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Taliban battle Afghan forces in Kunduz

BY JOSH SMITH

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The battle for Kunduz is drawing U.S. forces back into the fight just 10 months after the NATO-led coalition formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan and stepped back into an advise-and-assist role.

For a second time since Kunduz fell to the Taliban this week, U.S. special operations troops exchanged fire Thursday with Taliban fighters, even as American warplanes blasted insurgent targets to support Afghan government forces battling to regain the city.

An unexpected government thrust early Thursday into the heart of the city quickly deteriorated into street-by-street fighting, with neighborhoods

changing hands repeatedly throughout the day. Late Thursday police and residents said fighting eased after sundown, and President Ashraf Ghani declared the city secure.

At the same time, acting Defense Minister Masoom Stanekzai acknowledged that “small guerilla forces” remain “in various neighborhoods” and it was unclear if Ghani’s declaration was premature.

“You can’t say who is winning in these areas; one moment the government advances and then the Taliban,” Aminullah Aideen, a member of the provincial council, said by telephone from the beleaguered city.

Since the end of the NATO combat mission last year, the remaining U.S. and other international forces have been in Afghanistan in a training-and-

advising role while retaining the right to defend themselves.

In the chaos of Kunduz, however, the lines between adviser and combatant have become blurred.

In the midst of Thursday’s fighting, American special operations forces accompanying Afghan soldiers came face-to-face with Taliban gunmen.

“U.S. Special Forces advisers, while advising and assisting elements of the Afghan Special Security Forces, encountered an insurgent threat in Kunduz city,” U.S. military spokesman Col. Brian Tribus said. “U.S. Special Forces returned fire in self-defense to eliminate the threat.”

Citing the right of defense, U.S. officials also said American aircraft conducted two more airstrikes Thursday af-

ternoon on the outskirts of the city to “eliminate threats to coalition and Afghan forces.” That brought the total number of U.S. airstrikes since the city fell to eight, including one Wednesday called by U.S. special operators who fought to prevent the Taliban from breaching defenses at Kunduz airport.

U.S. officials insist that U.S. actions in the Kunduz fighting do not signal any change in the current “assist-and-advise” mission and were within the rules of engagement set down as NATO combat operations drew to a close.

“Afghan Security Forces have full responsibility for their operations in Kunduz,” Tribus said.

US complains to Russia about airstrikes in Syria

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pentagon officials complained to the Russian military on Thursday that Russian airstrikes in Syria are targeting areas of the country where few, if any, Islamic State fighters are operating, a White House spokesman said.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest said Pentagon officials participated in an hourlong videoconference with Russian officials in an initial discussion of ways to avoid U.S. and Russian forces firing on each other in Syria.

Tensions between the U.S. and Russia are escalating over Russian airstrikes that apparently are serving to strengthen Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Earnest described Russia’s operations, which began Monday, as “indiscriminate mili-

tary operations against the Syrian opposition” that were dangerous for Russia. Elissa Slotkin, who represented the U.S. in Thursday’s Pentagon talks, said as much during the call with the Russians, according to Earnest. Slotkin is the acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs.

“She pointed out that the Russian military operations we’ve seen so far raise some concerns, because Russia is targeting areas where there are few if any [Islamic State] forces operating,” Earnest said.

Russia’s defense ministry said that during the past 24 hours, it had damaged or destroyed 12 targets in Syria belonging to the Islamic State militant group, including a command center and ammunition depots. A U.S. military

spokesman in Baghdad, Col. Steve Warren, said he had no indication that the Russians had hit Islamic State targets.

Lt. Gen. Robert Otto, the deputy chief of staff for intelligence and surveillance for the Air Force, said Thursday that even as the U.S. tries to make sure Russian airstrikes don’t conflict with ongoing coalition operations in Syria, he does not believe there will be any real intelligence-sharing with Moscow.

“I have a low level of trust in the Russians. It’s trust but verify,” he said. “It’s easy, then, to exchange factual data where you’re going to operate. I would not envision a relationship where I would share some of my intelligence with them.”

He said a key goal is to ensure that the aircraft don’t run into each other.

