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Trump, Ryan meet, vow to seek unity

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan pledged to work together despite their differences after a meeting Thursday aimed at unifying a party torn over Trump's rise to the cusp of the Republican presidential nomination. The speaker appeared closer to offering a full-throated endorsement.

Trump and Ryan issued a statement describing their meeting as a "very positive step toward unification" that recognized "many important areas of common ground" as well as areas where they disagree. Ryan stunned Republicans by withholding his endorsement a week ago when it became clear Trump was on a firm path to the nomination.

The much-anticipated meeting unfolded Thursday morning as more Republicans have begun urging the party to put the extraordinary discord behind. The statement by the two suggested both are invested in tamping down the Republican infighting as they try to pull the GOP together for the fight against Democrats in the fall.

US: Romania missile site OK

BY STEVEN BEARDSLEY
Stars and Stripes

DEVESELU, Romania — The U.S. and NATO declared their missile interceptor system here ready for operations on Thursday while attempting to reassure Russia it is not the target.

"Missile defense is for defense," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said. "It is purely defensive."

Stoltenberg joined Romania's prime minister, Dacian Ciolos, and U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work at a U.S. Navy base near rural Deveselu, where 24 SM-3 missiles are now loaded in launchers for use against short- to intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The ceremony formally certifies the site for operations. The site is expected to be formally designated for NATO use at the alliance summit this summer.

The U.S. says the system, known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach, is a necessary defense against Iranian ballistic missiles that could target European cities or American bases. But Russia has long criticized it as a potential threat to its own missiles and a disruption of the regional strategic balance.

The issue has been a constant irritant in relations between Russia and the West since the system was announced in 2002. Officials at Thursday's ceremony repeatedly tried to defuse Russian concerns.

"This site in Romania — as well as the one in Poland — is not directed against Russia," Stoltenberg said. "The interceptors are too few, and located too far south or too close to Russia, to be able to intercept Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles."

NATO's official position is that the system is

intended to defend Europe against unspecified countries in Asia and the Middle East who possess missile technology.

But Russian officials insisted the system poses a threat to their country.

Adm. Vladimir Komoyedov, defense committee chairman in the Russian parliament, told the Interfax news agency the missile defense system was "a direct threat to us."

Dmitry Peskov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, said "measures are being taken to maintain Russia's security at the necessary, level," the TASS news agency reported.

Stoltenberg said that although Russia terminated dialogue on the issue in 2013, NATO hoped to continue discussions.

Work reiterated that the system is defensive and is meant to protect the alliance from any ballistic missile threat.

"This is not about Russia. This is about the collective self-defense of the alliance," Work told a subsequent news conference. "If we take actions to deter Russia, we say that is what we're doing, and we say why."

The U.S., he said, had offered repeatedly to show the Russians the technical specifications so they would understand the system's capabilities and that it does not propose a strategic threat.

The base marks the first time the Navy has installed its Aegis weapon system — an advanced missile-tracking and guidance system routinely built into Navy warships — onto a ground site. Much of the Deveselu system is housed in a large deckhouse that mimics the superstructure of a ship. The missiles are located miles away.

Paratroopers' sentences over brawl in Italy suspended

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — Twelve paratroopers received suspended eight-month sentences on Thursday morning after pleading guilty in connection with a bloody fight outside a disco with a group of African men.

The 12 did not appear in the local Italian court and were represented by a Vicenza lawyer.

A 13th paratrooper involved in the Sunday morning brawl was injured in the incident and had not been charged, said the lawyer, Alberto Negri. The injury was not serious, he said. Original reports said all 13 were arrested.

The sentences mean the soldiers, all from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, face no further punishment from local authorities. It's unclear whether the

Army will discipline them.

The judge also fined the troops 2,600 euros in damages to be paid to the owner of the Liv nightclub in Bassano del Grappa. But experts on the Status of Forces Agreement between the U.S. and Italy said that only the Army — not individual troops — can be asked to pay damages.

The sentences were the result of a plea agreement. The

soldiers had been charged with "rissa," an Italian word that translates as "brawl."

It was still unclear Thursday morning what had caused the clash. According to local media, the soldiers said they'd reacted after one of them had been stabbed by an African man. All but one of the troops is African-American, said a lawyer who knows about the case and declined to be identified.

