

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Repair issues delay USS Ford's delivery

BY SCOTT WYLAND

*Stars and Stripes*

Repairing the USS Gerald R. Ford's nuclear propulsion systems and weapons elevators is taking longer than expected, causing a three-month delay in delivering an aircraft carrier that has continually run over budget and schedule since its construction began a decade ago.

The lead ship of its class, the Ford won't join the fleet until October so crews can finish repairs and other work, Navy officials told a House Armed Services subcommittee on Tuesday.

"Obviously we would have liked to have gotten out in July," said James Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition. "I'm never

happy delivering a ship back to the fleet late."

Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Va., ranking member of the Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, asked Geurts if he was confident the Navy will deliver the Ford in October.

"With the information I have right now, sir, that's where we're sitting," Geurts said.

The Ford is the first of a new generation of aircraft carriers that will replace the Nimitz-class carriers. While it boasts the newest technology, its \$13 billion cost is more than double that of the last Nimitz carriers built, making it the Navy's most expensive warship.

Problems with the nuclear propulsion systems were detected during sea trials, which

are part of a 12-month "post-shakedown availability" to uncover any glitches during operations before the ship joins the fleet.

Geurts didn't specify during the hearing what the nuclear propulsion problems were. USNI News reported Tuesday that the steam-driven turbine generators weren't working properly, according to sources familiar with the repairs.

Troubles with the 11 weapons elevators — which are needed to swiftly load ordnance on planes and launch sorties — go back years.

Navy leaders say all 11 elevators will be installed by October.

The Ford's electromagnetic catapult system for launching aircraft still has bugs to work out.

## Berger tapped to be Marine commandant

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has nominated Lt. Gen. David Berger to be the next commandant of the Marine Corps, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

His nomination was submitted Tuesday, according to a Senate notice, and it requests that he be promoted to the rank of general. If his nomination is approved, Berger will be the

38th commandant of the Marine Corps.

Berger has been the commanding general of Marine Corps Combat Development Command and the Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration since August. Prior to his current assignment, Berger commanded I Marine Expeditionary Force and U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marine Corps commandant since

2015, is set to retire this summer after serving for 44 years.

Berger, 59, was commissioned in 1981 as an infantry officer after graduating from Tulane University in New Orleans with a bachelor's degree in engineering, according to his Marine Corps biography. He was a battalion operations officer with 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion during Operation Desert Storm and later was an instructor at Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron

One in Yuma, Ariz., and at III Marine Expeditionary Force Special Operations Training Group on Okinawa.

He has deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom as the commander of Regimental Combat Team 8 in Fallujah, Iraq. In 2012, he deployed to Afghanistan as the commanding general of 1st Marine Division during Operation Enduring Freedom.

## Gen. Abrams: North Korea 'inconsistent' on disarmament

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — North Korea's work on nuclear weapons and missiles is "inconsistent" with its stated intent to move toward nuclear disarmament on the Korean Peninsula, the commander of American and allied forces in South Korea said Wednesday.

Army Gen. Robert Abrams, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, also said he has seen "little to no

change" in North Korea's broader military capabilities, citing its typical pace of winter troop exercises.

Asked by Rep. Mac Thornberry, of Texas, the panel's ranking Republican, where there has been any recent change in the North's production of nuclear weapons and material and missiles, Abrams said, "Their activity that we've observed is inconsistent with denuclearization."

Abrams offered to provide details of that activity in a closed session.

At Wednesday's hearing, Randall Shriver, the Pentagon's top Asia policy official, echoed Abrams' remarks about a lack of movement toward North Korean denuclearization.

"On our core area of interest and concern — the issue of denuclearization — we have not seen any progress to speak of," Shriver said.

# Medal of Honor near for Atkins' heroism

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — It was not immediately clear to former Army Sgt. Sand Aijo what his squad leader was doing as he watched Staff Sgt. Travis Atkins body slam a young man onto a dusty road in rural Iraq on a hot day in June 2007.

From the turret of his Humvee, Aijo watched as Atkins, who earned respect through his actions and attention to detail, methodically moved his body directly between the pinned-down man and that of Aijo and two other American soldiers. Then came the explosion.

"He saved my life and the life of several others," Aijo said Tuesday at the Pentagon, recalling Atkins' act nearly 12 years ago. "I would not be here today without him."

Atkins was to be awarded the Medal of Honor on Wednesday afternoon for trading his life for that of his fellow soldiers on June 1, 2007, on the dangerous Route Caprice near the village of Abu Samak. His son, Trevor Oliver, 22, will accept the nation's highest military honor on behalf of his fallen father from President Donald Trump in a White House ceremony.

"It's the biggest honor I could possibly think of," Oliver told Stars and Stripes one day before the ceremony.

"There's no real words to explain how I feel. ... It's just such an incredible honor and it uplifts me so, so much," Oliver

said.

The award is an upgrade of the Distinguished Service Cross that Atkins' family received in a 2008 ceremony at Fort Drum, N.Y., where the soldier had been stationed. The upgrade, part of a Defense Department-wide review of post-9/11 valor awards ordered by former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in 2014, is long overdue, soldiers who served with Atkins have said for years.

