

STARS AND STRIPES®

Friday, October 2, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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6 US troops killed in Jalalabad C-130 crash

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Six U.S. airmen and five contractors were killed when a C-130 crashed at Jalalabad Air Field in Afghanistan early Friday.

Two Afghans also were killed, NBC News reported, citing a spokesman for the NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan.

Four of the airmen were deployed from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, and two were deployed from Hanscom Air Force Base, Mass., officials said. Ryan Hammond, of Marshall County, W.Va., was among those who died, according to local news reports.

The crash, which occurred just after midnight Friday Afghanistan time, involved a C-130J assigned to the 774th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron, which is part of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing.

The airfield at Jalalabad, about 100 miles east of Kabul, is used only for military and United Nations flights.

In a post online, the Taliban claimed they had shot down the aircraft, killing 15 “invaders” and several Afghan “hirelings.”

However, U.S. Air Force Maj. Tony Wickman, a spokesman for the 455th said, “enemy fire is not suspected as a factor in the crash. There is, however,

an ongoing investigation by officials to determine the cause.” He said he could not provide information about casualties on the ground, as recovery operations were still underway.

Wickman said the plane crashed immediately on takeoff. “The aircraft crash site is contained wholly within the confines of the airfield,” he said.

A senior official at the Pentagon said the aircraft hit a ground object as it was ascending, lost control and crashed into a guard tower at the end of the airfield. Afghan civilians in the guard tower were killed in the ensuing fire, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the investigation is still underway.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter said he was “saddened” to learn of the crash.

“My thoughts and prayers are with their families during this difficult time,” he said in a statement. “I also want to express my condolences to the families of the Afghans killed in this tragedy. We remain committed with our coalition partners to helping the people of Afghanistan build a secure and peaceful country.”

President Barack Obama also extended condolences to the families. “As we mark this terrible loss of life, we are reminded of the sacrifice brave Americans and our Afghan partners

make each and every day in the name of freedom and security,” he said in a statement.

Commanders of the airmen joined in the expressions of sorrow.

“The sadness and shock of this accident will have a profound effect on their wingmen here in Afghanistan, as well as the home station communities,” said Brig. Gen. Dave Julazadeh, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander.

The four crewmembers from Dyess Air Force Base — the two pilots and two loadmasters — were assigned to the 317th Airlift Group, said Senior Airman Kia Atkins, a spokeswoman for the 7th Bomb Wing.

“This is a deeply emotional time for everyone in the 317th Airlift Group,” Col. Stephen Hodge, the unit’s commander, said in a statement. “The friendship and camaraderie in the Herk community, especially among our Dyess and Abilene friends, is unlike any other. These airmen and their loved ones are our family, and we will continue to take care of them.”

The two airmen from Hanscom were members of the 66th Security Forces Squadron.

“This is a devastating day for our Air Force and for Hanscom Air Force Base,” Col. Michael A. Vogel, base commander, said in a statement.

All aboard the C-130J Super Hercules were assigned to Operation Resolute Support, the NATO-led mission to provide training and security assistance in Afghanistan.

About 9,500 U.S. servicemembers remain in Afghanistan after the administration’s decision earlier this year to keep a larger U.S. force size on the ground to help the Afghan government solidify security gains after the NATO-led coalition ended its combat mission at the end of last year.

The Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport plane, which has been in service since the mid-1950s, has been used extensively throughout the 14-year war to move equipment and troops across the mountainous country, which has few usable roads.

The C-130J model is the latest version and is the only one still in production. It has been extensively upgraded, with new turboprop engines that add to performance and allow for safer hot-and-high takeoffs and landings on remote dirt airstrips.

The Afghan air force also operates four of the earlier H models.

Stars and Stripes reporters Josh Smith and Slobodan Lekic contributed to this report.
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Wissler named to lead Marine Corps Forces Command

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Lt. Gen. John Wissler — the former top Marine official in Japan — has been tapped to take over the Marine Corps Forces Command and Marine fleet operations in the Atlantic, filling the position vacat-

ed last week by Gen. Robert Neller, the newly appointed commandant.

