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N. Korea raises stakes on exercises tiff

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The United States might adjust military exercises in South Korea for the sake of diplomacy with the North, the defense secretary said, as the communist state warned that it's running out of patience for the U.S. to soften its denuclearization demands.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper made his comments to reporters traveling with him to Seoul, where he is due to hold alliance talks with senior South Korean officials on Friday.

Washington already has canceled or reduced the scope of several annual exercises after President Donald Trump announced he was "stopping the war games" after his first summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un last year.

But the North considers all

allied military activity on the divided peninsula a rehearsal for an invasion and was not appeased when training continued.

The allies have said they plan to hold a joint air force exercise next month to replace the drills previously known as Vigilant Ace.

"We will adjust our exercise posture either more or less depending on what diplomacy may require," Esper said, while stressing the need to maintain readiness.

Any decision on "dialing up or dialing down exercises and training stuff like that" would be made in close collaboration with the South Koreans, Esper said, according to a transcript provided by the Pentagon.

Esper also insisted the decision would not be "a concession to North Korea or anything, but again, as a means to keep the

door open to diplomacy."

North Korea responded by raising the stakes on Thursday with separate statements in quick succession rebuffing what it said was a U.S. offer to hold talks next month and calling on Esper to cancel upcoming drills.

Former nuclear negotiator Kim Yong Chol noted that Esper's comments came after another North Korean official warned the country would retaliate against the drills in a statement on the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

"I would like to understand it as the U.S. intention to drop out of the joint military drill or complete stop it," Kim said of Esper's comment.

Kim Yong Chol, the chairman of the Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, said he hoped Esper's remarks reflected Trump's intentions to

maintain momentum in the U.S.-North Korean nuclear negotiations.

"However, if this ends up with our naive interpretation and the hostile provocation is committed ... we will be compelled to answer with shocking punishment that would be difficult for the U.S. to cope with," he said.

The response to Esper appeared on KCNA shortly after another North Korean official said that the U.S. special envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun had sent a request via a third party to hold negotiations next month.

Kim Myong Gil, a roving ambassador with the North Korean Foreign Ministry, said the North is ready to meet with the Americans "at any place and any time" but only if the United States is willing to change its negotiating stance.

Key takeaways from start of impeachment hearings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The start of public impeachment hearings unfolding in Congress marks the first time the American public can watch and listen to the witnesses whose testimony is at the center of the Democrats' investigation.

In several hours of testimony, punctuated by occasional bickering among lawmakers, some memorable moments have emerged. Hearings like this one can be scripted affairs. But on Wednesday, there was one early surprise. William Taylor, the top diplomat in Ukraine, revealed for the first time that his staff members overheard the president speaking on the phone to another diplomat about investigations.

Taylor said some of his staff

members were at a restaurant with Gordon Sondland, ambassador to the European Union, on the day after the July 25 call between President Donald Trump and Ukraine's newly elected president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Sondland used his cellphone to call Trump from the restaurant, and the staff members could hear Trump on the phone asking about "the investigations." Taylor took that to mean investigations into former Vice President Joe Biden and his son and the Burisma Group, the Ukrainian firm that had hired Hunter Biden as a director in 2014, he told lawmakers.

Sondland told the president the Ukrainians were ready to move forward, and after the call one of Taylor's staffers asked Sondland what Trump thought about Ukraine, he said.

"Ambassador Sondland responded that President Trump cares more about the investigations of Biden, which [his lawyer, Rudy] Giuliani was pressing for," Taylor said in his opening statement.

"I take it the import of that is that he cares more about that than he does about Ukraine?" House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff asked Taylor.

"Yes, sir," he responded.

Taylor said he learned about the call Nov. 8 and didn't know about it when he appeared for a closed-door deposition with House investigators.

The impeachment inquiry in many respects is about controlling the narrative. On Wednesday, Democrats seemed to begin to pivot, framing the actions of Trump as possible "bribery"

and "extortion" rather than emphasizing a "quid pro quo."

Schiff introduced the notion of bribery into the debate when he criticized acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney for saying that people concerned about Trump's requests that Ukraine do political investigations should "get over it," and that there is political influence in all foreign policy.

Schiff asked in his opening statement: "If we find that the President of the United States abused his power ... or if he sought to condition, coerce, extort or bribe an ally into conducting investigations to aid his reelection campaign and did so by withholding official acts — a White House meeting or hundreds of millions of dollars of needed military aid — must we simply 'get over it?'"

Ex-Army employee admits taking bribes

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — A former Army employee pleaded guilty Tuesday to taking bribes while serving as director of the range at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, the third person to plead guilty in the ongoing corruption investigation.

Victor Garo, of Mililani, Hawaii, pleaded guilty in District of Hawaii federal court to conspiracy to accept over \$100,000 in bribes, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a statement Wednesday.

Garo, 67, also pleaded guilty to one count of illegally transporting firearms across state lines.

In his plea agreement, Garo admitted that while employed as training range director at the Army's Schofield Barracks from 2011 through 2018 he accepted bribes in the form of cash, automobiles and firearms from an employee of a federal

contractor.

