

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Saturday, May 11, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## More deployments amid 'credible' threat

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will deploy a Patriot missile battery and an amphibious transport dock warship to the Middle East as part of the Defense Department's operations aimed at deterring increasing Iranian aggression, defense officials said Friday.

Acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan ordered the new deployments Friday, just days after he approved the expedited deployment of an aircraft carrier strike group and a task force of B-52 bombers into the Middle East, the Pentagon said. The deployment announced Friday was part of the same request for forces from U.S. Central Command as the previously announced deployments, the Pentagon said.

"The United States does not

seek conflict with Iran, but we are postured and ready to defend U.S. forces and interests in the region," the statement read.

A senior military official said Friday that the United States had not seen any increase in the threat level against U.S. forces in the region in recent days since the announcement of the initial deployment, but threat levels remained elevated. The threat is to U.S. troops deployed in Iraq and Syria — primarily emanating from Iranian-controlled Shia militias — and on the seas in the Persian Gulf region, where U.S. officials have observed Iranian-controlled vessels transporting military hardware including missiles, according to the official.

The senior official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the matter,

described the threats as "real and credible" but declined to provide additional details, saying they are classified.

Last year, the Pentagon removed Patriot batteries from the region when it pulled four of its batteries out of the Middle East to focus primarily on potential threats from Russia or China. Defense officials declined to say where that battery would be deployed or when it would arrive in the region, citing operational security concerns.

Patriot missile systems are defensive, surface-to-air missile launchers designed to shoot down short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft.

The amphibious transport dock, the USS Arlington, will replace the smaller, older USS Fort McHenry landing dock

ship that is now deployed in the Middle East with the Kearsarge Amphibious Readiness Group, the official said.

The Arlington, which is in the U.S. European Command area of operations, provides military officials with better command and control and more defensive options than the Fort McHenry, the military official said.

The USS Arlington will deploy with an unspecified number of Marines aboard, the official said. It also carries Marine helicopters, amphibious vehicles and conventional landing craft that could be used in an amphibious assault.

The Arlington had been tasked to support upcoming training with international partner nations in the Baltics, and the Fort McHenry will replace it for those operations, the official said.

## Shanahan: We want DHS to be able to stand alone

*Associated Press*

MCALLEN, Texas — On a trip to a border city in Texas, acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan said Saturday he intends to accelerate planning to secure the border and bolster the government's ability to accomplish that without the Pentagon's continuous help.

He also offered assurances to perhaps two dozen Border Patrol agents and other officials at the McAllen Border Patrol Station that the Pentagon would not withdraw its military support prematurely.

"We're not going to leave until the border is secure," he said, adding, "This isn't about identifying a problem. It's about fixing a problem more quickly."

Shanahan told Congress last week that there are 4,364 troops on the border, including active duty and National Guard. They are erecting barriers, providing logistics and transportation services and other activities in support of Customs and Border Protection. The troops are prohibited from performing law enforcement duties. Servicemembers have been deployed on the border since last October and are committed to being there through September.

While flying to Texas, he dismissed any suggestion that active-duty forces will extend their mission for the long haul. "It will not be indefinite," he told reporters traveling with him. Shanahan also said he has instructed a two-star Army general, Ricky Waddell, to de-

velop a plan soon that will answer this question: "How do we get more badges back to the border?" — a reference to ensuring the Department of Homeland Security is fully capable of securing the border, its core mission.

Shortfalls in personnel and other resources have prompted DHS to periodically ask for the military's help on the U.S.-Mexico border, without a plan for how to fix the underlying resource problems.

"What we want is for DHS to be effective and stand alone," Shanahan said, with the Pentagon always available to help in an emergency, as it has in the past.

DHS on Friday submitted another request for Pentagon assistance, defense officials

said Saturday. That request, which has not previously been disclosed, is for shelter for detained migrants and would include tents to be set up but not secured by an undetermined number of military troops, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning.

Shanahan announced on Friday that he was transferring \$1.5 billion from numerous defense projects, including \$604 million originally intended for use in support of Afghan security forces, to a Pentagon counterdrug fund that will help finance construction of barriers on the U.S.-Mexico border. That is in addition to \$1 billion the Pentagon transferred for wall construction in March.

# Marine killed in crash at Calif. base identified

*The Orange County (Calif.) Register*

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — A Marine Corps platoon commander killed in a training accident on Thursday at this sea-side California base has been identified.

First Lt. Hugh C. McDowell, 24, of the District of Columbia, assigned to 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division, died from injuries sustained when his light armored vehicle rolled over at about 9 a.m. The accident occurred during routine training near the battalion's headquarters at Camp Pendleton's north end.

The area has a mix of hilly and flat terrain. The vehicle, which looks like a small tank on wheels, likely was traveling with others in a convoy when the incident occurred, officials said. Marine Corps officials are investigating the cause of the accident, said 1st Lt. Cameron Edinburgh.

McDowell was commissioned as an officer on May 5, 2017. His awards include the National Defense Service Medal and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

Six other Marines who also were injured in the accident were taken to Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla with injuries

that were not life-threatening, Edinburgh said. Several have been released from the hospital.