Wissler’s nomination to the influential post by President Barack Obama was announced Thursday in a statement from the Defense Department. The unit is headquartered at Naval Support Activity Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Va.

Wissler handed over the reins of the III Marine Expeditionary Force and Marine Forces Japan to Lt. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson on Sept. 11 in front of columns of Marines and an enormous American flag unfurled on the parade grounds at Camp Foster, Okinawa.

Wissler, who took command of the Okinawa-based post in

July 2013, guided Marines in Japan through an uneasy period of North Korean provocations and Chinese intrusions. He also oversaw humanitarian operations in the Philippines during Operation Damayan and Nepal during Operation Sahayogi Haat in May.

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Navy revives Sea Dragon training squadron

The Virginian-Pilot

More than 20 years ago, with efforts already under way to begin retiring its Sea Dragon helicopters, the Navy disbanded a specialized training squadron where sailors learned how to fly and maintain the U.S. military's only minesweeping aircraft.

Two decades later, with still no firm plan to replace the Cold War-era helicopters, the Navy resurrected the training unit Thursday.

"This day, this moment, this second, we are saying that our commitment to fly,

fight and win applies to every community in naval aviation," said Rear Adm. Kevin Scott, speaking during a ceremony marking the rebirth of Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 12, or HM-12. "Today is about much more than re-establishing a squadron."

The ceremony at Norfolk Naval Station drew dozens of former pilots and crewmembers from across the country. It was symbolic of the Navy's long-term commitment to the aging helicopter program, said Scott, who flew the Sea Dragon when it first entered service in the 1980s.

The Sea Dragon — the only U.S. helicopter powerful enough to pull equipment through the sea to find and destroy underwater mines — is the oldest and most maintenance-intensive Navy helicopter in service.

Problems with the aging aircraft came to a head a few years ago with a series of accidents that cost sailors' lives and exposed maintenance and training shortcomings. The Navy has spent millions of dollars since then to upgrade the helicopters, to hire more maintenance workers and to improve training.

Senate to vote on Warthog

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Senate vote Tuesday could be key for the future of the A-10 Thunderbolt, which the Air Force wants to retire over the objections of infantry troops and lawmakers.

An annual defense policy bill scheduled for a vote by Senate Republican leadership — and facing Democratic opposition — would require the service to maintain 171 of the A-10s and bar it from spending any money on retirement efforts over the coming year. The House passed the measure Thursday, but Democrats rallied against it. Republicans were unable to get enough votes to protect it from a threatened White House veto.

The Air Force hopes to save money by retiring the 1970s-era aircraft and make way for advanced planes, such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which is in development. But supporters of the so-called Warthogs, especially former A-10 pilot Rep. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., said there are no good replacements for now and phasing it out could risk U.S. security and lives on the battlefield.

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Military's suicide rate holds steady

BY HEATH DRUZIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Despite an ongoing Pentagon campaign to combat suicide, the numbers of troops who killed themselves held steady in the first half of 2015, with active-duty numbers down and reserve numbers up during the same period last year, according to the most recent Department of Defense statistics.

The Defense Department quarterly statistics released Wednesday show 219 troops took their lives in the first half of this year, compared to 223 in the first half of 2014. Military suicides are down 8 percent from the first half of 2013, when there were 238.

For this year, the number of suicides breaks down to 130 among active-duty troops and

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89 among the Reserves and National Guard. That represents a 9 percent drop for active-duty troops and a 10 percent rise for reserve troops over the same period last year.

Military suicide statistics often change as investigations into deaths are resolved. These numbers reflect only "con-

firmed" cases.

In response to a Stars and Stripes query, the Pentagon released a statement saying that more troops have been seeking assistance, but it did not include statistics backing that claim.

The numbers have declined since 2012, when 525 troops took their lives. In 2013, 474 troops killed themselves, compared with 443 in 2014.

For several years, the military has been grappling with how to combat suicide, especially among the Guard and Reserves, whose rates have run well above that of the general public. The Pentagon has aired public service ads, launched help lines and employed top-ranking leaders to remove the stigma of mental health disorders and asking for help.