As the most senior Defense Department employee on the range, Garo supervised employees and used his position to benefit the contractor in securing Army contracts, according to court documents.

That contractor employee, John Winslett, 65, of Bristol, R.I., pleaded guilty in September to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and another count of conspiracy to accept kickbacks in connection with a U.S. government contract, the Justice Department said in a statement at the time of the plea.

Winslett paid more than \$100,000 in bribes to Garo and Franklin Raby, a former range operations manager at Schofield Barracks.

Raby, of Greeneville, Tenn., pleaded guilty in May in a federal court in Tennessee to accepting bribes and disclosing sensitive Army procurement information.

Airman's actions offer a window on bigger issue

BY MARCUS KLOECKNER
AND JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — An airman might have been trying to do the right thing last weekend by sleeping off a night of drinking instead of driving home.

But the car, in which the 25-year-old punched out the window before climbing in and passing out, doesn't belong to him, according to German police, who woke up the airman after several tries and handed him over to American military police.

The incident is just one of a number of recent cases of young U.S. service members in Germany getting in trouble after drinking too much. The issue, which has caught the attention of U.S. military leaders in Kaiserslautern, may lead to a change in the way American military police and German law enforcement officers conduct joint patrols in areas such as downtown Kaiserslautern or Landstuhl, which are popu-

lar with American service members.

German police in Landstuhl found the sleeping airman in a Ford Mondeo with a broken window early Saturday morning after the car's owner called the police to report, "There is a stranger in my car," Landstuhl police said in a statement.

The incident, which is under investigation, happened days after a meeting, aimed at reducing the number of drinking-related incidents involving U.S. service members, last month between U.S. military officials and local bar owners. Col. Jason Edwards, U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz commander, called the meeting after going on a late-night foot patrol in Kaiserslautern with military police.

"There's a need for us to address the conduct of our military members downtown. We don't want our people causing problems," Edwards told the meeting, according to a statement released by Army Installation Management Command-Europe.

DOD to expand commissary access to vets, caregivers

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will expand access to discounted, on-post stores for some 4.1 million veterans and some of their caregivers at the beginning of 2020, the Defense Department announced Wednesday.

The expansion, which begins Jan. 1, will grant veterans with a documented service-related disability, Purple Heart recipients, former prisoners of war and certain Department of Veterans Affairs-approved designated veteran caregivers access to commissaries, military exchanges, and some morale, welfare and recreation services on bases within the

United States, the Pentagon announced. The expansion of access was required in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act named for the late Sen. John McCain.

"These new privileges recognize the service and sacrifice of these veterans and those that care for them," A.T. Johnston, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy, said in a prepared statement.

For years, eligibility to shop at on-base commissaries and exchanges in the United States has been largely limited to active-duty troops, members of the National Guard and reserves, and military retirees and their family members.

In 2017, the Pentagon opened online versions of military exchanges to some 20 million honorably discharged veterans.

Sens. John Boozman, R-Ark., and Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, spearheaded efforts in recent years to open the services to more veterans, especially ones injured in combat or held prisoner.

"If you have the Purple Heart, you should also have access to the commissary. It's as simple as that," Schatz said last year.

The senators also touted their plan as an opportunity to strengthen the commissary systems, which have suffered in recent years amid fewer shoppers.

Defense Department officials said Wednesday that the expansion of access, however, is not designed to "boost retail store profits," but only to honor the individuals who lawmakers have deemed worthy of receiving the benefits.

Veterans newly eligible to shop at commissaries and exchanges must possess a VA-issued Veteran Health Identification Card in order to be granted access to installations and prove their eligibility, according to a DOD statement announcing the changes. Officials are still finalizing some details, primarily with regard to installation access for people now allowed on military bases by law, the department said Wednesday.

Shooting at Calif. high school

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — One person was killed and at least four others were injured in a shooting at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita early Thursday, authorities said.

The shooting was reported at the campus at 21900 Centurion Way about 7:40 a.m., prompting a massive law enforcement response. Paramedics swarmed the campus, treating the wounded while authorities combed through nearby neighborhoods searching for a 15-year-old boy suspected in the shooting.

After roughly an hour, authorities said that the suspect, who is believed to be a student at the school, had been apprehended. The teen, who was not immediately identified, is being treated at a hospital in

unknown condition, said Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva.

Four people from the school were transported to Henry Mayo Hospital for treatment. One patient, a female, died at the hospital. Two male patients are in critical condition and one male is in good condition, according to Patrick Moody, a spokesman for the hospital. Their specific injuries and ages were not immediately provided.

The scene at the high school was chaotic with teenagers walking in a line behind armed law enforcement officials with their arms raised in the air immediately after the shooting.

Some students remained locked in classrooms for more than an hour as authorities searched for the assailant. Eventually, they were led off

the campus by deputies. Some were in tears. As they walked, one student asked aloud a question on the minds of many others across the state: "What kind of a world is this?"