Last month, Staff Sgt. Joshua Braica, of the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, also was killed when his tactical vehicle, a Polaris MRZR, rolled over at Camp Pendleton. Two other Raiders were injured.

That accident occurred April 13 as the battalion was in the final weeks of pre-deployment training. Braica was taken to Scripps Memorial Hospital, where he died a day later. The accident remains under investigation.

## Trump offers tribute to military mothers

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump honored the nation's military mothers Friday, calling them "the backbone of America."

Trump told a group of moms gathered in the East Room of the White House for the third annual Celebration of Military Mothers that their "unwavering dedication and support strengthens our entire nation. Today, we honor you. We celebrate you. We salute you and everything that you do — so many things, so many great things — for our country."

He singled out mothers serving on active duty, telling them that they "have two of the most important jobs in the world: bravely defending America from our enemies and helping to raise the next generation of American patriots."

"You have spent Mother's Days on ships out at sea, on bases in faraway lands and staring down foreign threats in very, very dangerous areas. And you've done it all out of love for family, for country and for duty. Our nation is forever in your debt."

To military spouses, Trump said, "You help carry your families through frequent

moves and long deployments. You uplift your communities, care for your fellow military families and sustain our servicemembers through their most difficult battles.

And to mothers of those serving in the military, Trump said, "You have given our country a gift beyond measure. You raised your children to live by the sacred values of loyalty, bravery, patriotism and service."

Among those in attendance were first lady Melania Trump and Vice President Mike Pence and his wife, Karen, the parents of an active-duty Marine officer.

## Venezuela, Iran high on Pompeo's Russia agenda

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will head to Russia next week for talks with President Vladimir Putin amid heightened U.S.-Russia tensions over the crisis in Venezuela and the Trump administration's hardline policy on Iran, the State Department said Friday.

Pompeo's meeting with Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Tuesday in the Black Sea resort of Sochi will be the highest-level face-to-face talks between the former Cold War foes since the release of special counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election. Putin and President Donald Trump spoke at length by phone last week and Pompeo saw Lavrov earlier this week in Finland.

The trip will be Pompeo's first to Russia as secretary of state and as he prepared

for his weekend departure, administration critics, including congressional Democrats, noted that a statement highly critical of alleged Russian involvement in an attempted coup in Montenegro had been removed from the State Department's website.

The statement, which was released on Thursday, said a Montenegrin court's conviction in absentia of two Russian intelligence officers for plotting to overthrow the Balkan country's government and prevent it from joining NATO was "a clear victory for the rule of law, laying bare Russia's brazen attempt to undermine the sovereignty of an independent European nation."

After Pompeo's office objected to the release, the statement was taken down from the website, according to officials, who stressed that it had not been formally recalled and still reflected U.S. government policy. Its removal, first reported by Foreign Policy, however, appeared to amuse

Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee who tweeted a screenshot of the statement, saying "Good news, @StateDept: we saved a copy."

The State Department said Pompeo and Putin and Lavrov would discuss "the full range of bilateral and multilateral challenges" facing the two countries. A senior department official said in addition to Venezuela and Iran, the talks would include arms control, stalled U.S. nuclear negotiations with North Korea, Syria, Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and Washington's concerns about Russian election interference efforts.

The official, who was not authorized to preview the trip publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said Pompeo did not necessarily expect the talks to produce any "overnight" breakthroughs and were instead "an opportunity to take the conversation to a higher level."

# House passes \$19B bill for disaster relief

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The House on Friday passed a \$19 billion disaster aid bill that would deliver long-sought relief to farmers, victims of hurricanes and floods, and rebuild southern military bases, as Democrats try to dislodge the legislation from a Senate logjam over aid to hurricane-slammed Puerto Rico.

The measure passed by a 257-150 vote over the opposition of most Republicans, who said it should also include the Trump administration's \$4.5 billion request for stepped up humanitarian aid and law enforcement

along the U.S.-Mexico border, which is facing a wave of migrants fleeing violence in Central America.

The House had passed an earlier \$14 billion version of the measure in January, but the legislation has been held up in the Senate amid a fight between President Donald Trump and Democrats over aid to Puerto Rico. Trump is feuding with Democratic officials on the island and falsely claims that Puerto Rico has already received \$91 billion in aid.

Trump took to Twitter on Thursday to urge Republicans to vote against the bill.

"House Republicans should

not vote for the BAD DEMOCRAT Disaster Supplemental Bill which hurts our States, Farmers & Border Security," Trump tweeted. "We want to do much better than this. All sides keep working and send a good BILL for immediate signing!"

After the vote, Trump tweeted in praise of GOP solidarity, although 34 Republicans broke with his position and supported the disaster aid. "Great Republican vote today on Disaster Relief Bill. We will now work out a bipartisan solution that gets relief for our great States and Farmers. Thank you to all. Get me a Bill that I can quickly sign!"

Some of the Republicans who broke with Trump were from areas hit by the disasters, like Texas and Florida, and others were more moderate Republicans from the Northeast.