Atkins' battalion commander at the time of his death, now-retired Col. John Valledor, recognized what the soldier had done almost immediately. He interviewed Aijo and the two other soldiers who had witnessed the attack and walked the scene in the hours after Atkins' death.

He quickly drew his conclusion — Atkins had committed an exceptionally valorous act. It was an act that in his mind clearly deserved the military's top honor.

"It occurred to me there's a similar pattern here to Medal of Honor recipients who had jumped on grenades," Valledor said. "The only difference here is it was a living grenade that Travis had overpowered and then used his body to protect his fellow soldiers."

"I thought for sure that others would see it, or read it the same way that I did."

But somewhere along the long line of approvals needed to secure a Medal of Honor nomination, someone did not agree. The Army has never made pub-

lic who decided to downgrade the award to the Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest award for battlefield valor.

Valledor and others have speculated the decision to downgrade the award might have occurred because Atkins never verbally told the other soldiers around them what his intent was.

Aijo and other soldiers who knew Atkins have no doubt that he knew he was shielding his battle buddies from the explosive vest. Former Army Staff Sgt. Stuart Hollingsworth, a member of Atkins' platoon who was about 100 yards away when the attack occurred, described Atkins as an expert at recognizing weapons and would have quickly realized the insurgent was wearing the grenade-laced suicide vest.

"I know exactly what he did. No doubt at all," Hollingsworth said. "That man was a great man, and he was an even better soldier. It is an impossibility that he didn't know exactly what he was doing."

It was Atkins' second tour in Iraq. He initially enlisted in the Army from his hometown in Bozeman, Mont., in 2000. Less than three years later, he fought during the invasion of Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division as an Army fire team leader. He would earn a Combat Infantryman Badge during that tour.

After returning home, he decided not to re-enlist, choosing instead to go to college.

But after two years at the Uni-

versity of Montana at Missoula, Atkins found his classmates immature, his mother, Elaine Atkins, said. In late 2005, he re-enlisted in the Army and was sent to Fort Drum and, eventually, back to Iraq.

Atkins' unit — the 10th Mountain Division's 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment — was about 10 months into its tour when the soldiers received the radio call of four "military-aged males" acting oddly along Route Caprice, an off-limits to locals supply route that had become a favorite target of insurgents for emplacing roadside bombs.

When Atkins spotted two of the four males, he left his Humvee unarmed, yelling directions at the men, Aijo recalled. As Atkins moved toward one of the men, the team's medic moved toward the second man.

Suddenly, Atkins was fighting hand-to-hand with the insurgent. Aijo remembered the "impressive" body slam attracting his attention.

"It all happened so quickly," Aijo said. "My initial thought was that maybe they had rolled onto a [roadside bomb]. It didn't become more clear to me until the second man came around and he also detonated. That's when it clicked for me that this is what had happened."

Aijo credited Atkins not only with saving his life by shielding him from the blast, but with instilling in him the skills and maturity needed to deal with such a deadly clash.

## Shanahan: New review of 2017 Niger attack underway

By CLAUDIA GRISALES

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan told House lawmakers Tuesday that a new review into the deadly October 2017 ambush in Niger that left four American soldiers dead is underway.

Shanahan said he learned in January after taking over as acting Pentagon chief that a re-

view of the initial investigation was already in place, ordered by former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

Shanahan's new probe should reach conclusions on reprimands and awards related to the ambush "soon," he told Rep. Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz., during questioning.

"When I came into this role, the recommendation was brought to me that Secretary

Mattis, he had convened a review. ... I did not find that sufficient," he said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing. "So, I convened my own review so I can ensure from top to bottom as to the appropriate accountability."

"I don't know when that will be complete, but I have to assume that much of the work that's been done to date can be used."

The four soldiers killed in the ambush were Sgt. 1st Class Jeremiah W. Johnson, Staff Sgt. Bryan C. Black, Staff Sgt. Dustin M. Wright and Sgt. La David Johnson.

Gallego, a Marine veteran, said concerns remain that blame could be placed on junior officers alone for the ambush when others could be involved in the mistakes that led to the deadly attack.

# Veto override on border emergency fails

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-led House failed Tuesday to override President Donald Trump's first veto, salvaging his effort to steer billions of extra dollars to erecting border barriers and delivering a victory to the White House.

Lawmakers voted 248-181 to overturn Trump's veto, but that fell 38 votes shy of the required two-thirds margin.

Just days after Attorney General William Barr announced that special counsel Robert Mueller had found Trump didn't scheme with Russia to help his 2016 elec-

tion, Tuesday's vote bolstered Trump's drive to build a wall along the boundary with Mexico, a hallmark of his 2016 presidential campaign and a priority of his presidency.

While clearly a defeat for Democrats, the vote afforded them a chance to re-emphasize policy differences with Trump and change the subject from collusion allegations.

Underscoring that, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi placed her name atop a House Democratic fundraising email referencing the failed veto override, writing, "I know grassroots Democrats won't let Trump's

enablers get away with this."