Denzel Abesamis, a senior at Saugus, was driving to school and about to turn onto campus when he saw classmates running out and turned around. He called a friend who he knew was on campus. She told him there was a shooter and she was hiding in a classroom with five other students.

Michael Harrison, 26, said he first became aware of the shooting when his younger sister, a 17-year-old senior, texted him: "there is a shooter, call 911."

"I can't even describe it, man," Harrison said with a panicked laugh. "Imagine getting that text."

New program aims to fight gun violence in the US

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Attorney General William Barr announced a new initiative Wednesday that would better enforce the U.S. gun background check system, coordinate state and federal gun cases and ensure prosecutors quickly update databases to show when a defendant can't possess a firearm because of mental health issues.

The push, known as Project Guardian, was unveiled at a news conference in Memphis, Tenn., alongside officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

As part of the program, U.S. prosecutors will coordinate with state and local law enforcement officials to consider potential federal charges when a suspect is arrested for weapons possession, is believed to have used a gun to commit a violent crime or drug-trafficking offense or is suspected of being a violent gang member.

"Gun crime remains a pervasive problem in too many communities across America," Barr said in a statement.

The program "will strengthen our efforts to reduce gun violence by allowing the federal government and our state and local partners to better target offenders who use guns in crimes and those who try to buy guns illegally," Barr said.

During the news conference, Barr said discussions about any new legislation tied to the project have been sidetracked due to the impeachment process on Capitol Hill. He said Congress has been asked for more resources, including more ATF agents and U.S. marshals.

The initiative requires agents in charge of ATF offices across the country to either create new guidelines or review the protocols already in place to bring federal charges against people who lie in order to obtain a gun from a firearms dealer.

Trump voices optimism after meeting with Turkish President Recep Erdogan

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump expressed optimism that the United States and Turkey are on their way to resolving the many differences between them but provided few details at a news conference with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after a day of White House meetings.

Trump said a tentative ceasefire is holding in northeastern Syria and thanked Erdogan for "his cooperation." He said the two leaders "made tremendous progress" toward more than quadrupling bilateral trade — to \$100 billion — and "hopefully will be able to resolve" a conflict over Turkey's purchase of a sophisticated Russian missile defense system.

Calling Turkey a "great NATO ally and a strategic partner of the United States around the world," Trump described their talks as "wonderful and productive."

He said he was paying no at-

tention to House hearings in the impeachment inquiry over Ukraine that was taking place at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

"I hear it's a joke," he said. "I haven't watched for one minute, because I've been with the president, which is much more important as far as I'm concerned."

The most immediate tensions surrounding Erdogan's visit came with Turkey's military offensive against Kurdish fighters in neighboring Syria, begun last month after Trump announced he would withdraw U.S. troops from the area.

Trump rebuffed lawmakers who had called on him to cancel the invitation, saying Erdogan has lived up to an Oct. 17 agreement negotiated with Vice President Mike Pence to limit Turkey's incursion into Syria and allow it to create a long-coveted buffer zone at least 20 miles deep inside Syria.

Widespread reports of war crimes committed by Turkey-

controlled Syrian militias that are part of the invasion force are being investigated by the Pentagon. At the same time, Turkey's military operations have displaced an estimated 100,000 people from their homes in northern Syria, according to the United Nations.

Erdogan shared Trump's assessment of their talks as productive, but he also took the news conference as an opportunity to list outstanding grievances. Chief among them is the U.S. failure to extradite Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, a permanent U.S. resident, who Erdogan's government claims masterminded a 2016 coup attempt.

So far, the Justice Department has deemed evidence Turkey has submitted for Gulen's extradition to be insufficient.

At the news conference, Trump said, "the U.S.-Turkey alliance can be a powerful alliance for security and stability, not only in the Middle East but beyond."

Israel-Islamic Jihad truce holds amid rocket fire

Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — A cease-fire between Israel and Gaza's Islamic Jihad militant group appeared to be holding Thursday despite an earlier barrage of rocket fire that briefly disrupted a truce to end two days of intense fighting that killed at least 34 Palestinians, including three women and eight children, and paralyzed parts of Israel.

Before the truce was announced, a pre-dawn Israeli airstrike killed eight members of the same family in Gaza. Among them were five children, the youngest being 7 years old.

It was the deadliest single attack since a bruising 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, the larger militant group that rules Gaza. Islamic Jihad claimed no link to the family and the Israeli military offered no details on the strike.

Israel had hailed the Gaza operation as a victory, defending its policy of targeting militants in their homes despite civilian deaths, and vowed to continue the tactic. Islamic Jihad said it had succeeded in getting Israel to agree to a cease-fire based on several demands, including a halt to Israeli targeted killings of the group's leaders.

Islamic Jihad spokesman Musab al-Berim said the Egyptian-brokered deal went into

effect at 5:30 a.m. An Israeli military spokesman tweeted that the Gaza operation "is over." Some restrictions were lifted on residents of southern Israel, and traffic returned to the streets of the Palestinian coastal territory.