"The bill languished for months in the Senate over assistance for Puerto Rico. And as it sat there, floods battered the Midwest and tornadoes swept the South," said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y. "This legislation attempts to meet the needs of all of America's disaster-stricken communities — whether in Puerto Rico or the Midwest, California or the Carolinas."

## Subpoenas issued by Dem for president's tax returns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A top House Democrat has issued subpoenas for six years of President Donald Trump's tax returns, giving Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig a deadline of next Friday to deliver them.

Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass., issued the subpoenas Friday, just days after Mnuchin refused to comply with demands to turn over Trump's returns. Mnuchin told the panel he wouldn't provide Trump's tax records because the panel's request "lacks a legitimate legislative purpose," as Supreme Court precedent requires.

Neal reminded the two Trump appointees in a Friday letter that federal law states that the IRS "shall furnish" the tax returns of any individual upon the request of the chairmen of Congress' tax-writing committees and that Ways and Means "has never been denied" a request.

The White House and the Democratic-controlled House are waging a multi-front battle over investigations into

Trump and the administration has been refusing to comply across the board, refusing to comply with subpoenas for the unredacted report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and documents related to the testimony by former White House Counsel Donald McGahn.

If Mnuchin and Rettig refuse to comply with the subpoenas, Neal is likely to file a lawsuit in federal court. He indicated earlier this week that he was leaning toward filing a court case immediately but changed course after meeting with lawyers for the House.

Neal originally demanded access to Trump's tax returns in early April. He maintains that the committee is looking into the effectiveness of IRS mandatory audits of tax returns of all sitting presidents, a way to justify his claim that the panel has a potential legislative purpose. Democrats are confident in their legal justification and say Trump is stalling in an attempt to punt the issue past the 2020 election.

Mnuchin stated that the Treasury Department is "not authorized to disclose the requested returns and return information."

## US judge strikes down 2018 Ky. abortion law

Associated Press

FRANKFORT, Ky. — A federal judge on Friday struck down a Kentucky abortion law that would halt a common second-trimester procedure to end pregnancies. The state's anti-abortion governor immediately vowed to appeal.

U.S. District Judge Joseph H. McKinley Jr. ruled that the 2018 law would create a "substantial obstacle" to a woman's right to an abortion, violating constitutionally protected privacy rights.

Kentucky's only abortion clinic challenged the law right after it was signed by Republican Gov. Matt Bevin. A consent order had suspended its enforcement pending the outcome of last year's trial, in which Bevin's legal team and American Civil Liberties Union attorneys argued the case.

The law takes aim at an abortion procedure known as "dilation and evacuation." The procedure was used in 537 of 3,312 abortions in Kentucky in 2016, according to state statistics.

McKinley wrote that standard D&E procedures account

for virtually all second-trimester abortions in Kentucky. The law would "unduly burden" women seeking the procedure, he said.

"If the act goes into effect, standard D&E abortions will no longer be performed in the Commonwealth due to ethical and legal concerns regarding compliance with the law," he wrote.

The result, the judge said, would be that women lose "the right to obtain a pre-viability abortion anywhere in the Commonwealth of Kentucky after 15 weeks."

ACLU attorney Alexa Kolbi-Molinas said the judge's ruling "affirms that health, not politics, will guide important medical decisions about pregnancy."

"Laws like this are part of an orchestrated national strategy by anti-abortion politicians to push abortion out of reach entirely," she said in a statement.

Bevin spokeswoman Elizabeth Goss Kuhn said the governor's legal team will appeal McKinley's decision to the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. She predicted the law "will ultimately be upheld."

# Missouri River poses new flood problems

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Missouri River is causing new problems in a flood-battered part of northwest Missouri where the river broke through levees in March.

The rain-swollen waterway has again inundated the tiny village of Big Lake in Holt County, where some of its approximately 160 residents were beginning to clean up after the last deluge.

Water levels haven't dropped enough to fix the failed earthen levees intended to protect the area, Holt County emergency management director Tom Bullock said Friday. That means even moderate rises in river levels can cause problems. He calls it "a continuous mess."

Several roads in the region are closed again, including portions of U.S. 159 and U.S. 59 in Missouri near the Missouri River.

In eastern Missouri, water levels are

falling along the Mississippi River after some levees were busted.

Northwestern Missouri's new troubles come just as some areas were showing signs of improvement. A stretch of the Kansas Turnpike near the Oklahoma border has reopened, as has the Iowa Highway 2 approach to a Missouri River bridge that links southwest Iowa to southeast Nebraska.

The Kansas Turnpike section near Wellington, which is about 30 miles south of Wichita, flooded Wednesday when up to 10 inches of rain fell across parts of the state in just 24 hours. Flooding also forced evacuations and school closures.

In Mississippi, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials said Friday that they were days away from closing a floodgate because of the renewed rise of the Mississippi River. Officials issued predictions that a flood inside a region walled off by levees will set a new record once the floodgate is closed.

That lingering flood, which has been going on since February, makes it unlikely that farmers will plant any summer crops on hundreds of thousands of acres in the south end of Mississippi's Delta region. It has renewed calls for a once-promised system of pumps to drain the region that were vetoed because of predicted environmental harms to wetlands inside the basin, known as the Yazoo backwater.