Just 14 Republicans joined all voting Democrats in Tuesday's futile effort to void Trump's declaration of a national emergency at the Southwest border.

By invoking that power, Trump has said he will shift \$3.6 billion from military construction to erecting barriers along that boundary. Congress has voted to provide less than \$1.4 billion for border barriers, leaving Democrats and some Republicans fuming that Trump is abusing his powers by ignoring Congress' constitutional control over spending.

## Biden calls for change in 'white man's culture'

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former Vice President Joe Biden condemned "a white man's culture" Tuesday night as he lashed out against violence against women and, more specifically, lamented his role in the Supreme Court confirmation hearings that undermined Anita Hill's credibility nearly three decades ago.

Biden, a Democratic presidential prospect who often highlights his white working-class roots, said Hill, who is black, should not have been forced to face a panel of "a bunch of white guys."

"To this day I regret I couldn't come up with a way to give her the kind of hearing she deserved," he said, echoing comments he delivered last fall as the nation debated sexual misconduct allegations against Brett Kavanaugh amid his Supreme Court confirmation hearing.

Later in his Tuesday remarks, Biden called on Americans to "change the culture" that dates back centuries and allows pervasive violence against women.

"It's an English jurisprudential culture, a white man's culture. It's got to change," Biden said.

The 76-year-old Democrat delivered the remarks at a New York City event honoring

young people who helped combat sexual assault on college campuses. The event, held at a venue called the Russian Tea Room, was hosted by the Biden Foundation and the nonprofit group It's on Us, which Biden founded with former President Barack Obama in 2014.

Biden is perhaps the last high-profile Democrat who has yet to announce his or her 2020 intentions. He has a small team of political operatives laying the groundwork for a run, but he has acknowledged publicly in recent weeks that his entrance in the presidential race is no sure thing.

Biden's role in the 1991 Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings are among his many political challenges as he weighs his place in today's Democratic Party. Should he run, he would be among a handful of white men in a Democratic presidential field that features several women and minorities.

In remarks that were rambling at times and spanned more than a half hour, Biden repeatedly denounced violence against women.

It's a topic Biden knows well. As a senator, he introduced the Violence Against Women's Act in 1990.

## Trump: Report 'could not have been better'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An exuberant President Donald Trump took a victory lap on Capitol Hill, emboldened by the end of the special counsel's Russia probe, even as Democrats pressed insistently for Robert Mueller's full report and Justice Department officials said more information could be released in "weeks, not months."

Trump strode into a high-spirited gathering of Senate Republicans on Tuesday, flanked by party leaders, saying the attorney general's weekend summary of Mueller's report "could not have been better." GOP senators applauded his arrival, and he celebrated what he called his "clean bill of health."

But challenges are ahead for both the Republicans and the Democrats who hope to deny Trump re-election next year. Both parties are readjusting their aims and strategies in the post-probe landscape, pivoting to health care and other issues that are more important for many voters, even with Mueller's full findings still unknown.

At House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's own closed-door caucus meeting Tuesday, she urged rank-and-file Democrats to "be calm" and focus on the policy

promises of health care, jobs and oversight of the administration that helped propel them to the House majority last fall.

Not that the Democrats are forgetting Russia and the 2016 presidential election. Many Democrats dismiss the four-page summary released by Attorney General William Barr as inadequate.

"I haven't seen the Mueller report. I've seen the Barr report. And I'm not going to base anything on the Barr report," said Rep. Jamie Raskin, of Maryland.

"The president is saying he's been completely and totally exonerated by the report," Raskin said. "The one sentence we've seen from the report says this is not an exoneration of the president."

Meanwhile, a Justice Department official said it will take Barr "weeks, not months" to finish reviewing Mueller's longer, still-confidential report and make a version available for the public.

It's not clear whether that will be Mueller's own words or another synopsis.

Trump has said he "wouldn't mind" if the full report were released.

# Revamp planned for FAA's oversight process

Associated Press

America's standing as the model for aviation safety regulation will be on trial as congressional hearings begin into the Federal Aviation Administration's oversight of Boeing before and after two deadly crashes of its best-selling airliner.

The Senate aviation subcommittee was scheduled to hear testimony Wednesday from the acting head of the FAA, the Transportation Department inspector general who is leading a review of the FAA and Boeing, and the nation's top transportation safety investigator.

Inspector General Calvin Scovel III is expected to reveal plans to significantly

revamp the FAA's oversight of airplane construction this summer and discuss his office's findings of management weaknesses with a number of the agency's oversight processes over the years.

"While revamping FAA's oversight process will be an important step, continued management attention will be key to ensure the agency identifies and monitors the highest-risk areas of aircraft certification," Scovel wrote in his prepared remarks obtained by The Associated Press.

Even though the agency has made improvements, it plans by July to develop new evaluation criteria for training and company self-audits, Scovel wrote.

