntsville, Ala. If confirmed by the Senate, McConville would become the 40th Army chief of staff, the service's top general and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Army and White House officials on Tuesday did not

immediately confirm the nomination.

McConville, who has served as the service's vice chief of staff since June 2017, was widely considered the top choice of defense officials to become service chief later this year. He would replace Army Gen. Mark Milley, who President Donald Trump announced last year was his choice to become the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford retires, which could happen by late summer.

The 59-year-old from Quincy, Mass., is a 1981 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York. McConville has spent much of his career flying Army helicopters, including the AH-64 Apache, OH-58 Kiowa Warrior and the AH-1 Cobra, according to the Army. Before he became

the Army's No. 2 general, he served as its deputy chief of staff for personnel as a three-star general.

Earlier Army assignments sent McConville to command troops serving in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the commander of the Army's 101st Airborne Division, McConville deployed to Afghanistan in late 2012 to command U.S. and NATO forces in the country's eastern region as the United States and its allies began drawing down their forces to move from a combat role into a mission primarily to advise and assist Afghan partners. Earlier in his career, he commanded 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division during a tour in Iraq.

McConville and his wife, Maria, have three adult children who all serve in the military.

MDA: ICBM destroyed in 'milestone' test

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Salvos by multiple ground interceptors shot down an intercontinental ballistic missile during a test Monday, a "milestone" first-time achievement, the U.S. Missile Defense Agency said.

Two ground-based interceptors were used in the test, the MDA said in a statement Monday. The first was used to destroy the ICBM re-entry vehicle.

The second interceptor "then looked at the resulting debris and remaining objects, and, not finding any other reentry vehicles, selected the next 'most lethal object' it

could identify, and struck that, precisely as it was designed to do," the statement said.

The target ICBM was launched from the Reagan Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, more than 4,000 miles from the two interceptors launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif.

Space-, ground- and sea-based sensors provided real-time target acquisition and tracking data to a command and control center during the test, the statement said. The interceptors were then launched beyond the Earth's atmosphere, where they destroyed the target.

"This was the first [ground-based interceptor] salvo intercept of a complex,

threat-representative ICBM target, and it was a critical milestone," MDA Director Air Force Lt. Gen. Samuel Greaves said in the statement. "The system worked exactly as it was designed to do, and the results of this test provide evidence of the practicable use of the salvo doctrine within missile defense." He described the ground-based defense system as "vitaly important" to the defense of the American mainland.

The MDA conducted the test in cooperation with the Joint Functional Component Command for Integrated Missile Defense, U.S. Northern Command and elements of the U.S. Air Force Space Command's 30th, 50th, and 460th Space Wings.

Odor temporarily closes Bahrain clinic

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — Officials are investigating a strange smell that forced an evacuation of personnel and patients from the Naval Branch Health Clinic following two separate reports on Sunday and Monday.

"The odor is unidentified and is being investigated by the Naval Support Activity Bahrain environmental, fire and public works departments, as well as host nation teams," base spokeswoman Lt. Josie Lenny said via email on Tuesday.

Four people were taken to a local hospital for evaluation after the first report of the odor on

Sunday forced officials to cancel or reschedule all appointments at the small clinic, which serves Naval Forces Central Command, Naval Support Activity and 91 tenant commands in Bahrain.

Base security patrolled the area and redirected pedestrians away from the clinic. A hazardous material unit and fire and emergency services officials responded to the report.

The four people sent to the hospital were subsequently cleared for duty, Lenny said Monday.

After the clinic reopened Monday, a second report of the mystery odor forced another closure until emergency personnel declared the facility safe later that day.

Possible sex offense in Germany investigated

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — U.S. military and German authorities are investigating a possible sexual offense involving two minors last week at the Burger King on Vogelweh, base officials at Ramstein said Tuesday.

The 569th U.S. Forces Police Squadron and 92nd Military Police Company responded to a report of "possible sexual abuse" at the base fast food restaurant on March 21 at 5 p.m., said Lt. Col. Joel Harper, an 86th Airlift Wing spokesman.