But after hours of calm, a barrage of five rockets blasted out of the territory, setting off air raid sirens in southern Israel and testing the fragile truce. No group claimed responsibility for the new wave of rockets, but Israel did not immediately respond, an indication the cease-fire deal was intact.

The fighting first erupted early Tuesday after Israel

killed a senior commander of the Iran-backed militant group who was said to be behind a string of rocket attacks and who Israel said was believed to be planning a cross-border infiltration.

The rare targeted killing by Israel sparked the heaviest fighting with Gaza militants since May. Islamic Jihad fired some 450 rockets toward Israel, while Israel responded with scores of airstrikes.

However, Gaza's ruling Hamas stayed out of the latest escalation — an indication it would be brief.

Israel typically does not publicly acknowledge deals with militant groups.

Hong Kong police condemn protests, deny curfew

Associated Press

HONG KONG — Hong Kong police warned protesters on Thursday that they were moving "one step closer to terrorism" by sinking the city into chaos as riot squads skirmished with militant students at major universities.

Police spokesman Tse Chun-chung denied his department had been asked to enforce a possible curfew this weekend. A Chinese state media outlet later removed its tweet saying authorities were considering a weekend curfew that cited unidentified sources.

"We are aware of the relevant report circulating online," Tse said at a daily briefing, referring to the report as "false." He

said the authority to order a curfew lies with Hong Kong's leader, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, and "that's why police are not in a position to comment."

"The force is certainly capable and determined to control Hong Kong's social unrest at the moment. We welcome any new measures that can help us to achieve the goal of restoring the public safety and order in Hong Kong," Tse added.

In unusually harsh language, he said students were turning university campuses into "weapons factories" and a "hotbed of crime."

"Their acts are another step closer to terrorism," Tse said, warning of a major disaster if gasoline bombs stored on campuses were to catch fire.

He said violence that broke out this week at Chinese University of Hong Kong is spreading to other campuses "like a cancer cell," mentioning specifically Hong Kong University and Baptist University.

"It's time to wake up. No society can tolerate this much senseless violence," he said.

With no end to the protests in sight, the beleaguered police force is appointing a group of prison guards as special constables.

Up to 100 officers from the Correctional Services Department who are already familiar with anti-riot equipment will be given additional training and deployed mainly to guard government premises.

Iranian hard-liner calls for end to 2015 nuclear deal

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — A prominent member of Iran's powerful Guardian Council has told The Associated Press that the Islamic Republic should stop honoring all terms of the collapsing 2015 nuclear deal with world powers amid tensions with the United States.

The comments by Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei show an increasing willingness among Iran's hard-liners to use the country's atomic program to pressure Western powers.

Nonproliferation experts are already concerned that steps Tehran has taken

over the past months away from the accord narrow the estimated year it would need to build a nuclear bomb if it chose to pursue one.

Yet Iran still allows United Nations inspectors to monitor its nuclear sites and hasn't pushed its enrichment anywhere near weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Completely abandoning the deal as Kadkhodaei suggests could lead to an immediate confrontation. Israel, which has bombed Iraq and Syria in the past to stop their atomic programs, repeatedly has warned it won't allow Iran to build a nuclear weapon.

"I think those who disrupted the game should be punished since they damaged other parties' interests," Kadkhodaei said in an interview with the AP in Tehran on Saturday.

Kadkhodaei serves on the 12-member Guardian Council, a panel of six clerics appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and six jurists nominated by Iran's hard-line judiciary approved by its parliament. The Guardian Council approves all parliamentary and presidential candidates and must agree to all legislation passed by parliament before it becomes law.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cows cast away by hurricane found alive

NC CAPE LOOKOUT — A trio of castaway cows was discovered on North Carolina's Outer Banks, where they apparently washed up after swimming for miles to escape Hurricane Dorian's storm surge.

Cape Lookout National Seashore officials think the stranded cows swam up to 5 miles during the September storm before being found near Cape Lookout this month. The cows belong to a herd that roams freely on Cedar Island, across the sound.

Seashore spokesman B.G. Horvat told McClatchy news group the cows are grazing peacefully after a harrowing feat of survival, but they need to go home. He thinks they'll have to be sedated for the boat trip.

Researchers tag 50 sharks off Cape Cod

MA BARNSTABLE — Researchers fitted 50 great white sharks found in Cape Cod waters this season with tracking and data-logging devices to study how the species kills seals, in order to benefit public safety.

State shark researcher Gregory Skomal told the Cape Cod Times the primary focus is where and how white sharks kill seals, which will be used to determine when and where sharks are more likely to be present.

Principal indicted on child porn charges

KY WINCHESTER — A Kentucky principal who once made headlines for trying to ban books with what

he deemed inappropriate content was indicted on child pornography charges.

News outlets reported that a grand jury charged Phillip Todd Wilson, 54, principal of the Clark County Area Technology Center, with 17 child pornography possession and distribution charges.

WKYT-TV reported the education department no longer employs Wilson.