He added that the Russians have been dropping “dumb bombs” — munitions that are not precision-guided. The use of such indiscriminate targeting, he said, could kill innocent civilians, which could have the unintended consequence of creating more terrorists than they kill.

Warren said any agreements reached in the Pentagon talks would be reflected in the U.S.-led coalition’s air operations, which including daily strikes on Islamic State targets in both Syria and Iraq.

On Wednesday, Defense Secretary Ash Carter complained that Moscow did not use formal channels to give advance notice of its airstrikes to Washington, which has been conducting its own airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State for more than a year.

Branches conflicted on women in combat

The San Diego Union-Tribune

After three years of research and testing, both the Army and the Marine Corps are concerned about the likelihood of higher injury rates among women if they are allowed into direct combat jobs currently closed to them, according to congressional briefings Wednesday by the services.

The branches of the armed forces appear conflicted about how far the plan to phase out gender restrictions on employment should go. The last day of September was the deadline for the service secretaries to request an exemption if they wish to reserve any jobs for men.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter will make the final decision sometime before Jan. 1, after reviewing recommendations from the services and U.S. Special Operations Command, said Matthew Allen, a Defense Department spokesman.

Leaders of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and special operations spoke publicly of their support for the shift to standards, regardless of gender.

Navy Secretary Ray Mabus submitted his recommendations to Carter on behalf of the Navy and the Marine Corps, and he did not request any exemptions, a spokesman said Wednesday.

The Army and Air Force secretaries also submitted their recommendations but declined to say whether they asked to keep any positions closed to women.

The Marine Corps reportedly asked Mabus to keep some front-line units all-male. But Mabus was emphatic that gender restrictions had to go, since even the Navy SEALs are ready to accept women.

Gender restrictions have been lifted from more than 90,000 positions since 2013, the Government Accountability Office reported.

Reagan settles into new home

By TYLER HLAVAC

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan arrived Thursday at its new home at Yokosuka, taking over as the Navy's only forward-deployed carrier and the centerpiece of Pacific forces.

It replaces the USS George Washington, which arrived in 2008 and left in May for a major overhaul in the United States.

The Reagan's deployment is part of Washington's "Pacific pivot," reflecting the Obama administration's view of the region as its highest long-term priority.

"Just like a new car, we have the latest and greatest," said the carrier's commander, Capt. Chris Bolt. "We have GPS, we

have the back-up mirror so we can look behind us, and we have some tremendous command-and-control capabilities for the command staff to use.

"Those are modernization upgrades so that we can have staying power here in the 7th Fleet and not require any more upgrades for the whole time that we are here."

The deployment, along with the Navy's partnership with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, will ensure stability in the Pacific, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus said.

"Together we provide that most critical component of international security, the one that only maritime services can deliver ... presence around the globe, around the clock, ensuring stability, deterring adver-

saries and providing leaders with options in times of crisis," he said.

The Reagan is no stranger to Japan, having played a big role in Operation Tomodachi, the U.S. military's relief effort after Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami in 2011. The carrier was one of the first Navy ships in the area, where it served as a floating refueling station for Japanese and U.S. helicopters flying relief missions to the battered coast.

Approximately two-thirds of its crew was stationed in Yokosuka aboard the Washington. The carriers performed a crew swap in August in California. The Reagan left California on Aug. 3 and performed numerous drills and certifications at sea before heading to Yokosuka.

Official: 7 dead, 20 hurt in Ore. shooting

Associated Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — At least seven people were killed and 20 injured Thursday in a shooting at a southwestern Oregon community college, State Police Lt. Bill Fugate said.

The shooting happened at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, about 180 miles south of Portland. The local fire district advised people via

Twitter to stay away from the school. It later tweeted that there were "multiple casualties," but didn't elaborate.

Fugate told KATU-TV that seven to 10 people were dead and at least 20 others were injured. A photographer for the Roseburg News-Review newspaper said he saw people being loaded into multiple ambulances and taken to the local hospital.

Umpqua Community College has about 3,000 students. Its website was down Thursday, and a phone message left at the school wasn't immediately returned.

The Oregon State Police and Douglas County Sheriff's Office also didn't immediately return calls from The Associated Press seeking additional details.