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East Coast braces for more heavy rain

Associated Press

SPARTANBURG, S.C. — With already-saturated soils and flooded roads, East Coast states were bracing for another day of dreary and possibly dangerous weather Friday as forecasters predicted more downpours and a possible added punch from powerful Hurricane Joaquin.

Two storm-related deaths

already have occurred in the Carolinas, where heavy rain has fallen for days.

Governors declared states of emergency in at least five states as forecasters warned of flash floods from historic Charleston, S.C., to Washington, D.C. — regardless of whether Joaquin comes ashore or tracks farther out to sea.

The latest forecast track for

the hurricane early Friday showed it was expected to stay offshore as it moved northward over the coming days.

But the certainty of additional damaging rains and floods in coming days prompted governors to declare states of emergency in Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia.

Ravens beat Steelers in OT

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — John Harbaugh considered going for it. Joe Flacco had other ideas.

Why risk extending the worst start in Baltimore Ravens history when you've got a kicker with one of the best legs in the game waiting to go do his job?

So Harbaugh — not for the first time — listened to his quarterback. And Justin Tucker — not for the first time — sent the Ravens sprinting off the field in triumph.

Tucker drilled a 52-yard field goal through the tricky Heinz Field winds with 5:08 left in overtime to give Baltimore its first victory of the season, 23-20 over the Pittsburgh Steelers on Thursday night. Tucker's 42-yarder with 3 seconds left sent the game to the extra period and his winner was good all the way.

"It's one of the most electric stadiums to play in in the NFL," Tucker said. "So to be able to come in and win in such a dramatic fashion with just a consummate team effort, it's really special."

The Ravens, desperately trying to avoid a hole that would all but end their playoff hopes a quarter of the way into the season, responded emphatically while rallying from a 13-point second-half deficit. Justin Forsett ran for 150 yards for Baltimore. Flacco threw a touchdown pass and did just enough late, though Baltimore (1-3) got plenty of help from the Steelers (2-2).

"The finish is what counts," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "The finish is what our guys were able to accomplish." The Steelers, not so much.

Kicker Josh Scobee, acquired from Jacksonville in August after injuries to Shaun Suisham and Garrett Hartley, had two chances to give Pittsburgh some cushion late in the fourth quarter only to pull both kicks wide left.

"It's pretty frustrating," Scobee said. "I feel like I let the team down. It's not something I ever want to remember doing. It's just a bad feeling."

One he might not get a chance to shake with the Steelers after coach Mike Tomlin promised to "turn the stones over" in an effort to get back on track.

"We have to find ways to win games," Tomlin said. "Obviously, (kicking) is an element of it. It was an element of the outcome tonight."

Some other takeaways from one of the weirder entries in one of the league's most heated rivalries:

Fourth-down flubs: Scobee's botched kicks forced Tomlin to change tactics in overtime. Twice the Steelers faced fourth downs at the edge of Scobee's range. Twice Tomlin opted to go for it. Twice the Steelers put the ball in the hands of backup quarterback Michael Vick rather than running back Le'Veon Bell. Twice the Ravens came up with the stop.

"When you lose, you're open to criticism," Tomlin said. "We lost, so I'm not going to try to justify anything that we did."

Run, Forsett, run: An inability to get anything going on the ground was a major factor in Baltimore's winless September. Forsett helped change that with his first 100-yard game of the season, including a 33-yard sprint that kickstarted the

Ravens' comeback.

Vick's return: The four-time Pro Bowl quarterback showed brief flashes of his old self while taking over for injured Ben Roethlisberger. Vick completed 19 of 26 passes for 124 yards and a score but was also sacked four times and the Steelers converted just 2 of 13 third downs.

"I'm trying to fill in for Ben and it's a difficult task," Vick said. "I was up for it. I was excited for it. I haven't felt this pain in a long time."

Skid stopped: A loss would have dropped the Ravens to 0-4, a mark only one team has ever recovered from to make the postseason. Tucker's blast gives them momentum and a few extra days to prepare for Cleveland on Oct. 11.

"We know where we're at," Harbaugh said. "We know what we have to overcome. You can't get two until you get one. This one was a long time coming."