The Lexington Herald-Leader said that when Wilson was the principal of Montgomery County High School in 2009, he fought to ban books with what he labeled "homosexual" or otherwise inappropriate material, including sex, abuse and drugs.

Sheriff: Man threw nails into driveway

LA MONROE — A Louisiana man who had nails and screws thrown onto his driveway said it's not the first time the suspect accused of doing it tossed debris into a road.

The Monroe News Star reported that Prentice Lamar Tedeton Jr., 60, was booked at Ouachita Correctional Center on three counts of stalking and four counts of criminal mischief.

A neighbor told Ouachita Parish deputies it wasn't the first time he and Tedeton had argued. The neighbor accused Tedeton of putting hazardous debris into a road in 2018 and later showing up at his workplace to accuse him of stealing an air hose.

Police quell brawl at high school

CA LOS ANGELES — Dozens of police officers had to be called onto a Los Angeles high school cam-

pus after a fight between two female students turned into a bottle-throwing brawl involving scores of people.

KCBS-TV reported the brawl broke out after "bad blood" between the students at John C. Fremont High School erupted when they saw each other at lunch.

LA schools police Officer Rudy Perez said one officer was hit with a bottle but not seriously hurt.

Eight students were detained and later released to their parents.

Ex-lawmaker takes photo of 3-antler deer

MI MARQUETTE — A former state lawmaker said he took a picture of an unusual deer: a buck with three antlers in the Upper Peninsula.

Steve Lindberg posted the photo to his Facebook page where he regularly shares pictures from the outdoors.

A veterinarian, Steve Edwards said the deer is normal and healthy. Edwards, who said it's possible that something happened when the deer was an embryo, told the Detroit Free Press that the three-antler deer is probably a "one-in-a-million thing."

Police: Kittens thrown from moving car

FL PINELLAS PARK — Police in Florida said they responded to an unsettling call about someone throwing kittens out of a moving car.

Pinellas Park police spokeswoman Roxanne Pohl said officers found one kitten dead along a road Monday.

She said they don't have a description of the suspect or the vehicle. They're not sure how many kittens were thrown into the road.

Pohl said investigators want to talk to anyone who may have witnessed the incident.

Police: Child taken in running car found safe

TN MEMPHIS — Police in Tennessee said a suspect accused of stealing a running car with a child inside dropped the child off at a fire station unharmed.

The child's mother told investigators her car was stolen from a gas station where she briefly left it running with the child inside.

Police said the child was found safe after being dropped off by the suspect, who remained on the loose.

News outlets report the mother was cited for leaving her car running, and police alerted the Department of Child Services.

Substitute teacher fired over beating

TX KYLE — A substitute teacher was fired and charged with aggravated assault following the beating of a 15-year-old female high school student in an incident captured on video.

Tiffani Shadell Lankford was free on \$10,000 bond. Video of the incident in a foreign-language class at Lehman High School in Kyle went viral.

Paul Batrice, an attorney for the girl's family, said the students in the class were being loud and the situation escalated when the teacher cursed at them.

One video shows the teacher swinging several times at the student before stomping on her head.

From wire reports

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Verlander, deGrom win Cy Young Awards

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Justin Verlander has a second AL Cy Young Award—and a clear path paved toward Cooperstown.

Verlander beat out Houston Astros teammate Gerrit Cole in balloting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America revealed Wednesday night. Verlander got 17 first-place votes to 13 for Cole, who became a free agent after the season.

Mets ace Jacob deGrom won the NL prize for the second straight year. He received 29 of 30 first-place votes, becoming the 11th pitcher to win Cy Youngs in consecutive years. He and Verlander are the 20th and 21st players to win the award multiple times.

The 36-year-old Verlander won his first Cy Young in 2011 with Detroit, when he was also named MVP. Since then, he'd been a runner-up three times.

"The adversity I went through puts a new perspective on everything," he said. "I mean, still would've liked to have won a couple of them."

Verlander continued a marvelous second act to his career since a 2017 trade from Detroit to Houston. He led the majors

with 21 victories and padded his Hall of Fame résumé by getting his 3,000th strikeout in his final start of the regular season. He also reached 300 punchouts in a season for the first time.

Verlander no-hit Toronto on Sept. 1, becoming the sixth pitcher with three no-hitters in a career. He joined a group that includes Hall of Famers Nolan Ryan, Sandy Koufax, Bob Feller and Cy Young, along with 1880s pitcher Larry Corcoran.

Forget about slowing down—Verlander's goal this offseason is to add velocity to his top-end fastball. He's thinking about using weighted balls and other new-age throwing techniques.

"I will always try to push the boundaries of what I can do," Verlander said. "If my body says, 'Hold on, you can't do that anymore,' then I'll pull back."

The case between Verlander and Cole was tight. Cole had more strikeouts (326) and a lower ERA (2.50), but Verlander threw 10²/₃ more innings and won more games. They are the first set of teammates to finish 1-2 in AL voting—it's happened five times in the NL.

Verlander and Cole pitched Houston to the World Series,

where Cole continued to dominate while Verlander faltered. The right-hander lost twice to the champion Washington Nationals—a letdown not factored in voting that concluded before the postseason began.