Also on Wednesday, acting FAA Admin-

istrator Daniel Elwell was expected to testify that Boeing submitted an application on Jan. 21 spelling out changes it planned to make to crucial flight control software on the 737 Max — the same system that is suspected of playing a role in the Oct. 29 crash of a Lion Air jet in Indonesia and the March 10 plunge of an Ethiopian Airlines Max. In all, 346 people died.

Elwell said FAA engineers and pilots have tested the update in a simulator and the plane, including recovering from an aerodynamic stall, according to a copy of his prepared remarks obtained by the AP.

"The FAA's ongoing review of this software installation and training is an agency priority," Elwell is expected to testify.

# Dismissal of Smollett case brings backlash

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Prosecutors still insist Jussie Smollett faked a racist, anti-gay attack on himself in the hopes that the attention would advance his acting career. The "Empire" star still says he was assaulted by two men late at night in downtown Chicago.

But with little explanation, authorities on Tuesday abruptly dropped all charges against Smollett, abandoning the criminal case only five weeks after the allegations were filed. In return, prosecutors said, the actor agreed to let the city keep his \$10,000 in bail.

The dismissal drew a swift backlash from the mayor and police chief and raised questions about why Smollett was not forced to admit what prosecutors had said they could prove in court — that the entire

episode was a publicity stunt.

Among those sure to keep pressing for answers is Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who appeared blindsided by the decision. His voice rising in anger at times, Emanuel called the deal "a whitewash of justice" and lashed out at Smollett. He said Smollett had exploited hate-crime laws meant to protect minorities by turning the laws "inside out, upside down for only one thing — himself."

"Where is the accountability in the system?" Emanuel asked. "You cannot have, because of a person's position, one set of rules apply to them and another set of rules apply to everybody else."

Smollett has become a household name as a result of the case, but it's unclear if the dropped charges will diminish the taint that followed his arrest last month. His insistence that he had been vindicated may

make the entertainment industry cautious about fully embracing him.

Defense attorneys said Smollett's record was "wiped clean" of the 16 felony counts related to making a false report.

The actor, who also agreed to do community service, insisted that he had "been truthful and consistent on every single level since day one."

"I would not be my mother's son if I was capable of one drop of what I was being accused of," he told reporters after a court hearing. He thanked the state of Illinois "for attempting to do what's right."

In a statement, a spokeswoman for the Cook County prosecutors' office said the dismissal came "after reviewing all of the facts and circumstances of the case." Tandra Simonton called it "a just disposition and appropriate resolution" but said it was not an exoneration.

# Private wells at risk from major flooding in Midwest

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — More than 1 million private wells that supply drinking water in mostly rural parts of the Midwest could face the risk of contamination from floodwater, posing a health concern that could linger long after the flooding subsides.

Major flooding along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers and several smaller waterways has inundated states in the middle of America, from the Canadian border south to Kentucky. The National Weather Service has warned that with snowmelt in northern states only beginning, the threat

of additional flooding persists well into spring.

The high water and swift current carries raw sewage from overburdened treatment plants, animal waste and pesticides from farm fields, and spilled fuel.

"Whatever was on the land is in the water now," said Steve May, assistant chief of the Missouri Bureau of Environmental Epidemiology.

Contaminated water can carry bacteria such as E. coli that can cause gastrointestinal illness, reproductive problems and neurological disorders, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Pre-

vention. Infants, young children, pregnant women, elderly people and people with compromised immune systems are particularly vulnerable.

The National Ground Water Association, a trade group for the industry that includes well systems, said there are 1.1 million private wells in 300 flooded counties in 10 states: Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota and Kentucky.

Stagnant water could linger for days or even weeks even as flooding starts to subside in hard-hit areas, raising the risk that some of it will get into wells.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Ill orca improving; researchers optimistic

**WA** SEATTLE — Several months after researchers feared the worst for an ailing Puget Sound orca, the whale known as J7 was spotted in an improved condition.

KING-TV reported whale researchers with the Center for Whale Research observed the 42-year-old orca swimming with the J Pod in the northern Haro Strait on Friday.

In a Monday update, the team said her condition appeared to have improved since her last sighting around the beginning of the year. However, the team said they remain cautiously optimistic that she will survive.

### Man charged with DUI for sixth time

**DE** LEWES — Delaware State Police charged a man with driving under the influence of alcohol for the sixth time. Police said troopers arrested John Trala, 63, of Lewes after responding to a car accident.

Police said the troopers detected an odor of alcohol while speaking with Trala. He was taken into custody without incident.

In addition to the DUI charge, Trala was charged with following a motor vehicle too closely.

### Police: Man drove on campus without pants

**SC** ROCK HILL — A South Carolina man was arrested after police said he was driving around a college campus without pants on.

Winthrop University police Lt. Charles Yearata told The State that David Nathaniel Atkinson, 23, was arrested Saturday and charged with indecent

exposure.

Yearata said two students looking out the window of their dorm before 8 p.m. saw a man without pants in a car.

Yearata said Atkinson isn't a student at Winthrop University and has no known affiliation with the school in Rock Hill.

The newspaper reported that Atkinson was previously convicted of indecent exposure in December 2016 in Alamance County, N.C.