Congress OKs bill to keep government open

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Just hours before a midnight deadline, a bitterly divided Congress approved a stopgap spending bill Wednesday to keep the federal government open — but with no assurance there won't be yet another shutdown showdown in December.

Democrats helped House Republican leaders pass the measure 277-151 — a lopsided vote shrouding deep disagree-

ments within the GOP — after the Senate approved it by a 78-20 tally earlier in the day. President Barack Obama signed the bill Wednesday evening, but not without White House carping.

"The American people deserve far better than last-minute, short-term legislating," spokesman Josh Earnest said.

Approval of such stopgap measures used to be routine, but debate this year exposed acrimonious divisions between pragmatic Republicans such as

House Speaker John Boehner and more junior lawmakers in the party's tea party wing who are less inclined to compromise. The tea partiers demanded the must-pass measure be used to punish Planned Parenthood, stripping it of federal money.

The legislation finances the government through Dec. 11, providing 10 weeks to negotiate a budget deal that would carry past the 2016 presidential election.

Playoff-bound Pirates built for long haul

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — There was really only one request on the fourth floor at PNC Park that first winter, the one eight years ago when the new Pittsburgh Pirates braintrust set about rebooting a franchise in the midst of an historic freefall.

Keep your door open.

The search for a common vision wasn't going to happen with people staring at doorknobs as they walked the halls. President Frank Coonely and general manager Neal Huntington wanted the staff they'd assembled to get creative. Walk around. Talk to each other. Exchange ideas. See what sticks with the understanding that most of it won't.

"We wanted the doors open to create cohesion, to get people united," said Kyle Stark, who was brought on as director of player development and is now assistant general manager.

It led to an endless stream of meetings, most of them informal. Somebody would walk into an office to start a conversation. Other staff members would stop by to say hello only to be drawn in, everyone focused on the formidable task of digging out of 15 years of rubble.

"It was ungodly hours," said Greg Smith, who was director of scouting at the time and is now assistant general manager. "There were marathon sessions of 'How do we go about this?'"

Kind of like this: the Pirates enter the penultimate weekend of the 2015 regular season assured of a third straight play-

off berth. They've done it with a mix of homegrown talent (perennial MVP candidate Andrew McCutchen and All-Star ace Gerrit Cole) and veterans who either left money on the table to return (A.J. Burnett) or stuck around after reviving their career (Francisco Liriano).

"Trust me, we don't forget where we were," said second baseman Neil Walker, who was on the team that had the worst record in the majors in 2010. "Losing 105 games is something you can't quite explain. It's not fun at all. Fortunately, those days are past us here."

Long past. The franchise that went 20 years between winning seasons is making (hash)Buctober an annual rite. The core of McCutchen, Cole and outfielders Starling Marte and Gregory Polanco is locked in through at least 2018. So are Huntington and manager Clint Hurdle, whose relentless optimism provided the perfect antidote to nearly two decades of angst.

It is every bit the vision the front office laid out in those early days: a baseball Renaissance built not by spending lavishly but smartly, investing shrewdly at places far away from the shores of the Allegheny River with the understanding there was no quick fix at the major-league level.

While the team remained reticent in terms of chasing high-dollar free agents, owner Bob Nutting opened his wallet and gave Huntington the means to aggressively pursue players through the amateur draft. The club overhauled its

training facility in Bradenton, Fla., and built a 46-acre complex in the Dominican Republic to serve as its Latin American headquarters while also making a substantial investment in analytics.

The same team that took pitcher Daniel Moskos over catcher Matt Wieters in 2007 — the final draft before Huntington's tenure — because of concerns about the ability to sign Wieters gave Cole an \$8 million bonus after making him the top overall pick in 2011. Pittsburgh grabbed high school outfielder Josh Bell a round later and awarded him an extra \$5 million to turn pro instead of play collegiately at Texas. Bell finished 2015 at Triple-A Indianapolis and is transitioning to first base, where he will likely play whenever he arrives in the big leagues.