US airstrike in Somalia hits al-Shabab

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An U.S. airstrike Thursday morning killed a handful of al-Qaida-linked militants in Somalia who had opened fire on American-backed Ugandan troops, a Pentagon spokesman said.

The Ugandan soldiers were attacked by about 15 to 20 al-Shabab militants while conducting a raid on an illegal taxation checkpoint set up by the terrorist organization on a remote road west of Mogadishu, said Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman. Nearby American troops called in the “defensive” airstrike that killed five militants and ended the threat to the Ugandans.

The Ugandan soldiers were members of AMISOM, or African Mission in Somalia, a team of more than 20,000 troops from about 12 countries charged with expelling al-Shabab from the country.

“They came under fire from the al-Shabab militants and we called in an airstrike in their defense,” Davis told reporters Thursday at the Pentagon. “This is something we’re doing. We continue to work closely with partner forces to target al-Shabab in Somalia.”

About 50 American troops are serving in Somalia to advise and assist AMISOM troops, Davis said. A small group of those American soldiers — Davis did not provide specifics — were nearby when the Ugandan troops were attacked, but they were never engaged during the fight, he said.

Lawmakers plan hearing aboard carrier Eisenhower

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON—Nothing makes a statement quite like an aircraft carrier, just ask the House Armed Services Committee.

In what appears to be a first, committee lawmakers will trade in the Capitol’s wood paneling and marble for battleship gray when they hold a hearing this month aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. The location is meant to underscore members’ call for more Navy ships and spending.

Up to 42 members of Congress may gather on the massive warship docked at Norfolk Naval Station to hear testimony from Navy captains about the dangerous state of Navy readiness, according to Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va.

Forbes, the chairman of an Armed Services subcommittee that oversees the Navy, is organizing the event — and is also locked in a re-election battle for the Virginia district that includes the base.

“Too often, hearing testimony is scrubbed by the White House before getting to Congress — we want unvarnished opinions and the farther we get from Washington the more candid the views are likely to be,” Forbes said in a written statement to Stars and Stripes.

Armed Services and other House committees occasionally hold field hearings but the sworn testimony scheduled aboard the Eisenhower on May 23 appears to be unique, according to committee and congressional staff. The naval base is a three- to four-hour drive south from Washington.

Forbes’ Seapower subcommittee and the Armed Services Readiness subcommittee, led by chairman Rep. Rob Wittman, R-Va., were making plans Wednesday for the trip to Norfolk.

Four or five captains were expected but not yet confirmed to give testimony at the hearing, in addition to attendance by Adm. Phil Davidson, of Fleet Forces, Forbes’ staff said. It was still unclear how many of the members will attend but staff believed it would be less than the 42 who sit on the subcommittees.

“The Navy’s readiness and force structure shortfalls are real and dangerous,” Forbes said. “We are seeing the shrinking fleet directly impact the readiness of our sailors. Fewer ships and growing threats mean longer deployments and greater strain on sailors and their families.”

The subcommittee chairman has spearheaded a proposed House defense budget that adds \$2.3 billion more into Navy shipbuilding programs than the Obama administration requested in its proposed budget. It would be the biggest spending since the end of the Cold War, Forbes said.

A bigger Navy has also become central to Forbes’ re-election bid in southern Virginia where he faces State Delegate Scott Taylor in the Republican primary. Taylor is a former Navy SEAL and an Iraq war veteran.

His staff told Stars and Stripes that the upcoming hearing has no connection to the campaign and that the timing is meant to influence debate on Capitol Hill as lawmakers hammer out defense spending plans for the coming year.

Lawmakers to mull social media, background checks

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Federal employees may want to be more prudent when posting to social media and more selective about selfies, as the government eyes their online activities to gauge their trustworthiness.

Two subcommittees of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee will hold a hearing Friday on whether scrutinizing their social media accounts should become a regular part of security investigations of federal em-

ployees and if so, under what conditions.

The hearing comes as the Obama administration is preparing to announce a policy that officials have hinted will open the door to more searches of social media during those background checks.