He's hoping to take another run at a title—with Cole—next season.

"I know that Gerrit had a great time playing here and I know he would like to return, if possible," Verlander said. "But that is now on Gerrit and his family and people above me."

Tampa Bay Rays righty Charlie Morton finished third a year after leaving Houston in free agency.

DeGrom is in special company as a repeat NL winner, joining Koufax, Greg Maddux, Randy Johnson, Tim Lincecum, Clayton Kershaw and Max Scherzer.

"It was a dream to play this game and a dream to win one Cy Young," deGrom said. "To win back to back was a goal. It's hard to explain. You set these goals, but it almost doesn't feel real yet."

The 31-year-old led the NL with 255 strikeouts and posted a 2.43 ERA. His résumé was bolstered by his durability

—deGrom totaled 204 innings, compared to 182²/₃ for runner-up Hyun-Jin Ryu and 172¹/₃ for Scherzer, the Nationals ace who finished third.

A year after taking the award despite just 10 victories—fewest ever by a starting pitcher—deGrom earned 11 wins with a Mets team that's struggled to support him.

After signing a \$137.5 million, five-year deal to remain with New York shortly before opening day, deGrom wasn't so dominant early in the season. He got hit around in April and May, even allowing seven runs in an outing against the last-place Marlins.

The embarrassment in Miami was a wake-up call for the gritty deGrom. Following that loss, he went 8-3 with a 1.89 ERA over his final 23 starts. DeGrom wrapped up the season with 23 consecutive scoreless innings.

"I feel like I was trying to better what I did in 2018," he said, adding "I think that was something I struggled with to start this year, was kind of dwelling on what happened last year. Kind of not focusing on the task ahead as much as I probably should have."

Sign stealing charges latest to tarnish Astros' reputation

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Not too long ago, the Houston Astros were the feel-good story of baseball. Led by their diminutive Venezuelan dynamo and featuring smart play on the field and in the front office, they emerged from a morass of awful seasons that got them mocked as the 'Lastros and ascended to the top of the big league galaxy as World Series champions.

That picture of the sheer joy as the Astros celebrated their 2017 crown at Dodger Stadium sure looks different now.

Fresh off a bitter Game 7 loss in its bid for another title, and tarnished by an executive's clubhouse rant at female reporters and the failed attempt

to smear the journalist who wrote about the scene, the franchise is now embroiled in a new scandal: allegations with on-the-record comments from a former player the Astros turned to technology to devise a sign-stealing scheme during their greatest season.

Sign stealing may be as old as baseball. From a clandestine buzzer-and-spyglass system the New York Giants invented to overtake the Brooklyn Dodgers in their famed 1951 pennant race, to the Boston Red Sox being fined two years ago for a high-tech ploy using an Apple Watch to pilfer catcher's signals by the Yankees, cheating is engrained in the game's lore going back to the day of

spitballs.

Getting close to the line, or even crossing it, has long been a part of sports—witness the suspicions that have followed the New England Patriots during their dynasty.

But the Astros are under scrutiny for how they're said to have gotten around the rules. And it's just one of many ways the team has landed in the news for the wrong reasons in recent years.

The negative backlash includes sign-stealing clouds in the past and an episode this season when the team improperly barred a reporter from the clubhouse. It led, too, to some fans taking to social media this October to say they'd turned

against rooting for the Astros.

Major League Baseball is now investigating the Astros after The Athletic website reported the team stole signs during home games in 2017 by using a camera positioned in center field at Minute Maid Park. Tuesday's report quoted pitcher Mike Fiers, who played for the Astros that season, and three other unidentified people with the club.

The Astros won the World Series that year—two sources told The Athletic that Houston used the system into the playoffs while another source said the system ended before the postseason. Using cameras and technology to swipe signs is prohibited by MLB.

Buckeyes' Young to miss one more game

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio State star defensive end Chase Young will be held out of one more game as punishment for breaking NCAA rules by accepting a personal loan.

The penalty was announced by Ohio State in a statement Wednesday. The school had sought immediate reinstatement from the NCAA.

The situation worked out as well as it could have for the second-ranked Buckeyes. Young, a preseason All-American and the nation's leader in sacks, was held out of the 73-14 rout of Maryland last week and will miss Saturday's game against 50-point underdog Rutgers.

He'll return for showdowns with No. 9 Penn State and No. 14 Michigan to end the regular season.

Ohio State announced the day before its game with Maryland that Young would be held out amid concerns he violated NCAA rules by taking a loan last year from someone he describes as a "family friend" for living expenses. Young explained his "mistake" in a tweet and said the loan had been paid back.

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said the violation was reported to the university on Oct. 27, the day after the Buckeyes beat Wisconsin and Young's dynamic four-sack performance inserted him into the Heisman Trophy conversation.

Young was confronted with the report and cooperated with the university's investigation. Smith declined to comment on whether Chase knew at the time that borrowing the money was an NCAA violation.