Officials opened a floodgate at Steele Bayou north of Vicksburg on April 1 after six weeks of closure. Water fell for a time but began to rise again because of heavy rainfall. Now a rising Mississippi River means the gate will have to be closed again to prevent even worse flooding inside the backwater, even as heavy rains move down inland rivers toward their only outlet at Steele Bayou.

The Corps now predicts a crest higher than the peak earlier this year. That was the worst flooding since 1973.

## Cuba rations food amid grave economic crisis

Associated Press

HAVANA — The Cuban government announced Friday that it is launching widespread rationing of chicken, eggs, rice, beans, soap and other basic products in the face of a grave economic crisis.

Commerce Minister Betsy Diaz Velazquez told the state-run Cuban News Agency that various forms of rationing would be employed in order to deal with shortages of staple foods. She blamed the hardening of the U.S. trade embargo by the Trump administration.

Economists give equal or greater blame to a plunge in aid from Venezuela, where the collapse of the state-run oil company has led to a nearly two-thirds cut in shipments of subsidized fuel that Cuba used for power and to earn hard currency on the open market.

"We're calling for calm," Diaz said, adding that Cubans should feel reassured that at least cooking oil would be in ample supply. "It's not a product that will be absent from the market in any way."

Cuba imports roughly two-thirds of its food at an annual cost of more than \$2 billion and brief shortages of individual products have been common for years.

In recent months, a growing number of products have started to go missing for days or weeks at a time, and long lines have sprung up within minutes of the appearance of scarce products like chicken or flour.

Many shoppers find themselves still standing in line when the products run out, a problem the government has been blaming on "hoarders."

"The country's going through a tough moment. This is the right response. Without this, there'll be hoarders. I just got out of work and I was able to buy hot dogs," said Lazara Garcia, 56, a tobacco-factory worker.

At the Havana shopping center where Garcia bought her hot dogs, cashiers received orders Friday morning to limit powdered milk to four packets per person, sausages to four packs per person and peas to five packets per person.

## Branson's dream of space tourism in 'home stretch'

Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. — Billionaire Richard Branson is moving Virgin Galactic's winged passenger rocket and more than 100 employees from California to a remote commercial launch and landing facility in southern New Mexico, bringing his space-tourism dream a step closer to reality.

Branson said Friday at a news conference that Virgin Galactic's development and testing program has advanced enough to make the move to the custom-tailored hangar and runway at the taxpayer-financed Spaceport America facility near the town of Truth or Consequences.

Virgin Galactic CEO George Whitesides said a small number of flight tests are pending. He declined to set a specific deadline for the first commercial flight.

An interior cabin for the company's space rocket is being tested, and pilots and engineers are among the employees relocating from California to New Mexico. The move to New Mexico puts the company

in the "home stretch," Whitesides said.

The manufacturing of the space vehicles by a sister enterprise, The Spaceship Company, will remain based in the community of Mojave, Calif.

Taxpayers invested over \$200 million in Spaceport America after Branson and then-Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat, pitched the plan for the facility, with Virgin Galactic as the anchor tenant.

Virgin Galactic's spaceship development has taken far longer than expected and had a major setback when the company's first experimental craft broke apart during a 2014 test flight, killing the co-pilot.

Branson thanked New Mexico politicians and residents for their patience over the past decade. He said he believes space tourism — once aloft — is likely to bring about profound change.

"Our future success as a species rests on the planetary perspective," Branson said, "the perspective that we know comes sharply into focus when that planet is viewed from the black sky of space."

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Fired officer allegedly charged for freedom

**NC** DURHAM — A North Carolina probation officer was fired over allegations that he had offenders on house arrest pay for additional time outside, saying they had to “pay to play.”

The Charlotte Observer reported a state Department of Public Safety dismissal letter said Thomas Darnell Aker was fired in January.

The letter said one offender told authorities Aker had him pay for extra time out of the house to work and see his family last summer. It said an investigation found that the offender initially thought the money was going toward court fines and fees.

## More than 100 dogs seized from a home

**OH** TROY — An Ohio sheriff’s office said authorities seized more than 100 dogs from a home that is now condemned and two teens in the home have been moved to a different residence.

The Miami County Sheriff’s Office said deputies and personnel from the county’s animal shelter and health department executed a search warrant Monday at the Concord Township home. Authorities said they were investigating allegations of animal cruelty and child endangering due to unsanitary conditions.

Sheriff Dave Duchak said 125 dogs, including many puppies, were seized. Two dogs were found dead.

## Naked man accused of assaulting a baby

**NJ** ATLANTIC CITY — Atlantic City police said a naked man was under the

influence of narcotics when he assaulted a baby in a stroller.

Police said they found Stephon Whitfield naked, yelling and bleeding while beating on the front door of an apartment building. Police said he had approached a woman pushing her 9-month-old child in a stroller and attacked the child.

The baby was treated at a hospital for what police said were nonlife-threatening injuries.

Whitfield, 28, was taken to the hospital for evaluation.