The administration last month announced plans to test how the government could use such searches in those investigations, which determine eligibility to get — and keep — the security clearances that are

required for many federal jobs. Congress meanwhile is considering a bill to require that type of scrutiny during background checks of intelligence agency employees.

The issue of whether to snoop on social media postings of federal employees is surfacing near the one-year anniversary of disclosures that personal information on some 22 million people was stolen from two Office of Personnel Management databases. One involved personnel records on current and

former federal employees and the other files of background investigations into federal employees and others who applied for security clearances or who sought access to certain government facilities.

Those breaches triggered an internal review of background investigation procedures and a decision to create a new, semi-independent entity within the OPM to oversee those probes and to shift control of the information gathered to the Defense Department.

Nats' Scherzer ties record with 20 Ks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Max Scherzer has thrown two no-hitters, has come within one strike of a perfect game and has met just about every expectation that accompanied the \$210 million contract he signed with Washington.

Still, after his latest masterpiece Wednesday night, he said: "There's something about 20."

Scherzer struck out 20 batters to match the major league record for a nine-inning game in the Nationals' 3-2 victory over the Detroit Tigers.

"Tonight was an emotional game, facing a former team and all those guys I have so much respect for," Scherzer said after pitching against the Tigers for the first time since leaving Detroit. "And so to have a game like this against that caliber of hitter on their side, it really puts a feather in my cap."

Scherzer (4-2) had a chance to break the mark when James McCann stepped to the plate with two outs in the ninth inning. McCann, who whiffed his previous three times up, grounded to third base for the final out.

"It crossed my mind," said Scherzer, who did not issue a walk. "I was think-

ing of all the different scenarios in an 0-2 count that I could do to be able to get that last strikeout."

The ace right-hander, who pitched two no-hitters for Washington last season and struck out 17 in the second one, joined Roger Clemens (twice), Kerry Wood and Randy Johnson as the only big league pitchers to compile 20 strikeouts in nine innings.

"That's some serious company," Scherzer said. "It won't sink in right now, but it's an amazing accomplishment."

Johnson achieved his feat for Arizona during a 2001 game that went 11 innings. Tom Cheney holds the major league record with 21 strikeouts when he pitched all 16 innings for the Washington Senators against Baltimore in 1962.

After striking out the side in the eighth, all on called strikes, Scherzer was up to 18 on 106 pitches, with the Nationals holding a two-run lead.

"I knew there was a lot," manager Dusty Baker said. "But when they put it on the board, I was like, 'Oh, no.' At that point in time, you know, how often do you have a chance to make history like that? We just have to watch him his next start."

Said Scherzer: "There really wasn't a conversation, to be honest with you.

Everybody knew I wanted the ball, everybody was going to give me the ball."

The 2013 AL Cy Young Award winner gave up a leadoff homer to J.D. Martinez in the ninth, then blew a 97 mph fastball by slugger Miguel Cabrera for strikeout No. 19.

Victor Martinez singled for his third hit before Scherzer got another All-Star bopper, Justin Upton, swinging at a low slider to tie the record.

That came one pitch after Upton's foul pop landed just beyond the reach of first baseman Ryan Zimmerman and in a camera well.

Scherzer pounded his fist in excitement and went back to work. McCann, however, grounded an 0-1 pitch to third baseman Anthony Rendon, who threw to second for the forceout.

A giddy Scherzer smiled and yelped as he high-fived and hugged other Nationals players on the field. He was doused by his teammates during a postgame television interview.

"Had to go through some tough, tough hitters there with Miggy and J.D. and Victor and all those guys over there," Scherzer said. "Those guys are unbelievable and they gave me a heck of a time tonight."

Scherzer threw an astounding 96 of 119 pitches for strikes in a six-hitter for his sixth career complete game. He out-pitched pal Jordan Zimmermann (5-2), a former Nationals teammate who left Washington as a free agent for a \$110 million deal with Detroit before this season.

"That was one of the more dominant performances I've ever come across," said Tigers manager Brad Ausmus, also an opponent during Wood's 20-strikeout game and one of the two compiled by Clemens. "It wasn't quite as dominant as Kerry Wood and it was more dominant than Clemens."