Both the suspect and alleged victim — who was transported and received care at a local hospital — are minors and Army dependents, officials said.

Harper said the suspect was detained and interviewed by investigators.

The U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command is the lead in the case for the U.S. military, officials said. No other information was available on Tuesday.

The Burger King is a popular hangout for young people after school because it's within walking distance from Kaiserslautern high and middle schools.

Marines go to mattresses in Osprey drill

BY AARON KNOWLES
Stars and Stripes

In case of an in-flight emergency, aircraft maintenance Marines grab their mattresses. That's the procedure when no amount of prodding can get the landing gear of an MV-22 Osprey to extend.

It's a rare occurrence, but the Marines practice the procedure regularly. Earlier this month, they hauled out pallets stacked with twin mattresses at Camp Pendleton, Calif., to run through the drill, just as the Osprey program was about to reach 30 years since its first flight.

The exercise, known as a "hung gear" drill, allows the Marines to better understand their roles, the Marine Corps said in a statement.

"This drill is important because it is critical that we practice like we play as it pertains to emergency procedures," Capt. Ayleah Alejandre, aviation safety officer with Marine Aircraft Group 39, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, said in the statement. "Three pallets of stacked mattresses are taken out and strapped down on the landing pad — one

for the nose gear and two for the main gear."

A crew chief is tasked with guiding the descending aircraft down onto the stacks.

In an emergency, a pilot would call the tower and let them know they are having trouble with the landing gear. Then the maintenance Marines would assemble at a dedicated emergency landing pad.

The Air Force's CV-22 has the same mattress-landing procedures in the event of gear malfunctions, said Army Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Pena, a spokeswoman with the 352nd Special Operations Wing at RAF Mildenhall, England.

Maj. Thomas J. Dunn, the director of safety and standardization with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 164 at Camp Pendleton, shared at the training site his personal experience with a hung gear malfunction.

"I was coming into a landing, and the gear did not come down. It is a very uncomfortable situation, especially because of fuel requirements, enemy threat and all that," he said in the statement.

Tech boot camp aims to boost Marines' problem-solving skills

BY CARLOS M. VAZQUEZ II
Stars and Stripes

CAMP KINSER, Okinawa — Building upon technology already at their fingertips, Marines gathered at Okinawa's first-ever Marine Maker Innovation Boot Camp this month to learn how they can put robotics, 3D printing and other tools to work on the battlefield.

A training team from Building Momentum, a small business founded by a Navy veteran and based in Alexandria, Va., spent one week each with two classes of Marines on March 4-15.

The company — a problem-solving, engineering and consulting firm — works with the Defense Department and educational institutions, corporations and entrepreneurs, according to its website.

"Building Momentum's end goal for the Marine Corps is to make the Marines better adept

at problem-solving," Cheyanne Dwyer, an instructor for the workshop and director of engagement for Building Momentum, told Stars and Stripes on March 15.

The program aims to help Marines in the field with limited resources to come up with an idea that may save their fleet time, money and resources, she said.

An otherwise empty warehouse served as a classroom, with tabletops of wiring, gadgets and 3D printing machines for 38 students, seven Marine teaching assistants and five Building Momentum trainers, including Dwyer, CEO and founder Brad Halsey and training director Tom Sullivan.

For the first time, Building Momentum put machinist Marines in the role of teaching assistants. They gave their students real-world examples of how this training can be put to use on the battlefield.

"Marines out in the field often encounter problems they can't solve with the supply chain, like broken handles, knobs and switches," said Gunnery Sgt. Justin Horn, a teaching assistant for the two-week workshop. "[Now], they'd be able to 3D print those."

The Okinawa students' projects included developing and employing sensors, using solar energy and building a bridge from 3D-printed materials.

The bridge, about 2 feet long, could support 1,000 pounds, Dwyer said.

"During the innovation boot camp, we have a lot of light-bulb moments happen with the students," she said. "We like to say we don't teach the tech, we teach problem-solving because we know that these guys are smart, and we know the Marines are able to solve the problem themselves if just given the confidence and permission to do so."