### Dog owner fatally mauled at vet clinic

**TX** IRVING — Police said a Dallas-area woman was mauled to death by her two pit bulls as she tried to feed them at a veterinary clinic where the dogs were in quarantine for a prior attack.

Irving police said Johana Villafane, 33, of Irving was pronounced dead Saturday at a Dallas hospital.

A police statement said Villafane was at the clinic Saturday morning to feed the dogs and was in an exercise area when she was attacked. Medical personnel weren't immediately able to reach the victim until a police officer shot and killed both animals.

### Cat video fest shows claws for a cause

**ME** PORTLAND — It's lights, camera, meow for a video festival that shows claws for a cause.

The Portland Museum of Art is billing Cat Video Fest 2019 as "a compilation reel of the latest and best cat videos" culled from unique submissions, sourced animations, music videos and, of course, "classic internet powerhouses."

Organizers said the museum is working with the Animal Refuge League of Greater

Portland on the furry film festival, which is designed to raise money for needy cats.

### Poisonous toads infest neighborhood

**FL** PALM BEACH GARDENS — A Florida suburb is being plagued by thousands of poisonous toads.

Experts say the amphibians are bufo toads, also known as cane toads. Residents in the infested Palm Beach Gardens neighborhood worry toxins secreted by the toads will harm their pets and children.

News stations broadcast images of the small toads clogging pool filters, hopping en masse across driveways and sidewalks and hiding in lawns.

### Nude bike ride set at a warmer time

**PA** PHILADELPHIA — Naked bicyclists say they were so cold riding around Philadelphia last September that this year they'll do it in August.

Organizers of the annual Philly Naked Bike Ride said they've "ridden in chilly weather" the last two Septembers so this time they'll saddle up Aug. 24 and "hope it's a scorcher!"

The nude ride was on Sept. 8 last year and Sept. 9 the year before that, with temperatures reaching only about 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

### Man in attack says he was threatened

**NY** NEW YORK — The man facing an assault charge in connection with an attack on a homeless woman on a New York City subway train claims she threatened him with a knife.

The New York Post reported

the court-appointed attorney for Marc Gomez, 36, made the claim at his arraignment Sunday in Bronx Criminal Court.

Gomez, of Yonkers, N.Y., was arrested Saturday in the March 10 encounter, which was caught on video showing the 78-year-old woman being punched and kicked on a Bronx train around 3 a.m. She was treated for cuts, bleeding and swelling.

### Nails stuck in items left on roadway

**NH** PELHAM — Police in Pelham said someone stuck nails in pieces of cardboard and in oranges and left them on a road, where at least two drivers reported flat tires.

Police are asking the public's help in finding whoever put the nails out. The drivers hit the nails on Nashua Road early Monday.

### Crews work 7 hours to rescue man in silo

**IN** INDIANAPOLIS — Crews from several fire departments worked for more than seven hours to rescue a worker trapped inside a silo containing gravel in Indianapolis.

The Indianapolis Fire Department responded shortly after midday Tuesday to reports of a possible trapped worker at Milestone Contractors and learned that Billy Joe Walls, 34, was stuck inside. He had been lowered inside the silo to take measurements and unexpectedly sank into the gravel.

Walls was attached to a cable, but he couldn't be pulled out. Rescuers used a vacuum truck to remove some gravel and eventually hoisted him to safety.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

# Mariners taking it easy with Kikuchi

Associated Press

PEORIA, Ariz. — Aside from the attention he gets because of his talent as a pitcher, Yusei Kikuchi is well aware his first season in the majors will be subject to additional scrutiny.

Kikuchi's rookie season is something of an experiment, an attempt by the Seattle Mariners to see whether pitchers coming to the major leagues from Asia should be handled differently in their first season. The team will regulate Kikuchi's innings while making sure he starts on a regular five-day rotation, even if that means some outings are kept very short.

If it works, the strategy could become a blueprint for the future.

"As a player you want to go out there every start and perform and pitch one more inning, one more out," Kikuchi said through an interpreter. "But the front office guys, the GM, the (manager) are taking an importance in me and making an adjustment to the states. I'm really happy about that and thankful for that."

By using a deliberate approach, the team and Kikuchi's

representatives believe they can help ease his transition from pitching in Japan, where starters typically throw once a week, and in the process hopefully cut down on the arm problems like those that have felled Asian pitchers in the past.

Shohei Ohtani, Yu Darvish and Daisuke Matsuzaka are among those who suffered significant arm injuries relatively early in their major league careers after arriving from Japan. Ohtani had Tommy John surgery last year that will keep the Angels' two-way star off the mound for the upcoming season.

"I have no frustrations at all but I am eager to keep moving toward the next step," Ohtani said recently. "I'm eager, but once the games get going after opening day, it will probably hit me harder and I'll want to get back more."

Darvish had Tommy John surgery in late 2014, three seasons after arriving in the majors, and missed the entire 2015 season. He threw more than 400 total innings in the regular season in his first two seasons combined. Matsuzaka suffered a rotator cuff strain in his sec-

ond year of 2008, had multiple arm issues in 2009 after pitching in the World Baseball Classic, and eventually had elbow surgery.