With the win, Scherzer joined Chicago Cubs right-hander John Lackey as the only active starters to own victories against all 30 major league clubs.

"The fastball really just seemed to work for me tonight," Scherzer said.

Daniel Murphy had three hits, including a double and a pair of RBI singles off Zimmermann. Danny Espinosa homered off Zimmermann in the seventh as Washington took two of three in the interleague series.

Jose Iglesias homered early for Detroit.

Syndergaard's 2 HRs power Mets past Dodgers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Credit Thor with the victory on the mound and at the plate.

Noah Syndergaard became the second pitcher in Mets history to hit two home runs in a game on Wednesday night, driving in all of New York's runs in a 4-3 victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"I don't think I ever hit two home runs in Little League," he said. "To hit two home runs in a big league game, especially with a pitcher like (Kenta) Maeta out there, it was an ultimate experience."

Syndergaard (3-2) allowed two runs and six hits in eight innings, tying the longest outing of his career, struck out six and walked one. He gave up five hits in the first four innings and then retired 11 in a row.

"This guy holds his velocity," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "He was throwing 99 mph in the eighth."

Nicknamed "Thor" after the Marvel Comics character known as the god of thunder who possesses an enchanted hammer, Syndergaard swung a mighty black bat with his blond locks flowing beneath his helmet. He had to provide all the offense himself after his teammates produced just one run in his previous two starts.

"I do think this does add to the nickname," he said.

Syndergaard hit a solo homer on the first pitch from Maeda (3-2) in the third inning, and slammed a three-run shot in the fifth. In that at-bat, Syndergaard tried unsuccessfully to bunt before manager Terry Collins gave him the sign to swing away.

Walt Terrell was the first Mets pitcher to

hit two homers in a game at Wrigley Field on Aug. 6, 1983.

The last major league pitcher to homer twice in a game was Arizona's Micah Owings, who accomplished the feat against Atlanta on Aug. 18, 2007. Jim Tobin of the Boston Braves holds the modern-day big league record for pitchers with three home runs in a game against the Chicago Cubs on May 13, 1942.

Syndergaard came up with a chance to tie Tobin's mark with the bases loaded in the sixth. Facing Chris Hatcher, he took big rips on his first three pitches, fouling off each of them. With Syndergaard behind 1-2 in the count, Hatcher and catcher Yasmani Grandal convened for a chat as though Barry Bonds was at the plate. Syndergaard struck out swinging on his next pitch to end the threat.

Syndergaard's power display gave the Mets 51 homers through their first 33 games to lead the majors. They've hit 49 in the last 25 games and also lead the majors with 35 homers on the road. Last Saturday, Mets pitcher Bartolo Colon hit the first home run of his career at age 42 in San Diego.

Astros 5, Indians 3 (16): As inning after inning went by the game against visiting Cleveland stretched into the 16th, Houston manager A.J. Hinch couldn't stop thinking about how the Astros could have avoided this marathon if they hadn't squandered early opportunities.

The Astros had left a season-high 17 runners on base before Marwin Gonzalez hit a two-run homer in the 16th inning to give them a 5-3 win over the Indians.

"The entire back half of that game I'm thinking back to the first inning, bases loaded, to the second inning, bases loaded. ... The first three innings were an

incredible amount of baserunners where we didn't take advantage of it," Hinch said. "When you're in this tight of a game it's impossible not to think about it."

Carlos Correa reached on an infield single to start the 16th, Houston's first hit since the seventh inning.

One out later, Gonzalez sent one into the seats in right field off Cody Anderson (0-3) to hand Houston its third victory in five games.

Padres 7, 1; Cubs 4, 0: Drew Pomeranz tied a career high with 10 strikeouts in six scoreless innings and Christian Bethancourt hit a long solo home run to give San Diego a victory over host Chicago and a sweep of a day-night doubleheader.

In the first game, Brett Wallace hit a three-run homer in San Diego's four-run seventh inning, and the Padres stopped the Cubs' eight-game win streak. Pedro Strop (1-1) took the loss and Carlos Villanueva (1-0) pitched a scoreless inning for the win.

Royals 7, Yankees 3: Salvador Perez hit a three-run homer in yet another big first inning against Michael Pineda, and slumping Kansas City rebounded.