## 11 ducks rescued after falling through sewer

**PA** ALLENTOWN — Nearly a dozen lucky ducks were rescued by eastern Pennsylvania firefighters after falling through a sewer grate and out of sight of their distressed mother.

Emergency workers were called to a street in Catasauqua, an Allentown suburb. A neighbor had witnessed 11 of 12 baby ducks drop into the drain as they attempted to hop onto the curb.

The (Allentown) Morning Call reported that it took firefighters about 45 minutes to release the grate. All 11 ducklings were waiting patiently in the corner of the sewer as firefighter Samuel Safadi rescued each by hand.

## Man charged with DUI, stealing a fire engine

**MS** MERIDIAN — A Mississippi man was arrested after authorities said he stole a fire engine, drove it around town and damaged it by hitting a utility pole.

The Meridian Star reported Tommy Lee Hill, 20, of Meridian, was charged with burglary, motor vehicle theft, driving without a license and driving under the influence.

Lauderdale County Sheriff’s Department Chief Deputy Ward Calhoun said Hill was arrested after a concerned citizen found him passed out behind the damaged fire engine.

## Woman who sent poison pleads guilty to escape

**CT** BRIDGEPORT — Prosecutors said a Connecticut woman who was imprisoned for mailing cookies laced with rat poison to Supreme Court justices and others has pleaded guilty to escaping from federal custody.

Barbara March, 73, signed out of a halfway house in Washington, D.C., where she was completing her sentence in April 2018 and did not return as scheduled.

In October 2006 she was sentenced to 15 years in prison for sending the poisoned baked goods to judges, FBI officials and military leaders.

Prosecutors said March pleaded guilty to escaping from federal custody in federal court in Bridgeport.

## Cops: Woman bit deputy, swallowed crack cocaine

**NC** TARBORO — Authorities filed charges against a North Carolina woman who they said bit a deputy while swallowing crack cocaine.

WNCN-TV in Raleigh reported the Edgecombe County Sheriff’s Office said a state trooper was chasing a woman who was on the way to the county jail to pick up her husband after his release.

Deputies said Rebecca Carter was placed in the trooper’s car, then was seen putting a small plastic bag containing crack cocaine in her mouth. According to the sheriff’s office, when a deputy squeezed

her cheeks to prevent her from swallowing it, she bit his thumb and drew blood.

## Red-legged frogs thrive after a long absence

**CA** YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK — Red-legged frogs made famous by Mark Twain are thriving in Yosemite Valley after a decades-long absence.

Officials said they have documented the first breeding by the frogs in Yosemite since 2017 when adult red-legged frogs were first reintroduced after a 50-year absence.

Yosemite National Park Superintendent Mike Reynolds said ecologists found clusters of eggs in meadows and ponds this spring when it normally takes years to see such results.

The frog disappeared from Yosemite in part because non-native, predatory bullfrogs first introduced to a reflection pond spread throughout the valley and, over time, gobbled them up.

## Jeep driver with kids inside rams a Honda

**SC** NEWBERRY — Authorities said a South Carolina woman used her Jeep to ram into her husband’s vehicle even though she had children riding with her.

The State reported Heather Nicole Collins, 25, of Newberry, was charged with domestic violence of a high and aggravated nature, assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature, malicious injury to property and two counts of child neglect.

An arrest warrant said Collins’ two children were passengers in the Jeep Patriot she used Friday to repeatedly ram a Honda Civic driven by her husband.

From wire reports

# STARS AND STRIPES

On a mission to provide credible reporting and daily news to America’s military, wherever they serve.

Mobile apps available: [www.stripes.com/apps](http://www.stripes.com/apps).

# Warriors win Game 6, finish Rockets

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The Golden State Warriors still have plenty of work to do if they hope to win their third straight championship.

But after fending off the Houston Rockets on Friday night without leading playoff scorer Kevin Durant to advance to the Western Conference finals, they did take a moment to celebrate the accomplishment.

"It shows you how much respect we have for Houston," coach Steve Kerr said. "We just finished the conference semifinals series. We're only halfway home to where we want to be. And yet the celebration in there felt like a much bigger occasion and that's because of the challenge that this team put before us."

Stephen Curry scored all of his 33 points in the second half to lead the Warriors to a 118-113 win.

Klay Thompson added 27 points to help two-time defending champion Golden State reach the conference finals for a franchise-record fifth straight year and eliminate Houston for

the fourth time in five seasons. The Warriors did it with Durant sidelined by a calf injury sustained in the second half of their Game 5 victory.

"We're all very happy, but now we've got to get home and get some rest and prepare for the next round," Kerr said.

There won't be a lot of time to recuperate with the conference finals starting on Tuesday night in Oakland against the winner of the Denver-Portland series. Kerr said he'd give his team the weekend off after most of his key players logged heavy minutes in this series in which each game was decided by six points or fewer.

Though this team has had plenty of big victories as it won the NBA title in three of the last four seasons, Kerr and many of his players acknowledged that this win was pretty special.

"It's one of the most satisfying victories we've had during this run," Kerr said.