There are other examples too, whether it was Hideo Nomo's shoulder surgery in 2003, Takashi Saito's elbow ligament sprain in 2008 or Junichi Tazawa, who had Tommy John surgery in 2010, his second season in the majors.

Darvish has talked previously of going to either a six-man rotation or having starters pitch once a week to try to save their arms. He's a fan of the approach Seattle is taking.

"Not only for who came from Japan but for the young players, too," Darvish said. "That saves the elbow and shoulder stress. I think it's a very good idea."

When Kikuchi's agent, Scott Boras, was presenting his ideas for easing his client into the majors, he found a like-mind in Seattle general manager Jerry Dipoto. Perhaps it's Dipoto's history as a former pitcher, but whatever the reason, the GM didn't scoff at Boras' demand.

In fact, it was Seattle's willingness to develop a plan — along with a lucrative contract

and the club's history with Japanese players — that ultimately appealed to Kikuchi. The deal is worth \$56 million guaranteed over four years, but could be worth up to \$109 million over seven seasons if options are exercised. The pitching plan is similar to what the Mariners have done to acclimate some of their young arms in the minors.

"Not only do I think it is a viable argument on behalf of the Japanese pitchers, the pitcher coming over from (Nippon Professional Baseball), it's very viable with the domestic draft, U.S. players as they enter pro ball," Dipoto said. "Part of why we were able to create a program that made sense for Yusei, and for us and made sense to Scott, is we've been doing this for years with our entry-level classes."

The target is roughly 170 innings for Kikuchi while keeping his regular start rate. That means there will be times — once a month approximately — when Kikuchi will go through his normal pregame routine, throw the first inning and call it a night.

## NASCAR shuffles schedule for '20, gives Phoenix finale

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — NASCAR made the first significant changes to its schedule in years by shuffling the 2020 season into a freshened new sequence that tries to meet the wants of fans to the best of NASCAR's current ability.

"The fans and the industry as a whole have been vocal about the desire for sweeping changes to the schedule, and the 2020 slate is a reflection of our efforts to execute against that feedback," said Steve O'Donnell, NASCAR executive vice president and chief racing development officer.

The 2020 schedule was released Tuesday at ISM Raceway outside Phoenix, which got

the season finale following a \$175 million renovation to ISM Raceway.

Indianapolis Motor Speedway got July 5th to give the iconic track back-to-back summer holiday weekends; the event will follow the Indianapolis 500, a mere 42 days after that Memorial Day staple. IMS President Doug Boles said the Brickyard was the correct "venue to throw a massive party for our nation's birthday."

The July 4th holiday had belonged to Daytona International Speedway, but it gave up the traditional and often rain-wrecked event to claim the final race of the regular season, Aug. 29 when the championship field is finalized.

Daytona track President Chip Wile said the July race now created a chance at a "potential walk-off home run moment for a driver to solidify a playoff berth."

Pocono Raceway will run both its 400-mile races on back-to-back June afternoons, Martinsville Speedway got a Mother's Day race under the lights and also a slot in the playoffs — one of three short tracks featured in NASCAR's 10-race playoffs. Even better for Martinsville, it got the penultimate race for the championship finale.

Bristol and Richmond short tracks both joined the playoffs, as did Darlington Raceway.

Martinsville in 2017 became

the first major motorsports facility in the U.S. with a state-of-the-art LED Lighting system and will finally get to use them for a big-league event on the Saturday night before Mother's Day. Speedway President Clay Campbell noted fans have asked "literally every single day since we installed the lights" when Martinsville would have a Cup race at night.

The season ends one week shorter than usual, but still includes 38 events that run from a Feb. 9 exhibition race at Daytona through the finale on Nov. 8 at renovated ISM Raceway outside of Phoenix. That includes consecutive weekends off for the first time in the modern era so that NBC Sports can focus on the Tokyo Olympics.

# NFL adds pass interference to replay

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Roger Goodell laid down the law, and the owners readily changed NFL rules on reviewing pass interference, whether flagged or not.

As the league concluded its spring meeting one day early, the owners passed by a shockingly overwhelming 31-1 margin that interference can be challenged by coaches and reviewed by officials next season.

Owners voted on a one-year trial to include those often-controversial penalties in the officiating replay review system. Coaches still will have two challenges per game, and in the final two minutes of a half or fourth quarter or for all of overtime, the replay official can order a review of offensive or defensive pass interference.

The major change — owners traditionally have been highly reluctant to include any penalties in the replay process — stems from an egregious missed call in the NFC cham-

pionship game that likely led to the Rams making the Super Bowl and the Saints falling short.

“I told the owners we need to get to a place, and I felt strongly we should have OPI and DPI and that we should be able to throw flags (that were not thrown on the field),” Goodell said. “Everyone in there finally got to understand through a long process and a lot of discussion, everyone wanted to get it right. Some had to remove themselves from long-shared views.”