Red Sox 13, Athletics 3: Jackie Bradley Jr. had two home runs and six RBIs to extend his hitting streak to 17 games, and host Boston completed a three-game sweep.

Braves 5, Phillies 1: Williams Perez allowed only two hits and one run in eight innings, Freddie Freeman homered and Atlanta finally claimed just its second home win.

Pirates 5, Reds 4: Jordy Mercer singled home the go-ahead run in the top of the ninth inning, rallying visiting

Pittsburgh in an NL Central rivalry game full of plunkings and ejections.

Six batters were hit — four Pirates, two Reds — as the teams extended their history of plunkings. Over the last four seasons, the Reds have hit 43 Pirates batters (10 this season) and the Pirates have hit 41 Reds (five this season).

Marlins 3, Brewers 2: Wei-Yin Chen tied a career high with 12 strikeouts in 6¹/₃ innings to help host Miami beat Milwaukee.

Giants 5, Blue Jays 4 (13): Buster Posey walked with the bases loaded in the 13th inning and host San Francisco salvaged one win in a three-game series.

Rockies 8, Diamondbacks 7: Nolan Arenado hit a tiebreaking home run in the eighth inning, and Colorado ended its seven-game home losing streak.

Orioles 9, Twins 2: Mark Trumbo hit two home runs and visiting Baltimore hit back-to-back homers for the third straight game.

Mariners 6, Rays 5 (11): Chris Iannetta led off the bottom of the 11th inning with a homer to give host Seattle a sweep of the three-game series.

Cardinals 5, Angels 2: Jaime Garcia allowed just four hits in seven innings to lead visiting St. Louis.

Rangers 6, White Sox 5: Adrian Beltre had the tiebreaking RBI single soon after his long errorless streak ended, giving the Rangers their second win in less than 24 hours against the team with the American League's best record.

Beltre had a throwing error in the top of the sixth to end his streak of 44 games without an error.



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Blues rout Stars in Game 7

Associated Press

DALLAS — The captain and the kid are going to the Western Conference finals with the St. Louis Blues.

St. Louis did more than survive Game 7 this time. The Blues routed the top-seeded Dallas Stars 6-1 on Wednesday night to advance to their first Western Conference finals since 2001.

Robby Fabbri, their 20-year-old rookie center, became the youngest player in NHL history to score three points in a Game 7, with a goal and two assists, and captain David Backes added a goal and an assist.

"The way we feel here, we know we've got a good team and we know every time we're challenged we've kind of risen up to it," Paul Stastny said.

Blues linemates Fabbri, Stastny and Troy Brouwer each had a goal and two assists.

"Nice short plays, and we buried our opportunities," Brouwer said. "We talked before the game that we wanted to be the difference in this game tonight, and I feel like we made a good impact."

The Blues, in the playoffs for the 40th time and still in search of their first Stanley Cup, will have home-ice advantage in the Western Conference finals against Nashville or San Jose — and for the Stanley Cup as well if they advance. The Predators and Sharks were to play their deciding Game 7 on Thursday night.

Patrik Berglund and Vladimir Tarasenko also had goals to help the Blues win for the third time on the road. Tarasenko's seventh goal of the playoffs was an empty-netter with 4:40 left.

Patrick Eaves had the lone goal for Dallas, which matched its most lopsided playoff loss. The Stars also lost 6-1 in Game 3 of the series.

"A huge disappointment. We had good energy, but it's a tough way to end. It's not our team," coach Lindy Ruff said. "Even when we started pushing, we missed too many good opportunities to get back in it. But it's not the ending you want, it's a big disappointment."

It was the fourth straight game in the series, and fifth overall, won by the visiting team, and a lopsided finish to a second-round series matching the Western Conference's top two teams in the regular season.

Coach Ken Hitchcock's Blues were only two points behind Dallas in the regular-season standings for the top seed.

St. Louis also went seven games to win its first-round series this postseason, beating the defending Stanley Cup champion Chicago Blackhawks 3-2 on Brouwer's winning goal in the Game 7 clincher at home.

In this Game 7, the Blues were in firm control after the first period, even after having a goal taken off the board because of a replay challenge by Dallas.