Pittsburgh restructured its scouting department, with 24 canvassing for amateur prospects and 10 more doing the same at the professional level. Huntington has a handful of special assistants that fulfill a variety of roles and there's been a decided uptick in the international search for talent, a move that included signing Korean infielder Jung Ho Kang last winter. All the 28-year-old rookie did in 2015 was hit .285 with 15 homers before his season ended with a broken leg on Sept. 17.

Kang's injury gave the full-time starting shortstop job back to Jordy Mercer, a 2008 draft pick whose maturity while Kang supplanted him in the lineup is symbolic of the approach Huntington has tried to instill since the day he arrived from Cleveland. When Kang went down,

Mercer responded by going 9 for 23 (.391) over the next six games.

"The challenge is building a system in which no one is irreplaceable," Huntington said.

Except, at least for awhile, Huntington and Hurdle. When pressed on if there was a time when he wanted to blow it up, Nutting pointed to the end of 2012 when the Pirates saw a 66-50 start end with a 13-33 finish and a 20th consecutive losing season.

"Everything was up for discussion, for review, for throwing us all out," Nutting said. Only Nutting — who admits he's "incredibly impatient" — decided to stay the course.

"The Streak" as it became known ended in 2013 with 94 wins and an electric wild-card victory over Cincinnati in front of the black-clad masses at PNC Park — no longer an just aesthetic jewel but also one of the best home-field advantages in baseball. The Pirates backed it up last year with another wild-card berth before serving as the launch point for Madison Bumgarner's ridiculous postseason run.

So when Pittsburgh secured a third straight playoff spot Wednesday in Colorado, the players merely raised a glass to honor one milestone along the way to an even greater goal.

"We put things in place allow us to win for the long haul," Stark said. "We didn't want to just break The Streak. We want to win a championship and a day after we've done it, we want to start the process of doing it again."

Astros back on top in wild-card race

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Thanks to a late rally and help from others, the Houston Astros will go into their final series knowing three more wins will have them playing baseball beyond the final day of the regular season.

A day after being passed in the race for the second AL wild-card spot, the Astros retook control Wednesday night with a 7-6 win over the Seattle Mariners.

"Just so many dramatic plays, dramatic at-bats, a lot went right our way. It wasn't pretty but at this point I don't care what it looks like, let's just get the win," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said.

Colby Rasmus' broken-bat RBI single capped Houston's rally from a three-run deficit, and the bullpen hung on to preserve the lead.

The Astros moved back ahead of the Los Angeles Angels, who lost at home to Oakland. Houston, now a half-game in front of the Angels, finishes the season with a series beginning Friday in Arizona.

Houston committed a season-high four errors and needed six pitchers to escape Seattle having taken two of three games. Astros relievers Will Harris and Oliver Perez worked through two errors by rookie shortstop Carlos Correa for a scoreless eighth.

Luke Gregerson pitched the ninth for his 31st save, capped when center field-

er Carlos Gomez caught a line drive by Franklin Gutierrez and doubled pinch-runner James Jones off first base to end the game.

"I'm not one to show a lot of emotion on the mound but I did get pretty fired up when we got him at first base," Gregerson said.

Twins 7-2; Indians 1-10: Cody Anderson pitched seven shutout innings and Jose Ramirez hit a three-run homer, leading host Cleveland to split a doubleheader.

Anderson (7-3) held the Twins to two hits and won his fifth straight start, but the team was eliminated from playoff contention when the Astros beat Seattle.

Pirates 8-1, Cardinals 2-11: Jason Heyward hit a third-inning grand slam to power visiting St. Louis over Pittsburgh in the second game of a doubleheader, giving St. Louis its third NL Central title and 11th since 1994.

In Game 1, Francisco Cervelli's grand slam off Michael Wacha (17-7) provided Gerrit Cole (19-8) all the offense he would need to improve to 12-2 in September during his young career. Neil Walker also homered for the Pirates.

Blue Jays 15-1, Orioles 2-8: With its rout of host Baltimore in the first game of a doubleheader, Toronto clinched its first AL East title in 22 years, bringing an appropriate conclusion to its unstoppable, two-month run.

Toronto entered the doubleheader needing only one victory to eliminate the

New York Yankees and claim its first title since 1993. The suspense ended quickly as the Blue Jays built a 4-0 lead in the fourth inning of the opener before adding four unearned runs in the fifth.