Charges against Smollett dropped

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Prosecutors on Tuesday abruptly dropped all charges against Jussie Smollett, the "Empire" actor who was accused of lying to police about being the target of a racist, anti-gay attack in downtown Chicago, his attorneys said.

Smollett's attorneys said his record has "been wiped clean" of the 16 felony counts related to making a false report that he was assaulted by two men. The actor insisted he had "been truthful and consistent on every single level since day one."

It was not immediately clear what prompted the decision to dismiss the case. Typically, a minimum condition of dropping cases is some acceptance of responsibility. In a statement, the Cook County prosecutors' office offered no detailed explanation.

"After reviewing all of the facts and circumstances of the case, including Mr. Smollett's volunteer service in the community and agreement to forfeit his bond to the city of Chicago, we believe this outcome is a just disposition and appropriate resolution to this case," the statement from spokeswoman Tandra Simonton said.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the city's police superintendent angrily denounced the dropped charges against Smollett, with Emanuel calling it "a whitewash of justice."

Among the unanswered questions was whether prosecutors still believe Smollett concocted the attack and whether new evidence emerged that altered their view of events.

Smollett was accused of falsely reporting to authorities that he was attacked about 2 a.m. on Jan. 29 in downtown Chicago. Authorities said he made the report because he was unhappy with his pay on "Empire" and believed it would promote his career.

Trump hardens stance on 'Obamacare'

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is hardening its legal position toward so-called "Obamacare," arguing now the entire law is unconstitutional in a shift that promises to bring the issue to the forefront of the 2020 election campaign.

The position is a change for the Justice Department after it argued last year that large parts of the 2010 law — but not all of it — should be struck in the case *Texas v. U.S.*, which is pending before the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. A trial court judge sided with Texas and voided the law in a December ruling. The Justice Department now says that the entire law, enacted under President Barack Obama, should be thrown out.

The filing assures renewed attention to President Donald Trump's position that the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, should be eliminated, including its subsidies and popular rules banning insurers from charging more to people with pre-existing conditions.

Trump's move, which could prove to be a gift for Democrats, prompted a swift response from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"Tonight in federal court, the Trump administration decided not only to try to destroy protections for Americans living with pre-existing conditions but to declare all-out war on the health care of the American people," she said in a statement.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, also weighed in, claiming on Twitter that the Trump administration was focusing on "taking away your health care."

The debate over the ACA, which Republicans tried unsuccessfully to repeal in 2017, caused heartburn for the party in the 2018 midterm elections and was a focal point for Democrats on the campaign trail.

Democratic strategist and campaign veteran Jesse Ferguson said Trump's party "lost the midterms" as a result of its position on health care, but "he seems determined to put his hand on that hot stove again and again."

Exit polls published by CNN found that health care was the top issue for 2018 voters in House elections across the country. The 41 percent who cited it preferred Democratic candidates over Republicans by a jarring margin of 75 percent to 23 percent.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ruling favors ex-cop in dog feces case

TX SAN ANTONIO — A San Antonio police officer fired in 2016 amid allegations he tried to give a homeless man a sandwich filled with dog feces won his appeal but hasn't been reinstated.

An arbitrator this month sided with Matthew Luckhurst because administrators failed to assess punishment within the required 180-day period after the alleged incident. Luckhurst remains off the job while appealing another unrelated indefinite suspension.

Some officers reported the incident happened May 6, 2016, on bicycle patrol. Luckhurst on Oct. 28, 2016, was notified of indefinite suspension. Luckhurst challenged the May date, saying he'd been hurt in a martial arts class and unable to ride a bicycle then.

An arbitrator decided the incident could have happened earlier outside the 180-day window.

Team moves hungry wolves to park

MI TRAVERSE CITY — A U.S.-Canadian team has successfully relocated about half a dozen gray wolves to Isle Royale National Park in Michigan.

A private organization helping to fund the effort reported Sunday on its Facebook page that the relocation involved six wolves from a second Lake Superior Island in Canadian territory and one from the Ontario mainland.