Brian Elliott was back in goal for the

Blues and had 31 saves. He had been pulled late in the first period of Game 6 after giving up three goals on seven shots — and Dallas held on to win 3-2 to set up its first Game 7 at home since 2000, and first in the American Airlines Center.

"I know in this dressing room there was no question who we were going to turn to, and he's our guy," Brouwer said. "He was phenomenal for us, and we're going to have to ride a couple more times throughout the course of these playoffs. But he's a guy that we could rely on."

The Blues were ahead to stay when Fabbri scored on a power play 5:23 into the game with a backhand after Kari Lehtonen was unable to control a loose puck in front.

Tarasenko took a shot from in front of the left circle that somehow got behind Lehtonen and into the net with about 2 minutes left in the first period that appeared to make it 2-0. But replay showed that Tarasenko was just offside before the puck got in the zone, and officials wiped out the goal. St. Louis responded with two goals in the final 1:38 of the period. Stastny scored first and then Berglund on a shot from just inside the blue line with only 3.4 seconds left before the intermission.

"The offside call gave us some life and we had a few opportunities to score," Stars left wing Patrick Sharp said. "The late one in the first was a tough one. It's all tough."

Spieth returns from rest

Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — Four weeks away from golf, Jordan Spieth feels like he is starting a brand new season.

It's everyone else who is looking behind.

The Players Championship is Spieth's first tournament since he lost a five-shot lead on the back nine at the Masters, most of that on the par-3 12th where he put two shots into the water and made a quadruple-bogey 7.

He received text messages from people who didn't even have his phone number, reaching out to remind him that sports can be cruel and it happens to the best. He analyzed what went wrong with coach Cameron McCormick, not just on the 12th hole at Augusta National but all week with his swing. He spent a week in the Bahamas with three players who are close friends. There were commercial shoots with corporate sponsors, time in the gym, a practice round at Oakmont and then work on the range.

When he sat down Wednesday for his press conference, 10 of the 15 questions were about the Masters.

"I think people have moved on already — at least I thought so until I came in here today," Spieth said with a smile.

Perhaps it will take another tournament to move on from the Masters, and this one should get his attention. The Players Championship is the strongest and deepest field of the year, with the richest purse (\$10.5 million) in golf on a TPC Sawgrass course that historically favors no one.

"One of the tougher tracks of the year," Spieth said. "I enjoy that."

Then again, anything is more enjoyable than his last three hours at Augusta National, right up until the time that Spieth — as defending Masters champion — had to slip the green jacket on Danny Willett.

He attributes his collapse to one bad swing at the wrong time, that he had been missing his shots short and right most of the final round, and paid dearly for that on the 12th hole. That part he can fix, along with a swing that he says has not been the same since late last summer.

In his month away from golf, what has irritated him nearly as much as his own mistakes was the narrative from Augusta, that he lost the Masters more than Willett won.

"It really bugs me when people are trying to take that away from him or shoot it down, and the questions have been asked to him, 'Do you think this will go down as you winning or him losing? And that's absolute bull,'" Spieth said. "Because he won, and he earned it."

If Spieth is having to deal with Masters hangover, so is Willett.

Asked what he has done in the last month because of the green jacket in his possession, the 28-year-old from England smiled and said, "Drunk more."

Willett had played one round of golf in four weeks since his Masters victory, and he was hopeful to work out some kinks in the two days of practice leading up to Thursday's opening round.

Spieth starts a busy summer stretch in which he plays the next four weeks, followed by a one-week break before the U.S. Open. He has two more majors, the Olympics, a World Golf Championship and the FedEx Cup playoffs on his very full plate.

If the Masters stung that badly, he could have added another tournament just to get back onto a golf course.

Warriors finish off Blazers in 5 games

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Stephen Curry stopped just before leaving his postgame press conference with one final, important thought.

A much-deserved acknowledgment of fellow Splash Brother Klay Thompson for all of his tireless work on both ends of the court to get Golden State back to the Western Conference finals, much of it with Curry sidelined nursing a knee injury.