Ohio State submitted its report on Tuesday. The university had asked for a single-game suspension but decided not to appeal the NCAA's ruling that Young sit out two games.

Wiseman withdraws lawsuit, will sit

Associated Press

Freshman James Wiseman has withdrawn his lawsuit against the NCAA and Memphis, and the university has declared him ineligible while officials work to resolve the case.

"The University supports the decision, as it believes it is in James' and the men's basketball team's best interests to resolve his eligibility issue expeditiously through the NCAA process," Memphis said in a statement released Thursday morning.

The freshman's attorneys announced on Twitter that Wiseman withdrew his lawsuit Thursday morning, saying the legal action was not helping the two sides reach a resolution.

"It has become clear to Mr. Wiseman that the lawsuit he filed last week has become an impediment to the University of Memphis in its efforts to reach

a fair and equitable resolution with the NCAA concerning his eligibility status. Therefore, Mr. Wiseman advised his legal team that he wished to withdraw his lawsuit," the law firm of Ballin, Ballin and Fishman wrote.

Memphis officials say they are immediately applying for Wiseman to be reinstated. Until then, Wiseman will be held out of games but can practice with the No. 13 Tigers (2-1).

"The NCAA is fully aware of the unique nature and challenges in this particular case, and the University is confident that the NCAA will render a fair and equitable decision consistent with its mission," officials said in the statement.

It was a dramatic turn of events in Wiseman's battle to regain his eligibility after the NCAA sidelined him for receiving impermissible benefits from Penny Hardaway, before

the former NBA star became Memphis' coach.

Wiseman had obtained a temporary restraining order and had played in Memphis' first three games, two after the order was granted Nov. 8. The 7-foot-1 center is Memphis' leading scorer, averaging 19.7 points and 10.7 rebounds.

NCAA spokeswoman Stacey Osburn declined to comment Thursday when contacted by The Associated Press about Wiseman's case. The NCAA made it clear hours after the temporary restraining order was granted that with Wiseman on the court that the association had told Memphis the freshman was "likely ineligible."

"The university chose to play him and ultimately is responsible for ensuring its student-athletes are eligible to play," the NCAA wrote on Twitter.

Top 25 roundup

Louisville rolls over Indiana St.

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Jordan Nwora scored 21 points, Dwayne Sutton added 14 and No. 4 Louisville shot 59% from the field to run past Indiana State 91-62 on Wednesday night.

The Cardinals (3-0) made 14 of their first 17 shots for a 16-point lead through 11 minutes on the way to a 47-26 advantage at the break. Nwora's 14 points, including a pair of threes, got Louisville going, and Sutton had 10 before the break.

Nwora, a junior forward, finished 5-for-10 shooting for his third consecutive game of 20 points or more.

Tyreke Key led the Sycamores (0-2) with 20 points, including four three-pointers.

No. 18 Ohio State 76, No. 10 Villanova 51: Duane Washington Jr. had 14 points and four other players scored in double figures as the host Buckeyes

started hot and ran over the Wildcats.

Washington opened the game with a pair of three-pointers to set the tone as Ohio State moved to 3-0 with a significant early season victory.

D.J. Carton and Luther Muhammad each had 11 points, and CJ Walker and Kaleb Wesson added 10 apiece.

Jermaine Samuels had 14 points and Cole Swider had 11 for Villanova (1-1).

No. 11 Texas Tech 103, Houston Baptist 74: At Midland, Texas, freshman Jahmi'us Ramsey scored 25 points on 10-for-13 shooting, TJ Holyfield had 21 points on 9 of 10 field goals and the Red Raiders beat the Huskies.

Texas Tech (3-0) had four players score in double figures while shooting 60% overall from the field (40-for-67).

Jalon Gates had 21 points with five three-pointers to lead

Houston Baptist (0-3), which jumped out to a 9-0 lead before the Red Raiders took over.

VCU 84, No. 23 LSU 82: Marcus Santos-Silva had 17 points and 11 rebounds and the host Rams turned 26 turnovers by the Tigers into 37 points.

VCU (3-0), whose contract with former coach Will Wade mandated he bring his new team to the Siegel Center in Richmond or have his school pay \$250,000, improved to 5-2 against ranked opponents on their home court.

LSU (1-1) had a chance after Santos-Silva made one of two free throws with 4.9 seconds left, but Tigers point guard Skylar Mays raced up court and lost control of the ball.

De'Riante Jenkins and Marcus Evans added 15 points each for the Rams.

Mays led the Tigers with 23 points, but also had seven turnovers.

NBA roundup

Harden powers Rockets past Clippers

Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden scored 47 points and the Houston Rockets outlasted the Clippers 102-93 in a wild game that saw Los Angeles coach Doc Rivers ejected in the fourth quarter Wednesday night.

Houston was up by two with about two minutes left when former Rocket Patrick Beverley fouled out. Harden made both free throws before grabbing a rebound on the other end and hitting a three to make it 95-88.

Beverley was given a technical foul during a timeout after

the play and Harden hit the two free throws.