Draymond Green said that downing the Rockets again also meant a bit more since Houston has said since losing to the Warriors in last year's conference finals that its main focus

was beating them this season.

"This one feels good ... just because it was a team that said for years: 'We're built to beat them,'" Green said. "Then Kevin goes down and no one gives us a chance. You take all those things into account, this one feels amazing. If I said otherwise, I'd be sitting here lying to you."

Curry struggled early, failing to score in the first half for the first time in 102 career playoff games, and had just 10 points through three periods. But he got going in the fourth, scoring 23 points.

There were questions entering the game about how the Warriors would weather the loss of Durant — and his more than 34 points a game. But they didn't seem to miss a beat, getting 21 from Thompson in the first half before Curry closed it in the fourth.

The team said on Thursday that Durant would be re-evaluated next week and Kerr said after the game that it was too early to know if he could return at some point in the next series.

Though the Warriors were

able to get past the Rockets behind big nights from Curry and Thompson, they know that their chances for defending the title are much better with Durant on the floor.

"I'm happy we won so we can get some rest and get him healthy," Thompson said. "Because if we want to get this three-peat, we desperately need him back. He's our best player, so we dearly miss him. We'll hold it down while he's out but it's not the same."

Curry finished out the series strong, but faced criticism for most of it as he struggled with his shot. He discussed the "noise" surrounding him lately and how he never let it get to him.

"I know what I'm capable of and it's bigger than me," he said. "I don't get caught up in that. I don't need any extra motivation. I don't need to hear who I am as a player. I know that. My confidence never wavers."

"A night like tonight doesn't happen without belief in myself."

James Harden led Houston with 35 points, and Chris Paul added 27.

## Auto racing roundup

# Chastain earns first victory in NASCAR Truck Series

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Ross Chastain raced to his first NASCAR Trucks victory Friday night after leader Stewart Friesen ran out of gas with three laps to go at Kansas Speedway.

"This is what sports is all about — comebacks, man," Chastain said after leading just five laps.

Friesen took the first two stages for the first time this season, but a costly mistake of leaving the pit box early with 42 laps to go left him without enough gas. He held the lead after a restart with 16 laps to go and led a race-high 87 laps on the 1½-mile oval, but ended

up 15th.

"We just can't close it," said Friesen, who was seeking his first Trucks win after five runner-up finishes. "I didn't know we were taking four (tires). I thought for sure we were taking two. Just a lot of silence on the radio. That's it."

The winner of a NASCAR Xfinity Series race last year in Las Vegas, Chastain topped Ben Rhodes by 0.483 seconds.

Todd Gilliland was third, followed by Austin Hill and Brandon Jones and two-time Kansas winner Matt Crafton. Johnny Sauter, coming off a victory at Dover, was forced to the garage after his 20th lap because of mechanical woes.

**Formula One:** Valtteri Bottas is poised to become a major threat to teammate and defending Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton after clocking a scorching lap at the Spanish Grand Prix to win his third consecutive pole position on Saturday.

Bottas smashed Hamilton's track record at the Barcelona-Catalunya Circuit in qualifying, rocketing through the 2½-mile track in 1 minute, 15.406 to better Hamilton's mark from 2018.

More importantly for Bottas' hopes in Sunday's race in Montmelo, Spain, was the gap of more than half a second he established over the best effort

from Hamilton.

Bottas, who failed to win a race last season, leads Hamilton by one point in the standings after they have alternated places in their run of one-two finishes.

"I really enjoyed that adrenaline rush from those laps," Bottas said. "It started well, this season. Just the way I hoped for. I am feeling better and better in the car."

With Hamilton second on the grid, Mercedes is in great position to extend its record start after the pair swept the top two spots at the first four races.

"Valtteri did a fantastic job. He has been quick all weekend," said Hamilton.

# Yanks gain ground on Rays in AL East

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — In a season full of strange twists so far, the New York Yankees turned a couple of odd hops into their latest victory.

Domingo German became the majors' first seven-game winner, Gio Urshela got a key hit set up by a pair of bizarre bounces and the Yankees beat the Tampa Bay Rays 4-3 on Friday night.

The injury-filled Yankees pulled within a half-game of the AL East-leading Rays in the first of 19 meetings between the teams this season. New York has won 15 of 20 while often relying on its non-All-Stars — the team currently has a dozen players on the injured list, including Aaron Judge, Giancarlo Stanton and Luis Severino.

"They're focused everyday but also playing the game with some joy and having fun doing it," Yankees manager Aaron

Boone said. "It's a close-knit group that's playing an unselfish brand of baseball."

German (7-1) was matched up against Tyler Glasnow (6-1), who left in the sixth inning with right forearm tightness.

"I don't really know what's going on right now," said Glasnow, who will have an MRI Saturday. "I'm just going to be optimistic. It wasn't a pop or anything crazy. I just felt tightness for a couple pitches."

Glasnow struck out nine in 5 1/3 innings. He signaled for a trainer after striking out Gleyber Torres and was pulled.

German allowed three runs and five hits over five innings. Aroldis Chapman, the fourth Yankees reliever, worked the ninth for his ninth save.