The competition committee, which recommends rules changes to the ownership, had been split 4-4 on adding interference penalties, particularly non-flagged ones, to replay. But they tweaked the proposal, and it remains part of the overall replay system, which was a critical component.

Falcons President Rich McKay, chairman of the competition committee, said the analytics also played a role in the rules change. Of the 50

most incorrect on-field calls as determined by officiating director Al Riveron and his staff that were impactful, half of them were for defensive pass interference.

“We felt this was a place to start,” McKay added. “There was a lot of discussion and definitely a block of people on the committee and in membership concerned about the ability to put a flag on. We got more comfortable as we worked it out that it would be captured in the replay system.”

It might have been a pyrrhic victory for Saints coach Sean Payton, a member of the competition committee, but he was a driving force in persuading many people such an alteration was needed.

“It’s great when we can arrive at what we think is a good change,” Payton said. “We wouldn’t have any of these on the docket had it not been for one play. I don’t think any of these would be on a replay discussion.

“So my point is, I think we

need to do a better job thinking forward and preparing, regardless of what’s currently out there. Where do we want to be in 2028? It’s a good way to work and come backward. I think we do that in a lot of other things. But I feel like at times we come in here each year and we’re in a little bit in a reactionary mode.”

Not this time.

Earlier in the day, the NFL owners voted down a proposal to replace the onside kick with one play from scrimmage, and tabled a suggestion to require each team to have one possession in overtime regardless of what happened on the first series of the extra period.

Owners vetoed the idea of a one-year trial of a fourth-and-15 play from the offense’s 35-yard line to replace the onside kick, considered one of the game’s more dangerous plays. The powerful competition committee recommended the play by a vote of 7-1, but the owners were not swayed.

## Vols look for another signature win against Purdue

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee coach Rick Barnes heads to his first Sweet 16 in more than a decade looking for another win against an opponent the Volunteers beat last season to signify their emergence as national contenders.

The Vols knocked off then-18th ranked Purdue 78-75 in overtime at the Battle 4 Atlantis in November 2017 to earn their first victory over a ranked non-conference opponent in three years. That triumph provided a spark for a 2017-18 season in which Tennessee won a share of the Southeastern Conference title after three straight years of finishing .500 or below.

Tennessee (31-5) and Purdue (25-9) meet again Thursday in a South Regional semifinal.

“That tournament in general is the tournament where I

thought our guys realized that we can do this and play with these teams. ... Yeah, I do think it was a big boon for our program,” Barnes said Monday.

Barnes used to coach this deep into the NCAA Tournament just about every year. He reached the Sweet 16 five times in a seven-year stretch at Texas from 2002-08, including a Final Four appearance in 2003 and regional final berths in 2006 and 2008. He also reached the Sweet 16 with Clemson in 1997.

But this marks his first time back in a regional semifinal since 2008. Barnes got there because his team regrouped in overtime to beat Iowa 83-77 on Sunday after blowing a 25-point lead.

“The fact is, you don’t take any of this for granted,” Barnes said. “You don’t. Because, one, it’s hard to get there. It’s hard

to advance. So when you do get there, you hope to take advantage of it.”

This Sweet 16 appearance continues a career revitalization for Barnes, who was named the Henry Iba national coach of the year by the U.S. Basketball Writers Association on Monday.

Barnes was fired by Texas in 2015 before trying to stabilize a Tennessee program that was in upheaval. Cuonzo Martin left for California after taking Tennessee to the Sweet 16 in 2014 and was succeeded by Donnie Tyndall, who lasted just a year before getting fired as the NCAA investigated his old school.

Tennessee posted a combined 31-35 record in Barnes’ first two seasons but has gone 57-14 the past two years with a roster that doesn’t include any former top-100 recruits.

“To be totally honest with you, I don’t think I had a vision or anything,” Barnes said. “I don’t. I just thought we said, ‘Hey, we’re just going to go to work and see what we can do.’ I always felt like that. You have to live one day at a time, and you have to get your players to buy into a work ethic.”

“There’s no magic dust you can sprinkle onto anything, it’s just getting the kind of guys you really want to coach and getting [them] into believing in each other and getting them to believe into what we’re trying to do and buy into it.”

The top six players in Tennessee’s rotation — Southeastern Conference player of the year Grant Williams, Kyle Alexander, Jordan Bone, Admiral Schofield, Lamonte’ Turner and Jordan Bowden — have a combined 475 career starts.

## NHL roundup

## Ovechkin leads Caps past Hurricanes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored his NHL-leading 49th goal of the season to snap a four-game drought and help Washington beat the Carolina Hurricanes 4-1 on Tuesday night, increasing the Capitals' division lead.

Ovechkin snapped a shot past Petr Mrazek for the go-ahead goal 4:31 into the third period for his third goal in 10 games. With his 656th career goal, Ovechkin tied Brendan Shanahan for 13th on the all-time list.

T.J. Oshie and John Carlson also scored. Braden Holtby made 27 saves and Nicklas Backstrom added an empty-netter off a pass from Ovechkin as the Capitals won their second straight. Evgeny Kuznetsov had three assists on his bobbles

head night.