Athletics 8, Angels 7: Stephen Vogt hit a tiebreaking, two-run single during his team's four-run rally in the seventh inning, and host Oakland hung on to stop Los Angeles' seven-game winning streak.

Red Sox 9, Yankees 5 (11): New York's normally steady bullpen wasted a chance to clinch its first playoff berth in three years when Dellin Betances gave up a tying homer and Andrew Bailey allowed the go-ahead hit to visiting Boston.

Rangers 6, Tigers 2: Adrian Beltre hit the first of three Texas home runs as the AL West leaders moved closer to a post-season berth by beating visiting Detroit.

Phillies 7, Mets 5: New York slugger Yoenis Cespedes was bruised on two fingers of his left hand after he was hit by a pitch in a testy loss to host Philadelphia.

X-rays were negative on Cespedes, struck on the ring and middle fingers.

Cubs 10, Reds 3: Austin Jackson drove in a career-high five runs, Jon Lester set a team for strikeouts in a season by a left-handed pitcher and playoff-bound Chicago beat host Cincinnati for its fourth straight win.

Giants 5, Dodgers 0: Mike Leake pitched a two-hitter for his first career

shutout as host San Francisco topped Los Angeles.

Royals 5, White Sox 3 (10): Eric Hosmer hit a go-ahead two-run homer in the top of the 10th inning, and visiting Kansas City clinched home-field advantage in an AL Division Series.

Ben Zobrist singled with one out, and Hosmer drove a pitch from David Robertson (6-5) into the bullpen in right field to give the Royals the lead.

Rays 6, Marlins 4: Drew Smyly won his fifth straight decision and Grady Sizemore had a three-run double for host Tampa Bay.

Braves 2, Nationals 0: Rookie Williams Perez threw six innings and his team's bullpen did the rest to record host Atlanta's first shutout since June 21.

Jordan Zimmermann (13-10) took the loss in what will likely be his final appearance for the team that drafted him in 2007. Zimmermann will be a free agent at the end of the season.

Brewers 5, Padres 0: Zach Davies pitched seven innings for visiting Milwaukee in its seventh shutout of the season.

Diamondbacks 3, Rockies 1: Chase Anderson pitched effectively into the sixth inning in a combined five-hitter for host Arizona.



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Serena to miss season's final 2 events

Associated Press

BEIJING — The 2015 season is over for Serena Williams. The No. 1-ranked Williams withdrew from her final two scheduled tournaments of the year on Thursday, saying she needs time to heal from a series of injuries and the heartbreak of coming up short in a bid for a calendar-year Grand Slam.

Williams hasn't played since losing to Roberta Vinci in the semifinals of the U.S. Open, where she came two matches short of becoming the first player to win all four majors in the same year since Steffi Graf in 1988.

"It's no secret I've played injured most of the year — whether it was my elbow, my knee, or, in the final moments after a certain match in Flushing, my heart," Williams said in a statement.

Williams pulled out of next week's China Open in Beijing and the season-ending WTA Finals in Singapore from Oct. 25-Nov. 1.

"I want to compete as well as I can as long as I can," she said. "So I'm taking a proactive step and withdrawing from tournaments in Beijing and Singapore to properly address my health and take the time to heal."

In 2015, Williams won the Australian Open, the French Open and Wimbledon.

Williams said she plans to get back on the court during the offseason and prepare for the Australian Open in January, where she will be going for her 22nd Grand Slam title. That would tie Steffi Graf for most in the Open era.

Williams has already secured the year-end No. 1 ranking for the third straight year and fifth season overall.

Williams won the last three WTA Finals, which features the world's top eight players. She has won the tournament a total of five times.

Earlier this week, No. 3-ranked Maria Sharapova pulled out of the China Open because of a left forearm injury. She said she still hopes to play at the WTA Finals.

In other tennis news:

■ Venus Williams advanced to the semifinals of the Wuhan (China) Open by beating Johanna Konta of Britain 6-4, 3-6, 7-5 Thursday.

The unseeded Williams fought back from 5-3 in the final set before serving out the victory.