The National Parks of Lake Superior Foundation said Sunday that the animals were captured, checked by a vet and transported over a couple of days. The half-dozen from Michipicoten Island were in

danger of starvation.

The National Park Service is winding up the first phase of a multiyear effort to rebuild wolf numbers at Isle Royale.

Man must avoid Pepsi while on probation

HI WAILUKU — A judge ordered a Hawaii man to refrain from drinking his favorite soda as part of his probation.

The Maui News reported Saturday that Second Circuit Judge Rhonda Loo imposed the restriction Friday while sentencing Christopher Montilliano Jr., 21. Montilliano pleaded no contest to unauthorized control of a propelled vehicle and driving without a license.

Police said he was arrested June 12 on Maui and charged with stealing a 1990 Honda Accord from a Texaco station.

The newspaper said the judge told Montilliano that because he lied to police about taking the car to buy soda, he could not drink Pepsi for four years in addition to 100 hours of community service and a \$100 fine.

Family is stalked through service calls

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A Utah family has become the victim of extreme stalking involving unwanted service providers repeatedly being sent to their home, according to the homeowner and police.

Walt Gilmore's family in suburban Salt Lake City has been the target since August of a stalker using phone calls and texts to send a parade of people to the home for legitimate services and illegal activities, the Deseret News reported Friday. Up to 20 people per day arrive saying they were called to provide electrical, plumbing, tree-

trimming, and towing services, according to Gilmore, who said some are seeking illegitimate business.

Gilmore said they have taken out a civil stalking injunction against the person they believe is responsible. Court records indicate the man named in the injunction lives in Hawaii.

Police commissioner 'troubled' by video

MD BALTIMORE — Baltimore's police commissioner said he is "troubled" by a video that appears to show an officer sleeping in his patrol car.

The Baltimore Sun reported that Commissioner Michael Harrison expressed his concern after a video posted Saturday on Instagram appears to show a uniformed officer sleeping in the front seat of a marked vehicle with headlights and flashing lights on.

Police union president Sgt. Michael Mancuso said about 20 percent of officers are working on overtime shifts at any given time. He said people "make more mistakes" when they are fatigued.

Student suspended over toy gun in project

OH CELINA — Military veterans and students are upset over the suspension of a middle school student in northwest Ohio whose class project creating a memorial to veterans included a toy Nerf gun.

The Daily Standard reported eighth-grader Tyler Carlin made a replica of a battlefield cross that included a NERF gun painted black. An attorney for the boy said his teacher gave him permission to bring the project to school.

But the attorney said Tyler

was sent to the principal's office when he carried the memorial into school and suspended for bringing something resembling a dangerous weapon to school.

School officials have declined to comment, saying they would need permission from the family.

Kitchen fire hurts 2 at NHL practice rink

NV LAS VEGAS — Authorities said two people were injured in a kitchen fire at the practice rink of the NHL's Vegas Golden Knights.

Clark County Fire Department officials said the sprinkler system at the City National Arena extinguished the fire before crews arrived Saturday night. They said one person was taken to a hospital with undisclosed injuries and another was treated and released.

Authorities said damage to the kitchen was minor.

Town putting kibosh on releasing balloons

ME UNITY — A Maine town is asking people to keep a grip on their balloons.

Residents of Unity on Saturday approved an ordinance prohibiting the intentional release of 10 or more balloons within a 24-hour period.

Penny Sampson, chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen, told the Morning Sentinel that she came up with the idea of limiting the release of balloons after seeing social media posts about mass balloon releases to memorialize or celebrate something.

She said limiting the release of balloons is good for the environment and she'd like to see the idea taken up by the Maine Legislature.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Opening day start still seen as honor

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — As spring training neared its conclusion, a reporter mentioned to Washington Nationals manager Dave Martinez that Max Scherzer was not precisely on schedule to start on opening day.

“He’s going to be lined up,” Martinez said with a laugh. “Come Thursday at 1:05, he’ll be on the mound.”

Of course he will. Scherzer is, after all, one of the best pitchers in all of baseball, a three-time Cy Young Award winner and runner-up last season. So it makes perfect sense that when Washington hosts the NL East rival New York Mets this week, Scherzer will take on the pitcher who topped him in the NL voting, Jacob deGrom.