Washington increased its lead to three points over former coach Barry Trotz and the New York Islanders atop the Metropolitan Division.

Dougie Hamilton scored and Mrazek finished with 24 saves for Carolina.

**Blue Jackets 4, Islanders 0:** Sergei Bobrovsky recorded his second consecutive shutout and host Columbus stayed in the playoff hunt by beating New York.

Ryan Dzingel, Artemi Panarin, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Cam Atkinson scored, and Bobrovsky finished with 26 saves and his eighth shutout of the season for the Blue Jackets, who are fighting to get above the wild-card line in the Eastern Division with six games to play.

**Canadiens 6, Panthers 1:**

Tomas Tatar had two goals and an assist to lead host Montreal over Florida and remain in playoff position.

Brett Kulak, Artturi Lehkonen, Phillip Danault and Max Domi also scored for the Canadiens (41-28-8), who have won four of five.

**Oilers 8, Kings 4:** Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Leon Draisaitl each scored three goals, leading host Edmonton past Los Angeles.

Draisaitl added an assist, Connor McDavid had a goal and three assists, and Zack Kassian also scored for the Oilers (34-34-8), who moved within five points of a wild card in the Western Conference playoff race with six games remaining.

**Senators 4, Sabres 0:** Craig Anderson stopped 35 shots for his second shutout of the season

and host Ottawa beat Buffalo.

Brian Gibbons had a goal and an assist, and Anthony Duclair, Rudolfs Balcers and Magnus Paajarvi also scored.

**Ducks 5, Canucks 4:** Rookie Sam Steel recorded his first NHL hat trick and visiting Anaheim beat Vancouver.

Rickard Rakell and Kiefer Sherwood also scored for the Ducks.

**Coyotes 1, Blackhawks 0:** Nick Cousins scored a power-play goal early in the third period and host Arizona boosted its playoff chances by snapping a five-game losing streak.

Darcy Kuemper made his 18th consecutive start and stopped 31 shots for his fourth shutout of the season. Arizona, which was 0-3-2 in its previous five games, has won nine of 11 at home.

## NBA roundup

## Bledsoe's 23 points help Bucks turn away Rockets

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Eric Bledsoe stole the show in a marquee matchup between the Milwaukee Bucks and Houston Rockets on Tuesday night.

With top-billing going to MVP front-runners Giannis Antetokounmpo and James Harden, the feisty Bucks guard turned in one his best all-around performances of the season as the Bucks pulled away for a 108-94 victory.

Bledsoe poured in 23 points, including 16 in a decisive third quarter, and tightly guarded Harden for most of the game.

"I just try to play to my strengths," Bledsoe said.

Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer praised Bledsoe's all-around performance.

"To do what he did on both ends of the court, pretty special," Budenholzer said. "I think

he loves that challenge. I think he's an incredible defender."

Antetokounmpo had 19 points and 14 rebounds for Milwaukee, which improved to an NBA-best 56-19.

Harden scored 23 points and Chris Paul had 19 for Houston, which lost for just the third time in 17 games. Harden shot just 9-for-26, including 1-for-9 from three-point range with Bledsoe closely guarding him throughout most of the game.

**Clippers 122, Timberwolves 111:** Danilo Gallinari scored 25 points and Los Angeles clinched a playoff spot with a win over host Minnesota.

Coach Doc Rivers' club is back in the postseason after falling short last year. Los Angeles finished 42-40 last season, missing the playoffs after making it six straight years — four under Rivers.

The Clippers (45-30) became

the fifth Western Conference team to secure a postseason berth.

**Magic 104, Heat 99:** Nikola Vucevic had 24 points and 16 rebounds, Jonathan Issac added 19 points and Orlando extended its longest winning streak in eight years to six games by downing host Miami.

**Celtics 116, Cavaliers 106:** Jayson Tatum and Marcus Smart each scored 21 points, and Boston broke away from a fourth-quarter tie to defeat host Cleveland.

**Hornets 125, Spurs 116 (OT):** Kemba Walker scored 11 of his 38 points in overtime and host Charlotte outlasted San Antonio to stretch its longest winning streak of the season to four games.

**Raptors 112, Bulls 103:** Norman Powell scored 20 points, Serge Ibaka had 16 and host Toronto beat struggling

Chicago for the eighth consecutive time.

**Nuggets 95, Pistons 92:** Jamal Murray scored 33 points, including six in the final minute, and host Denver held off Detroit after nearly squandering a 27-point lead.

**Kings 125, Mavericks 121:** De'Aaron Fox scored 23 points, including a crucial basket to help Sacramento stay in front in the final minute against host Dallas.

**Hawks 130, Pelicans 120:** Rookie guard Trae Young had 33 points and 12 assists for his 24th double-double of the season, leading Atlanta past host New Orleans.

**Lakers 124, Wizards 106:** LeBron James had 23 points, 14 assists and seven rebounds, and host Los Angeles beat Washington for its first back-to-back victories since mid-January.