Konta had won 21 of her last 22 matches going into Thursday's match, including a victory over top-seeded Simona Halep on Wednesday.

■ Top-seeded Annika Beck was eliminated in the

Tashkent Open quarterfinals, losing to Bojana Jovanovski 2-6, 7-5, 6-3 Thursday as four unseeded players reached the semifinals.

The loss ended Beck's bid for a second WTA title in two weeks after her victory in Quebec City last month.

Bowyer, MWR penalties upheld

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — An appeals committee has upheld penalties against Clint Bowyer and Michael Waltrip Racing that effectively ends any shot Bowyer had at winning the Sprint Cup championship.

The three-person National Motorsports Appeals Panel on Wednesday ruled NASCAR was correct in penalizing the No. 15 team for an illegally modified part two weeks ago at Chicagoland Speedway.

Bowyer was docked 25 points, which dropped him to last in the 16-driver Chase for the Sprint Cup championship field. Four drivers will be cut from the field after this weekend's race in Dover, Del.

Crew chief Billy Scott will begin a three-race suspension this weekend. He was also fined \$75,000 and placed on probation for six months.

In other racing news:

■ The 2016 Formula One championship is set to start two weeks earlier than originally planned.

FIA, the sport's governing body, has released a revised provisional schedule with the season getting underway at the Australian Grand Prix on March 20 instead of April 3.

A number of rule modifications were also announced at a World Motor Sport Council meeting in Paris, including a change increasing the noise of cars, a measure that "will not have any significant effect on power or emissions."

Vols' Sapp out indefinitely

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee reserve linebacker Quat'e Sapp is out indefinitely with a stress fracture in his foot.

Volunteers coach Butch Jones said that he "can't really put a time frame on" how much time Sapp would miss.

Sapp, who is from Alpharetta, Ga., played in each of Tennessee's first four games and made three tackles.

Tennessee (2-2, 0-1 SEC) hosts Arkansas (1-3, 0-1) on Saturday.

Sporting KC wins Open Cup

CHESTER, Pa. — Jordi Quintilla scored the winner in the eighth round of penalty kicks, Tim Melia made two saves

in the tiebreaker and Sporting Kansas City beat the Philadelphia Union on Wednesday night for their third U.S. Open Cup title.

Sporting KC won the shootout 7-6 after the teams played to a 1-1 tie.

John McCarthy was brought into the game in goal at the very end of extra time after leading Philadelphia to two shootout wins in the tournament, but stopped only Krisztian Nemeth as the Union lost the championship game at home for the second straight year.

Nuggets sign Miller to deal

DENVER — The Denver Nuggets signed veteran forward Mike Miller to a one-year deal Wednesday.

Miller played last season for the Cleveland Cavaliers, where he saw action in 52 games and averaged 13.5 minutes. The 15-year veteran has also played for Memphis, Miami, Washington, Minnesota and Orlando.

In other NBA news:

■ The NBA said current referees will staff its replay center this season and be able to make decisions in certain situations.

All replay reviews will still be triggered by the three referees on the court. However, they will no longer make all the calls after the reviews, as some will now be done in the Secaucus, N.J., facility that opened last season.

Those will include determinations such as whether a shot was a two- or three-pointer, or whether it beat the shot clock or end of quarter buzzer. Out of bounds calls and goaltending rulings also will be handled by the replay center.

Case delayed for Sabres' O'Reilly

LONDON, Ontario — The impaired driving case involving Buffalo Sabres forward Ryan O'Reilly has been adjourned until Oct. 22.

A lawyer for O'Reilly, 24, appeared in court Thursday on his behalf. It's the third time the case has been adjourned.

O'Reilly was charged with impaired driving and failing to remain at the scene on July 9. Police say a pickup was driven into the side of a Tim Hortons restaurant in Lucan, a community north of London, around 4 a.m. before driving away.

O'Reilly was traded from Colorado to Buffalo in June. The Sabres signed O'Reilly to a seven-year contract extension for \$52.5 million on July 3.

'Bama in unfamiliar role

Associated Press

ATHENS, Ga. — Mark Richt had to acknowledge this week is a little different for Georgia.