“It definitely has its prestige,” Scherzer said. “It’s symbolic. It’s an honor to get the ball in that situation.”

That’s because even in this data-driven age in baseball, when analytics and analysis are supposed to be replacing “gut feel” and sentiment when it comes to making any and all decisions, granting an opening day start to a particular pitcher because of his status rather

than his statistics is something of a remnant of a bygone era. So what if your team, say, is facing an all-righty lineup? If a right-hander seems like the proper guy to send out there for Game 1, managers tend to do it.

“There’s still a hierarchy on your pitching staff. And certainly when you have established, veteran guys, it still matters to them,” said Houston Astros manager A.J. Hinch, who will use Justin Verlander on Thursday against the Tampa Bay Rays and 2018 AL Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell. “It also matters to your team. People want to name guys ‘aces.’”

The choice is often an obvious one, such as for Mets-Nationals and Astros-Rays.

Other times, though, it can get complicated, and this year is no exception.

Take the Los Angeles Dodgers. Their natural pick would Clayton Kershaw, but the lefty is beginning the season on the injured list. Walker Buehler and Rich Hill were ruled out, too. So the World Series runners-up the past two years are going with Hyun-Jin Ryu against Zach Greinke, an easier pick for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Sometimes, there’s not a bevy of optimal options. Coming off a 115-loss season, the Baltimore Orioles planned to go with Alex Cobb to face the New York Yankees on Thursday, before the righty had groin soreness in his final exhibition tuneup Sunday. Cobb was 5-15 with a 4.90 ERA in 2018.

Fact is, Baltimore’s top two other starters — “top” being relative, of course — also each took at least 15 Ls a year ago. Yankees manager Aaron Boone counters with Masahiro Tanaka, because Luis Severino is sidelined with right shoulder inflammation.

It’ll be Tanaka’s fourth start in the past five opening days for New York, which went 0-3 in his others.

“Obviously, if you’re given the opportunity to pitch on that day, you want to go out and do your best,” Tanaka said through a translator. “If you look back, I don’t think I’ve necessarily been good on opening days.”

Seattle Mariners manager Scott Servais went away from tradition for his team’s opener against the Oakland Athletics in Japan last week, bypassing Felix Hernandez, who had made 10 consecutive Game 1

starts, the longest active streak in the majors and surpassed by only four pitchers in history (Hall of Famer Jack Morris holds the record of 14 in a row).

Hernandez, the 2010 AL Cy Young Award winner, boasts a 1.53 ERA in opening day appearances but struggled this spring, to the tune of a 15.95 ERA.

“We try to take as much of the emotion out of it as you can,” Servais said, “and do what’s best for our ballclub.”

Still, King Felix did not hide his displeasure at giving up a slot he’d held for a full decade. Instead, Marco Gonzalez and Yusei Kikuchi started for Seattle in the two overseas games that officially got the season going.

As much as getting that initial pitching assignment clearly counts for something to many, Houston’s Hinch knows the next 161 games are equally valuable in the standings.

“We should continue to make it a big deal to start on opening day,” Hinch said. “And we should make it a bigger deal to take your 33, 34 starts and go wire-to-wire.”

MLB briefs

Mets reach \$137.5M, 5-year deal with deGrom

Associated Press

NEW YORK — NL Cy Young Award winner Jacob deGrom and the New York Mets have agreed to a \$137.5 million, five-year contract, a person familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press.

The person spoke on the condition of anonymity Tuesday because the agreement was subject to a successful physical.

New York and deGrom had agreed in January to a \$17 million, one-year deal, and he was on track to be eligible for free agency after the 2020 season. The new deal guarantees an additional \$120.5 million for four seasons.

His new deal calls for a \$10 million signing bonus, a \$7 million salary this season, \$23 million in 2020, \$33.5 million each in

2021 and 2022 and \$30.5 million in 2023. The Mets have a \$32.5 million option for 2024.