Choice words: Ravens wide receiver Steve Smith caught four passes for 24 yards before leaving in the second half with a back contusion and a bad taste in his mouth. Smith said Steelers safety Mike Mitchell — a former teammate when both players were in Carolina — started jawing at him as Smith slowly made his way to the sideline after getting hurt, something Smith didn't exactly need to hear.

"After he hit me he said 'How do you like that?'" Smith said. "The best thing I could do without threatening him and saying that I will assault you when I see him is saying I look forward to playing him again and he's on my lifetime hit list."

The rematch is in Baltimore on Dec. 27.

More flags than ever this season

Associated Press

Watching the NFL is a wildly popular experience, proven by massive ratings and undeterred by constant interruptions.

Commercial breaks. Replay reviews. And, of course, penalties.

There's nothing like the appearance of that yellow "flag" icon on the bottom of the screen to make the home viewer wince, and if it seems as if it's been popping up so far this season more than ever, well, it has.

In 48 games over the first three weeks, according to STATS research, 878 penalties have been called. That's an average of 18.3 per game, up from 17.1 per game during the first three weeks of 2014. Over the same span in 2013, the number was 14.8 per game. More flags typically don't mean more fun for fans, coaches or players around the league.

But before the whistle is blown on the NFL for overzealous officiating, or too many striped shirts on the field, let's take a closer look.

First, consider the types of fouls fueling the increase.

Pre-snap infractions like false starts and illegal formations have risen, comprising 34.2 percent of all penalties through the first three weeks, per STATS data. The number last year over the same span was 30.3 percent. Defensive offside, for example, has jumped from 64 to 84. Offensive delay of game went from 26 to 38.

According to NFL vice president of officiating Dean Blandino, preseason observations identified a pattern of illegal formations, so that foul has been a point of emphasis so far. As for those jumpy defensive ends and left tackles, well, these pre-snap penalties are about as obvious as they come. No special scrutiny required by the refs.

"You can't blame anyone except us on that," said Dallas right guard Zack Martin said, alluding to a sloppy start by an offensive line that has been one of the best in the league.

The Cowboys are tied with Oakland for the NFL lead with eight false starts. In their Sept. 20 game against Philadelphia, the offensive line alone accounted for 10 of the franchise-record 18 penalties called.

The Raiders are tied with Tampa Bay for the overall league lead with 33 penalties over the first three games.

"The pre-snap penalties are the ones that just I have very little patience for. I don't think we should tolerate that as a team. We're looking to eliminate those as much as possible," Raiders coach Jack Del Rio said.

The big spike in penalties around the league from 2013 to 2014 was anticipated, due to the heightened emphasis on fouls like illegal contact, defensive holding and offensive pass interference. The smaller, albeit clear, increase from 2014 to 2015 is harder to quantify. The per-game number of penalties through three games is less than only the 2005 number, which was 18.5 per game, according to STATS.

Cardinals happy Johnson fell in their lap

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — It was late in training camp. Andre Ellington was having his usual injury troubles. Rookie David Johnson was sidelined with a sore hamstring.

The Arizona Cardinals needed to add a running back, and they found Chris Johnson, whose style fit coach Bruce Arians' system so well. On Aug. 17, Johnson signed a one-year contract with Arizona.

"He just fell into our lap," Larry Fitzgerald said.

Johnson, a three-time Pro Bowl selection in his first three NFL seasons at Tennessee, was released by the New York Jets after one season last year. Then early on a Sunday morning, March 7, in Orlando, Florida, Johnson was wounded when someone opened fire on the van in which he was riding. A friend was killed. Johnson still has a bullet in his shoulder.

Prospective NFL employers stayed away.

"There were a lot of things going on with me. A lot of teams thought I had character issues," he said, "just a lot of stuff going on around me as far as the shooting. Stuff like that, I'm pretty sure it scared a lot of teams off. Now when I look at it, I think everything happened for a reason and that

helped me land here."

There have been no apparent character problems since Johnson arrived.

Fitzgerald called him "a great teammate."

With Ellington out, Johnson moved into the primary ball carrier role. In Arizona's 47-7 rout of San Francisco on Sunday, Johnson carried it 22 times for 110 yards and two touchdowns. He also had a 40-yard reception, a play that featured one of his trademark "cut-on-a-dime" moves on the sideline. It also left him exhausted.