"Oh, wait, I've got to say one thing, though: Klay was in here earlier. That dude had the best series I think I've ever seen him play on both ends of the floor," Curry said of Thompson's scoring and defense against Damian Lillard. "Defending Dame, exhausting all his energy to make it uncomfortable for him, and what he was able to do offensively, hopefully that doesn't get lost in our series and the way we played as a team. ... Shout out to him for elevating his game on both ends of the floor. I had to say that. Thank you."

The newly minted MVP and the rest of the Warriors sure have a different post-season swagger this year.

They've done this before. They plan to win another championship, and said that from the very start after capturing the franchise's first title in 40 years last June.

They're one step closer.

"They're an amazing team. They've had an amazing season," Portland coach Terry Stotts said.

Curry, Thompson and their teammates weren't even at their best — or healthiest, for that matter — in eliminating the Trail Blazers 125-121 on Wednesday night in five games, and now they will wait on their opponent once more — preparing to face either Oklahoma City or San Antonio in the Western Conference finals.

Once again, Golden State delighted its raucous home crowd at Oracle Arena, where yellow confetti fell immediately

after the final buzzer.

"It does feel different, but I expected it to," Coach of the Year Steve Kerr said. "Last year was the first time through for us, first time obviously getting to the Finals and winning a championship, and when you do that I think there's a deeper level of confidence that emerges and a better understanding of what it feels like when you lose and what it feels like when people are questioning you and critiquing you and things aren't going your way."

Back in the starting lineup for the first time all series, Curry scored 29 points and sealed it with a three with 24.9 seconds left a day after becoming the first unanimous MVP in NBA history, while Thompson scored 33 points with seven three-pointers.

"It wasn't perfect, but we got it done," Kerr said.

The Warriors got past Portland without Curry for the first three games as he recovered from a sprained right knee.

"It wasn't an individual thing when Steph went out," Thompson said. "We did it collectively and that's what you've got to do to make up for that. You saw tonight how many times he bailed us out and we obviously missed, yet so many guys stepped up and that will pay dividends for the rest of the playoffs."

Golden State can use a little break before the next round.

Curry insists his knee will be fine, Draymond Green's left ankle is tender and center Andrew Bogut was lost for the second half with a strained muscle in his right leg.

Raptors 99, Heat 91: DeMar DeRozan matched a playoff high with 34 points, Kyle Lowry had 25 and host Toronto beat Miami to take a 3-2 lead in their Eastern Conference semifinal series.

Bismack Biyombo had 10 points for the Raptors, who can clinch their first conference finals berth with a win in Game 6 in Miami on Friday.

It was DeRozan's franchise-best 13th

20-point game in the playoffs and his sixth this postseason.

Dwyane Wade scored 20 for Miami, Goran Dragic and Josh Richardson each had 13 and Joe Johnson 11.

Toronto led by 20 in the first half and by 13 to start the fourth quarter before its lead shrunk to 88-87 when Wade made a pair of free throws with 1:54 left. DeRozan made a pair of free throws and, after a Miami turnover, Lowry made a long three-pointer to put Toronto up 93-87 with 52 seconds left.

DeRozan sealed it by going 4-for-4 on his free throws in the final 21 seconds.

DeRozan jammed his sore right thumb while fouling Miami's Tyler Johnson with 8:19 remaining in the fourth. He headed to the locker room for treatment but returned four minutes later.

Lowry and DeRozan, who combined for 19 total points in Toronto's overtime loss in Game 4, scored 19 between them in the first quarter as the Raptors raced out to a 28-18 lead. Wade was the only Miami starter to make a field goal in the first as the Heat had more fouls (eight) than made baskets (six).

Biyombo had eight points in the second, electrifying the crowd by sandwiching a pair of dunks around a huge block on Wade. Toronto led 55-35 with 3:39 left but Dragic scored eight points as the Heat used a 10-0 run to cut the deficit to 55-45 at halftime.

Miami's Luol Deng left midway through the third with a sore left wrist and did not return. The Heat said X-rays were inconclusive. Deng scored four points and missed all eight of his field goal attempts.

Shortly after, Toronto's DeMarre Carroll injured his left wrist after being called for a charge, ending his night. Carroll went down in pain after the play before getting up and walking to the locker room while cradling his wrist. The Raptors said X-rays were negative.