DeGrom has the right to opt out of the deal after the 2022 season and become a free agent. A right-hander who turns 31 in June, deGrom had a 1.70 ERA last year yet went 10-9. He allowed three runs or fewer in 29 consecutive starts to close the season, but the Mets were 11-18 in those games.

DeGrom is 55-41 with a 2.67 ERA in five big league seasons.

MLB suspends Giants’ Baer

SAN FRANCISCO — Major League Baseball suspended San Francisco Giants President and CEO Larry Baer without pay through July 1 after a video showed him in

a physical altercation with his wife.

Commissioner Rob Manfred said Tuesday his office conducted an investigation of the events shown on a video released by TMZ of the altercation on March 1 between Baer and his wife, Pam, in a San Francisco plaza. Manfred said he also talked to Baer.

“I have concluded that Mr. Baer’s conduct was unacceptable under MLB policies and warrants discipline,” Manfred said. “In determining the appropriate level of discipline, I find that Mr. Baer should be held to a higher standard because as a leader he is expected to be a role model for others in his organization and community.”

Baer took a leave of absence after TMZ released the video. Manfred said the unpaid suspension will date back to when Baer stepped away on March 4.

Sweet 16 set in women's tournament

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Sweet 16 is set and Missouri State is crashing the party for the first time in 18 years.

The 11th-seeded Lady Bears, who last made it this far in 2001 when the team made its historic Final Four run, are the only double-digit seed to reach the regional semifinals. It's the ninth time in 10 years that a team seeded 10 or lower has reached the Sweet 16. Missouri State knocked off Iowa State on the Cyclones' home court to advance.

Missouri State had gone one-and-done in its previous four NCAA appearances.

"Wow. That was amazing," said Missouri State coach Kellie Harper, who won three national championships as a point guard under Pat Summitt at Tennessee. "We did it our way. This is a dream come true."

While Notre Dame and Baylor cruised to easy victories, Missouri State wasn't the only lower seed to advance. Six

seeds UCLA and South Dakota State also pulled off surprising wins, beating Maryland and Syracuse, respectively, on their home courts. It's the first trip to the Sweet 16 ever for the Jackrabbits.

"It's a great, great, great day to be a Jackrabbit," said South Dakota State coach Aaron Johnston, who suffered a fat lip in the postgame celebration.

Next up, UCLA will try to do something the school has never done — beat UConn. The Huskies have won all five meetings, including a 15-point win in the Sweet 16 in 2017. The Huskies won at UCLA by 18 points last year.

Conference dominance

The Pac-12 had five of its six teams advance to the round of 16 — the most of any conference. Oregon State will join UCLA in Albany, N.Y. Oregon and Arizona State advance to play in Portland, Ore., on Sunday. Stanford rallied to beat

BYU and reach the Chicago Regional.

"For five teams to be in the Sweet 16 is a great statement about our league," Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer said. "Congrats to UCLA and Oregon State. That's awesome."

It's the second time in three years that the Pac-12 has had five teams in the Sweet 16. The SEC and ACC each have three teams, with the Big 12, Big Ten, American, Missouri Valley and Summit all having one team.

Getting big

Three of the finalists for the Lisa Leslie Award, given to the best center in the country, are still playing. Baylor's Kalani Brown, Mississippi State's Teaira McCowan and Iowa's Megan Gustafson are still around. If the Lady Bears and the Hawkeyes win their next games, Brown and Gustafson will square off. McCowan could potentially face off with either one if two of the teams reach

the Final Four.

Attendance

Fans turned out for the opening round, with no place better than Iowa for attendance. The Hawkeyes drew an average of 11,548 over the first two rounds, including 12,376 for its second-round win over Missouri. The average is the highest total in the past five years, topping South Carolina, which had over 10,500 in 2015 and 2018. The average attendance at the 16 first-round sites was 5,299 for the first- and second-round games. It's the highest average attendance for the opening rounds since 2008.

Falling short

Iowa State star Bridget Carleton had 31 points in the loss to Missouri State. She finished just seven points shy of tying Angie Welle's career scoring record at the school with 2,149 points.