He is not yet in football shape.

"I was pretty tired after that," Johnson said. "Larry caught a touchdown pass right after that. It felt pretty good, but that's another reason I need to get all the way in shape because if I had to stay in and run it (on the next play), I need to be in shape to do those things."

Ellington could be back Sunday against St. Louis but coach Bruce Arians has made it clear Johnson will still have a significant role. The Cardinals' vastly improved running game is a big reason for the team's overall success, especially in the red zone, where they have scored touchdowns in 11 of 12 tries.

Johnson turned 30 on Sept. 23 but rejects the idea that that's too old for today's running backs. He notes Adrian Peterson and Marshawn Lynch are older

than he is.

On Sunday, Johnson will go against a familiar foe in Rams coach Jeff Fisher. Johnson had his best seasons when Fisher was at Tennessee, rushing for 2,006 yards in 2009.

Fisher sees a lot of familiar moves on display.

"Anytime C.J. gets the ball, there's a chance that he goes the distance, so I was really impressed," Fisher said. "They're utilizing him like they should, trying to get the ball to him in the passing game and run game. He's really quick through the hole. For his size, he's got power, so on the goal line, run for a touchdown."

Johnson said he's never been surrounded with this much offensive talent before.

"It's a situation where we've so many different guys we can go to," Johnson said. "Carson (Palmer), he knows how to do it all, as far as checking in and out of the right plays. He knows when to go to the right receiver and when to check it down."

He said that just before the 40-yard pass play, Palmer said to him, "make sure you get out for me on this one 'cause I might need you."

Johnson is just grateful to have a good team that needs him.



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Yanks win, return to playoffs after rare two-year absence

Associated Press

NEW YORK — CC Sabathia stood near his locker in the back of the oval Yankees clubhouse while excited teammates celebrated New York's return to the postseason.

"It feels like an eternity," the big left-hander said, not trying to hide his relief.

With some help from the one of the old guard, the next generation of Yankees will have a chance to make their mark in the playoffs.

Ending a rare two-year absence from the postseason, New York clinched a wild-card berth with three games to spare by beating the Boston Red Sox 4-1 Thursday for the franchise's 10,000th regular-season win.

Putting behind the venerated teams of Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera, New York (87-72) opens its 52nd postseason with a winner-take-all game on Tuesday.

Alex Rodriguez and the Yankees could face Houston — which leads the race for the second wild card — or the Angels or Minnesota, tied a game behind the Astros.

"We'll never forget what Derek did for this organization," manager Joe Girardi said, "but you have to move on. Yogi retired. Mickey Mantle retired and Joe D retired — all these guys, they were great players, but the Yankees continued to win."

Masahiro Tanaka is lined up to pitch the wild-card game, with the winner advancing to a Division Series against East champion Toronto or Central winner Kansas City.

Rangers 5, Angels 3: Host Texas clinched a wild-card spot and moved to

the cusp of the AL West title, with Adrian Beltre's three-run double backing pitcher Derek Holland in a win over Los Angeles.

The Rangers (87-72), in the playoffs for the first time since 2012 after a 95-loss season, are a win or a Houston loss away from their first division title since winning two straight and going to the World Series in 2010-11.

The Angels are a game behind the Astros and tied with Minnesota for the second wild-card slot.

Phillies 3, Mets 0: Jerad Eickhoff struck out 10 batters in seven innings and Darin Ruf hit a two-run homer as host Philadelphia beat the NL East champion to complete a three-game sweep.

The Mets have a one-game lead over the Dodgers for home-field advantage in their division series next week.

Cubs 5, Reds 3: Austin Jackson hit a three-run homer and Anthony Rizzo added an RBI double as visiting Chicago kept alive its slim hopes for home-field advantage in the NL wild-card game.

The Cubs moved within two games of idle Pittsburgh in the race for home field in Wednesday's NL wild-card playoff game.

Dodgers 3, Giants 2: Brett Anderson gave up four hits in 72/3 innings as NL West champion Los Angeles wrapped up its road schedule.

Tim Hudson (8-9) allowed three runs and three hits in 21/3 innings in the final start of his 17-year major league career.