Home runs by Austin Meadows and Ji-Man Choi gave the Rays a 3-2 lead entering the sixth.

Gary Sanchez opened the Yankees sixth with an infield

single on a popup that struck the highest of four overhanging catwalks — approximately 185 feet high — and fell in the infield as Tampa Bay players scrambled to catch the carom. The park's ground rules say such balls are in play.

"Fortunately deflected far enough that we got a break there," Boone said.

It's the fifth fair ball to hit the "A" ring at Tropicana Field — which opened in 1998 — and second that resulted in a hit.

Clint Frazier followed with a single and Torres fanned, finishing Glasnow. Emilio Pagan relieved and Miguel Andujar hit a grounder that took a crooked hop off the mound and went for an infield single that loaded the bases. Urshela then delivered a two-run single for a 4-3 lead.

"Probably our MVP at this point," Yankees reliever Adam Ottavino said.

On Thursday night, Urshela entered in the seventh for de-

fense and hit a two-run single in the eighth of a 3-1 victory over Seattle.

The Rays loaded the bases on two walks and a bunt single in the seventh. But Ottavino escaped by striking out Tommy Pham and getting Choi to hit a grounder off the pitcher's leg that second baseman DJ LeMahieu fielded, raced to second for an out and threw to first to complete a nifty double play.

"I was fired up," Ottavino said. "It was a grind of an inning."

Meadows, reinstated from the 10-day injured list after missing 15 games with a strained right thumb, hit a two-run homer and Choi added a solo shot two batters later off German as the Rays went up in the fifth. German had allowed just two homers overall in six previous starts.

New York took a 2-0 lead in the first when LeMahieu scored on rookie Nick Ciuffo's passed ball and Torres' RBI single.

## MLB roundup

# Verlander dominant as Astros shut out Rangers

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Justin Verlander continued his strong start to the season with arguably his best start of the year.

Verlander pitched one-hit ball for seven dominant innings, right fielder Josh Reddick made another leaping catch and the Houston Astros beat the Texas Rangers 3-0 on Friday night.

The only hit off Verlander (6-1) was a single by Asdrubal Cabrera to lead off the fifth.

Jake Marisnick homered in the third, and Yuli Gurriel and Robinson Chirinos hit back-to-back solo home runs with two outs in the seventh.

Verlander struck out eight, walked two and hit a batter.

**Red Sox 14, Mariners 1:** Mitch Moreland hit a three-run home run, Rafael Devers and

Andrew Benintendi each added a solo homer, and host Boston moved above .500 for the first time this season with a win over Seattle.

**Mets 11, Marlins 2:** Amed Rosario hit a grand slam during an eight-run outburst that marked his team's biggest first inning in three decades, and New York routed visiting Miami.

**Twins 6, Tigers 0:** Jake Odorizzi stretched his scoreless streak to 20 innings with seven frames of one-hit ball, Max Kepler and Mitch Garver homered, and host Minnesota beat Detroit.

**Blue Jays 4, White Sox 3:** Randal Grichuk hit a three-run homer, Teoscar Hernandez added a solo shot and Toronto snapped a season-worst five-game skid with a win over visiting Chicago.

**Pirates 2, Cardinals 1:** Adam Frazier opened the game with a homer, Starling Marte drove in the game-winner and Trevor Williams allowed one run in seven solid innings as Pittsburgh defeated host St. Louis.

**Rockies 12, Padres 2:** German Marquez pitched effectively into the sixth inning and had a three-run double in Colorado's seven-run fourth inning in a victory over visiting San Diego.

**Angels 8, Orioles 3:** Mike Trout homered and drove in three runs, Andrelton Simmons had two RBIs and scored twice, and Los Angeles beat host Baltimore.

**Royals 5, Phillies 1:** Alex Gordon homered twice to drive in three runs, and Kansas City beat visiting Philadelphia.

**Braves 2, Diamondbacks 1:** Ronald Acuna Jr. hit a tiebreak-

ing homer in the eighth inning, and Atlanta overcame Zack Greinke's strong start to beat host Arizona.

**Dodgers 5, Nationals 0:** Joc Pederson hit two home runs, Kenta Maeda pitched one-hit ball over six innings and Los Angeles cruised past visiting Washington.

**Reds 7, Giants 0:** Luis Castillo struck out a season-high 11 in six innings, Nick Senzel hit a two-run triple and Cincinnati beat host San Francisco.

**Athletics 4, Indians 3:** Matt Chapman homered against Brad Hand leading off the 12th inning to lift Oakland over visiting Cleveland.

**Brewers 7, Cubs 0:** Gio Gonzalez pitched two-hit ball into the sixth inning and Ryan Braun homered, helping visiting Milwaukee beat Chicago for its seventh straight victory.

# Bettman's vision coming true in playoffs

Associated Press

NEW YORK — There's a P-word on players' and coaches lips this playoffs, and it has nothing to do with getting pucks in deep.

"Parity in the league, it's insanely tight," Colorado coach Jared Bednar said.

This has been the postseason of parity with all four division champions gone, including the top seeds in each conference. This is the world Commissioner Gary Bettman envisioned when the NHL instituted a salary cap in 2005 after a yearlong lockout.