UFC star McGregor announces retirement on Twitter

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — UFC superstar Conor McGregor announced his retirement on social media Monday night, abruptly ending his remarkable fighting career.

In a post on his verified Twitter account, the former UFC featherweight and lightweight champion said: "I've decided to retire from the sport formally known as 'Mixed Martial Art' today."

The post wishes his "old colleagues well going forward in competition," and says he would "join my former partners on this venture, already in retirement. Proper Pina Coladas on me fellas!"

The name of the drink in the post appears to be a reference to Proper No. Twelve Whiskey, the loquacious Irishman's burgeoning liquor venture.

UFC President Dana White

said in a text message to The Associated Press that McGregor's announcement "totally makes sense."

"He has the money to retire, and his whiskey is KILLIN it," White added. "If I was him, I would retire too. He's retiring from fighting. Not from working. The Whiskey will keep him busy, and I'm sure he has other things he's working on. He has been so fun to watch!!! He has accomplished incredible things in this sport. I am so happy for him and I look forward to seeing him be as successful outside of the octagon as he was in it."

The 30-year-old McGregor is the most famous fighter in his sport, but he hasn't won a fight since November 2016, when he beat Eddie Alvarez to become the first UFC fighter to hold championship belts in two divisions simultaneously.

His only fight in 2017 was a

loss to boxer Floyd Mayweather in the richest fight in boxing history. He finally returned to the UFC cage last October, but lost a lightweight title fight to Khabib Nurmagomedov via submission in the fourth round.

McGregor was widely expected to fight for the UFC later this year. A few hours before he announced his retirement, McGregor appeared on "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" in New York and claimed he was negotiating for a probable fight in July at UFC 239 in Las Vegas.

"I don't necessarily need to fight," McGregor said on the show. "I am set for life. My family is set for life. We are good, but I am eager to fight, so we'll see what happens."

McGregor has quit his sport before. He announced his retirement on Twitter in April 2016 during a dispute with the

UFC about the promotion of his next proposed bout. He reversed his decision two days later and fought in August 2016, winning his rematch with Nate Diaz.

White believes this retirement is genuine, and McGregor has had plenty of action outside the cage to occupy his time.

In April 2018, McGregor was charged with assault and criminal mischief after he attacked a bus carrying UFC fighters outside Barclays Arena in Brooklyn. McGregor was acting in revenge for a perceived slight against a teammate, and he eventually pleaded no contest to a count of disorderly conduct.

Earlier this month, McGregor was arrested again in Miami Beach for stealing the phone of someone trying to take his photo, authorities said. McGregor was charged with robbery and criminal mischief.

NHL roundup

Blueger's goals lift Pens over Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The surging Pittsburgh Penguins are closing in on the top spot in their division.

Teddy Blueger scored twice, Matt Murray made 33 saves and the Penguins rallied from an early two-goal deficit for a 5-2 victory over the New York Rangers on Monday night.

"I thought we didn't have a great start," Blueger said. "We know we have the firepower in here to get back in those kinds of games. We didn't get down on ourselves. We kept pushing each other."

Blueger centered the second line, with Evgeni Malkin out of the lineup due to an upper-body injury.

"He's playing an important role for us right now, especially with Geno out of the lineup, and he's done a great job," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said.

Sullivan said after the game that Malkin, who has been out since leaving a game against

St. Louis on March 16, did not skate Monday but "skated a couple of days prior to that."

Justin Schultz, Nick Bjugstad and Matt Cullen also scored for Pittsburgh. Phil Kessel and Marcus Pettersson each added two assists.

"One of those (games) where everyone seemed to contribute," Bjugstad said.

Murray improved to 6-0-0 against the Rangers in the regular season and 5-0-0 at Madison Square Garden.

Pittsburgh, which finished a 3-0-1 road trip, pulled into a tie with the New York Islanders for second place in the Metropolitan Division with 95 points. Both teams trail Washington by one point for first.

Brendan Lemieux and Vinni Lettieri scored for the Rangers. Alexandar Georgiev, coming off a 44-save effort in a 2-1 overtime win Saturday night at Toronto, stopped 31 shots.