"A lot of people are excited," the coach said Tuesday, breaking into the subtlest of smiles. "At least that's what I hear."

Indeed, the No. 8 Bulldogs have a chance to take a step toward a truly special season when they host No. 13 Alabama on Saturday.

Of course, they've been in this position before against Nick Saban's Crimson Tide.

It hasn't worked out so well.

Georgia started the 2008 season ranked No. 1 in the country, only to have its hopes crushed when Alabama raced out to a 31-0 halftime lead between the hedges. In 2012, the teams met again in the Southeastern Conference championship game, which went down to a final play — a deflected pass that left the Bulldogs 5 yards short of the winning touchdown as time ran out.

The Tide went on to rout Notre Dame in the BCS championship game.

"That season would've ended very well if we had won that game," said receiver Malcolm Mitchell, among a handful of Georgia players still around from three years ago. "But we didn't, so this is where we're at today."

A victory over their longtime nemesis would go a long way toward erasing the sting of those defeats.

"Wins always make you forget losses," Mitchell said.

More significantly, it would leave the Bulldogs (4-0, 2-0 SEC) with a much clearer path toward their first conference title in a decade, and possibly a spot in the College Football Playoff. Georgia has only one other ranked opponent after Saturday's game: No. 25 Florida.

During his weekly media session, Richt was very measured in his responses. When asked about the Tide being an underdog for the first time since 2009, Richt wouldn't bite.

"I don't really have a reaction to that," the coach said.

The Tide does have much to prove after a 43-37 loss to No. 3 Mississippi two weeks ago.

Alabama had five turnovers in that game and mustered 303 total yards in a 34-0 win over Louisiana-Monroe after that come-together session.

Bulldogs' linebacker Jordan Jenkins, like Mitchell, played against Alabama in that 2012 classic. The lead changed hands five times before Alabama scored the winning touchdown with just over 3 minutes remaining on a 44-yard pass from A.J. McCarron to Amari Cooper.

Georgia's confidence going into Saturday's game is buoyed by the play of quarterback Greyson Lambert, who transferred to Georgia at the beginning of the summer and didn't earn the starting job until the week before the opener.

Colts confident hurt Luck will be ready

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The beating Andrew Luck has taken this season on the field is taking a toll.

Coach Chuck Pagano decided to give Luck most of Wednesday's practice off so he could rest his sore throwing shoulder. Pagano said it was only a precaution and that he expects Luck to play Sunday against Jacksonville.

"I'm not a witch doctor, I don't have a crystal ball. I just listen to the trainers and the doctors, but I wouldn't bet against 12, ever," Pagano said, referring to Luck's jersey number.

Just seeing Luck out of action was odd. Since the Colts drafted him with the top overall pick in 2012, Luck has been one of the league's most durable players. He has started all 57 games, including the playoffs, and hasn't showed up on an injury report since late in his rookie season when he was listed with a knee injury. He doesn't even like taking plays off in practice.

Luck insists this injury is no big deal. "There's always bumps and bruises that show up in high school, college and the NFL. You deal with stuff, you manage it," Luck said. "It's nothing more than that in my mind."

The bigger question might be how the

Colts (1-2) would manage if Luck can't go.

Indy's offensive line played so poorly in the first two weeks that Pagano made three lineup changes at Tennessee. Luck was still sacked three times, hit four more times and Indy committed five holding penalties.

Luck, who was hit more than any quarterback in the league in 2013 and 2014, has already been sacked five times this season and taken 21 additional hits, according to STATS. The only quarterbacks hit as frequently as Luck are Philip Rivers (24), Ryan Tannehill (22) and Russell Wilson (21).

The constant pressure has led to some ugly results, too.

Luck leads the league with seven interceptions and is ranked 32nd in passer rating. Indy's offense, which was supposed to be among the league's best, scored just 28 points in the first 11 quarters.

The first indication of a potential injury came when backup quarterback Matt Hasselbeck tapped Luck after one of his two touchdown passes, and Luck appeared to wince in pain. Following the game, Luck looked and sounded uncharacteristically drained.

As speculation grew Monday about a possible rib injury, Luck downplayed the rumors and told reporters he didn't expect to be on this week's injury report.