Rivers was then given two technical fouls and ejected to the delight of son Austin Rivers, the Houston guard who laughed and signaled for the officials to T-up his father. Doc Rivers spent several more seconds screaming at the referees before slowly walking to the locker room.

Russell Westbrook added 17 points to help the Rockets win their fifth straight game. Kawhi Leonard led Los Angeles with 26 points, 12 rebounds and seven assists.

Lakers 120, Warriors 94:

LeBron James had 23 points and 12 assists in three quarters, Kyle Kuzma added 22 points starting for Anthony Davis, and host Los Angeles rolled past Golden State.

Davis sat out because of a sore right shoulder after playing the night before in a victory at Phoenix.

Celtics 140, Wizards 133:

Kemba Walker scored 25 points and Boston won its ninth straight, overcoming 44 points from Bradley Beal to beat visiting Washington.

Raptors 114, Trail Blazers 106: Pascal Siakam scored

36 points, Fred VanVleet had 30 and Toronto beat host Portland.

Timberwolves 129, Spurs 114:

Andrew Wiggins had 30 points on 12-for-23 shooting and Minnesota handed visiting San Antonio its third straight loss.

Magic 112, 76ers 97:

Nikola Vucevic had 25 points and 12 rebounds and host Orlando used a big fourth quarter to beat Philadelphia.

Grizzlies 119, Hornets 117:

Rookie Ja Morant scored on a driving left-handed layup with 0.7 seconds left to lift visiting Memphis.

NHL roundup

Capitals edge Flyers in shootout, extend points streak

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Washington Capitals have a calm confidence in the game's most tense moments.

T.J. Oshie and Evgeny Kuznetsov scored in a shootout to lift Washington over the Philadelphia Flyers 2-1 Wednesday night.

Brendan Leipsic had a goal in the first period and Braden Holtby made 30 saves for the Capitals, who extended their point streak to 13 games (11-0-2) and increased their NHL-best total to 32 points.

"The talk on our bench is, 'Who's going to get the next goal? Let's see who's going to do it,'" Washington coach Todd Reirden said. "No one slams doors. No one breaks sticks. We believe in our system."

Claude Giroux scored for the Flyers (10-5-3), who had won four straight. Philadelphia has earned at least one point in seven consecutive games (5-0-2).

Carter Hart made 35 saves in regulation and overtime, including several late highlight-

reel stops, but the 21-year-old netminder couldn't stop either Washington attempt in the shootout.

After Jakub Voracek missed high with a backhand, Oshie beat Hart through the legs. Giroux scored over Holtby's left shoulder to tie it, but Kuznetsov followed with a forehand high into the net and the Capitals celebrated when Sean Couturier couldn't convert in the third round for the Flyers.

"We're finding ways to gather points," Reirden said. "It felt like we deserved the two points."

Islanders 5, Maple Leafs 4:

Anthony Beauvillier scored twice, Derick Brassard had a goal and two assists, and streaking New York held off visiting Toronto.

Semyon Varlamov made 23 saves and the Islanders earned a point for the 13th straight game (12-0-1). Mathew Barzal had a goal and an assist.

Kasperii Kapanen, William Nylander, Justin Holl and John Tavares scored for the Maple Leafs in their third straight loss. Frederik Andersen had 25

saves in Toronto's second game since losing Mitchell Marner for at least four weeks due to a high ankle sprain.

Senators 4, Devils 2: Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored a hat trick, including the go-ahead goal with 2:01 to play, and Ottawa rallied in the third period to win at New Jersey.

Mark Borowiecki tied the game with 6:30 to go, and Pageau got the winner when he put the rebound of a shot off the post by Nick Paul into an open net. Pageau finished off his first regular-season hat trick with 26 seconds left on a shot into an empty net. He has eight goals in his last six games.

Craig Anderson made 21 saves for the Senators, including a breakaway stop on Taylor Hall midway through the third period with the Devils ahead 2-1.

Will Butcher and Wayne Simmonds scored for New Jersey, which returned from a five-game road trip. Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 21 shots.

Blackhawks 5, Golden Knights 3: Erik Gustafsson scored his first goal of the sea-

son, Corey Crawford made 39 saves and Chicago won at Las Vegas for the first time.

Patrick Kane, Calvin de Haan, Kirby Dach and Dylan Strome also scored for the Blackhawks. Crawford, who improved to 2-0-2 in his last four games, entered 0-3-0 versus the Golden Knights with a 5.38 goals-against average and .859 save percentage.

William Carrier, William Karlsson and Nate Schmidt scored for Vegas against a team they'd dominated since entering the NHL in 2017. Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 21 shots.

Stars 3, Flames 1: Joe Pavelski scored twice, including an empty-net goal, and resurgent Dallas won on the road.

Calgary native Justin Dowling's first NHL goal was the winner for the Stars, who are 8-1-1 after stumbling to a 1-7-1 start this season. Ben Bishop made 24 saves.

Sean Monahan scored for the Flames (10-8-3), who lost in regulation for just the second time at home (6-2-2). Cam Talbot turned aside 29 shots.