"We weren't able to sustain all the good things we did in the first period," coach David

Quinn said.

"And for them to tie it so quickly seemed to deflate us. We never got back on track."

Trailing 2-1, the Penguins roared back with three goals in the second.

They tied the game 61 seconds into the period on the power play. Sidney Crosby had the puck behind the Rangers' net and sent a pass to Schultz, who one-timed it past Georgiev for his second of the season.

Kings 3, Flames 0: Back-up goaltender Jack Campbell made 42 saves in his second shutout of the season and visiting Los Angeles beat Western Conference-leading Calgary.

Red Wings 3, Sharks 2: Dylan Larkin scored in the first minute, Jonathan Bernier had 38 saves and visiting Detroit beat San Jose.

Maple Leafs 7, Panthers 5: John Tavares had the first four-goal game of his career, leading host Toronto to the win over Florida.

Lightning 5, Bruins 4: Ste-

ven Stamkos scored twice and finished with four points, and host Tampa Bay became the fourth NHL team to win at least 59 games in a season, rallying from two goals down to beat Boston.

Devils 3, Sabres 1: Cory Schneider overcame an embarrassing early, bad-hop goal from center ice, made 45 saves and got the benefit of having a game-tying, third-period tally nullified for goaltender interference in leading host New Jersey past Buffalo.

Predators 1, Wild 0: Juuse Saros made 29 saves for his third shutout of the season and Ryan Johansen scored a short-handed goal to lead visiting Nashville past Minnesota.

Stars 5, Jets 2: Tyler Seguin and Radek Faksa each scored a pair of goals and visiting Dallas snapped a two-game losing streak.

Blues 3, Golden Knights 1: Ivan Barbashev, Zach Sanford and Ryan O'Reilly scored to help host St. Louis beat Vegas.

NBA roundup

Trail Blazers win in 2OT, lose Nurkic to broken leg

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — They had just clinched a playoff spot, though there were no cheers or celebrations from the Portland Trail Blazers. Instead, just silence and prayers for Jusuf Nurkic.

The gruesome injury suffered by their center overshadowed everything else Monday night.

"Devastating," Blazers coach Terry Stotts said.

Nurkic had 32 points and 16 rebounds before suffering his left leg injury in the second overtime, and the Blazers outlasted the Brooklyn Nets 148-144.

"It made me sick to my stom-

ach," Blazers guard Damian Lillard said of Nurkic's injury. "As I was walking over there, I saw everyone else turn around real quick and walk away, and then I look and I saw his leg."

Nurkic was hurt when his leg bent awkwardly as he battled for an offensive rebound. His leg was immobilized and he was removed on a stretcher while surrounded by members of both teams. Nurkic was then transferred to a local hospital and the team said he sustained compound fractures to his left tibia and fibula.

After the injury, the Blazers made enough plays to get the win, but then reality hit.

"He wouldn't want us to say,

'All right, let's feel sorry for ourselves and feel sorry for Nurk and not care as much,'" Lillard said. "So we're going to finish the job, try to get the game, but I think after the game, that's when it kicks in."

Jazz 125, Suns 92: Rudy Gobert scored a season-high 27 points and set the season NBA dunk record to fuel host Utah to a victory over Phoenix, which got 59 points from Devin Booker.

Booker topped his previous season high of 55, set in December in a triple-overtime loss to Washington. The fourth-year guard made five three-pointers and shot 19-for-34 despite drawing several double-teams

as the Jazz sought to prevent him from reaching 60 points.

Magic 119, 76ers 98: Nikola Vucevic had 28 points and 11 rebounds, and host Orlando held Philadelphia without a field goal for nearly 12 minutes.

The Magic outscored the 76ers 30-5 in a second-half stretch in which Philadelphia missed 15 straight shots.

The Magic moved a half-game behind Miami in chasing the eighth playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. They were to visit the Heat on Tuesday.

Grizzlies 115, Thunder 103: Bruno Caboclo scored a career-high 24 points, Tyler Dorsey added 21 and host Memphis beat Oklahoma City.