Bettman prefers to call it "competitive balance," and it's the thing he trumpets the most about the state of the league where almost anyone can contend for the Stanley Cup in a given season.

If there's ever a time to showcase competitive balance, it's now, with top-shelf hockey almost every night, even if many big markets are gone.

"Everything starts with the game, what takes place on the ice," Bettman told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "You can't market and promote around a product that is

inferior.

"When the game is good, authentic, entertaining, then you can market it and promote it and reach out to new people. Frankly it comes down to story lines, to player performance and that is as important, if not more so, than what cities are being represented."

There's not a lot of national buzz if a team from Raleigh, N.C., makes it to the third round of the playoffs. But when the Cinderella Hurricanes face the Boston Bruins, it should be a continuation of one of the wackiest, wildest postseasons in recent history.

Carolina in the conference final would've been difficult to imagine in the late 1990s, when big-market teams spent like crazy and could tilt the ice against those from smaller markets. It's referred to now as the "Dead Puck Era" because scoring was repressed, and Bettman remembers the conversations he'd have with coaches of some of those lower-revenue clubs back then.

"I said, 'What's your strategy going into a game?' And they would say, 'We clutch, we grab, we hook and hold — we neutralize skill for 50 minutes

and then we try and steal the game,'" Bettman recalled.

"And that's why the game looked the way it did, and many people weren't happy with it and many teams knew at the start of the season, (and) fans knew, they couldn't compete."

The hard salary cap that started at \$39 million and has reached \$79.5 million still has its flaws, particularly the consequence of squeezing out the middle class of players with a bigger portion going to highly paid stars and more reliance on youth because of fixed entry-level contracts.

From a collective bargaining standpoint, it has also created problems for players paying varying escrow rates to even out the revenue split with owners, and that's an issue that will fill up plenty of time in meeting rooms in the coming months.

Inside arenas this spring is the positive side of parity. The Hurricanes ended the league's longest playoff drought after a decade, the Blue Jackets won their first series in franchise history and the Avalanche and Stars were able to go punch-for-punch with the best in the West.

"It's just a testament to how

close our clubs are competitively," Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said. "I don't think that's a problem with the system. I think that's a unique aspect to the system. I think it's worked well. I don't think you'll see it every year. But you won't be surprised when it happens again."

Bettman said nothing in sports is better than the first round of the NHL's playoffs, and NBC Sports reported the highest first-round ratings in the network's history. If more big markets go out, that picture could change and interest could wane, but Bettman believes it all evens out over time.

"Will ratings vary from year to year? Yes. And that is one of the results of this type of system. Some would say one of the consequences," Bettman said.

"Obviously, if you take two big-market teams and they're in the Stanley Cup Final, your ratings are likelier to be higher than if you have two small markets. And over time that can change, and the NFL's a good example of that. The Super Bowl it doesn't matter who's playing."

## Bruins' 'Little Ball of Hate' trying to stay out of trouble

Associated Press

BOSTON — There's a dust-up in the corner, the referee raises his arm to signal a penalty, and Brad Marchand is right in the middle of it.

Only this time, he's trying to keep the peace.

The face-licking, stick-stomping Bruins forward moved quickly to pull rookie Connor Clifton away before he could retaliate for an illegal hit by Carolina's Jordan Staal. Instead of matching minors, Boston wound up with a power play that led to the tying goal, and the Bruins went on to beat the Hurricanes 5-2 in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals.

"He's turning over a new leaf, eh?" Bruins coach Bruce

Cassidy said with a smile after the Bruins moved three wins from returning to the Stanley Cup Final for the first time since 2013.

A 5-foot-9 gadfly nicknamed "The Little Ball of Hate," Marchand is a two-time All-Star who helped Boston lift the Cup as a rookie in 2011 and scored 100 points this season for the first time. He leads all players with 15 points this postseason.

But his antics have angered other teams and sometimes overshadowed his skills.

During last year's postseason, he developed a tendency to lick opponents' faces; the NHL told him to knock it off. This year, even Cassidy has praised

him for the maturity that has kept that behavior to a minimum; Marchand was caught stomping on Blue Jackets' forward Cam Atkinson's stick before a faceoff.

Later in the series, he sucker-punched Columbus' Scott Harrington from behind. More important for the Bruins, after going scoreless in the first three games of the East semifinals, Marchand had a goal and three assists over the next two to help them rally from a 2-1 deficit and win the series in six.

"Listen, he's been in these big games," Cassidy said. "He's a Stanley Cup champion. So he understands maybe a little more than meets the eye sometimes."

Perhaps nobody understands better than Marchand what was going through Clifton's mind when he saw Staal hit Wagner from behind in the conference finals opener on Thursday night. Clifton gave Staal a cross-check and grabbed him around the back of the head.

But, before things could go any further, Marchand was pulling him away.

"When someone gets hit like that, you stand up for him," Marchand told WEEI.com.

As for playing peacemaker, Marchand said: "You know, it's not often I'm in that position. But, obviously, it was an important power play and we scored on it, so he did a great job of getting in there but staying disciplined."