Nationals 3, Braves 0: Stephen Strasburg continued his strong September to help visiting Washington beat Atlanta. Strasburg (11-7) gave up six hits and

struck out seven in six innings. In his final four starts of the season, he finished 3-0 with an 0.62 ERA. He struck out 44 in 29 innings.

Padres 3, Brewers 1: Ian Kennedy struck out 11 in what was likely his final start with host San Diego.

The Padres underachieved this year, extending their postseason drought to nine seasons despite a roster overhaul that included adding stars such as Matt Kemp, Justin Upton, Wil Myers, Derek Norris and James Shields. San Diego will finish with a losing record for the fifth straight season.

Royals 6, White Sox 4: At Chicago, Jonny Gomes drove in three runs and banged-up Kansas City moved into a tie with Toronto for the AL's best record.

The Royals were minus outfielders Lorenzo Cain and Alex Rios, and designated hitter Kendrys Morales (left quad tightness) and catcher Salvador Perez (swelling in right thumb) each departed during the game. Cain was sidelined by a sore right knee, and Rios was scratched because of a stiff back.

Diamondbacks 8, Rockies 6: Wellington Castillo had a go-ahead two-run double with two outs during host Arizona's four-run seventh inning.

Orioles 6, Blue Jays 4: AL East champion Toronto rested its regulars a day after clinching the division title as Manny Machado homered twice for host Baltimore.

Rays 4, Marlins 1: Jake Odorizzi allowed one run over seven innings as host Tampa Bay beat Jose Fernandez and Miami for a three-game sweep.

Former Joint Chiefs chair Dempsey joining NBA

NEW YORK — Gen. Martin Dempsey, the recently retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has been appointed a special adviser to NBA Commissioner Adam Silver.

The league said Friday that Dempsey, the highest-ranking U.S. military officer for the past four years, will participate in NBA functions and serve as chairman of the newly formed Jr. NBA Leadership Council. His position begins Jan. 1, 2016.

Dempsey worked closely with the NBA through the league's Hoops for Troops program, which conducted basketball clinics and health seminars on military bases throughout the country. He says basketball has always been a favorite sport in his family and he's "seen firsthand how it can bring people together."

Among Dempsey's roles, he will take part in the NBA's overseas exhibition games and its All-Star weekend, and participate in some league meetings.

In other NBA news:

■ Forward Tristan Thompson declined to sign a one-year, \$6.8 million qualifying offer for this season with the Cleveland Cavaliers, and remains a restricted free agent.

■ The Milwaukee Bucks have locked up young big man John Henson for the long haul.

The Bucks announced a contract extension with the Henson on Friday. A person with knowledge of the deal tells The Associated Press it is a four-year extension worth \$44 million. It could reach \$48 million with incentives. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team does not disclose contract terms.

The 24-year-old Henson averaged 7.0 points, 4.7 rebounds and 2.0 blocks in 18 minutes per game last season.

Jordan Spieth wins PGA Tour player of the year

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — Jordan Spieth has been voted PGA Tour player of the year, giving him a sweep of all the significant awards.

The PGA Tour does not disclose how many votes Spieth received from the players, though the 22-year-old Texan removed any suspense last week with his four-shot victory in the Tour Championship to win the FedEx Cup.

Spieth had five wins this year, including the Masters and U.S. Open. He is the youngest player since Tiger Woods (21) to win the Jack Nicklaus Award as player of the year. Spieth also won the Arnold Palmer Award by topping the money list with a record \$12 million, and the Vardon Trophy for the lowest adjusted scoring average.

Also Friday, Daniel Berger was voted rookie of the year. He was the only rookie to qualify for the Tour Championship.

Kenseth on pole as rain washes out qualifying

DOVER, Del. — Matt Kenseth has the pole for the NASCAR Sprint Cup race at Dover after rain wiped out qualifying on Friday.

With the field set on points, Kenseth starts first and is followed by Joe Gibbs Racing teammates Denny Hamlin and Carl Edwards. Hamlin and Kenseth have advanced into the second round of the Chase for the Sprint Cup championship with wins in the first two races.

The 16-driver field is sliced to 12 following Sunday's race at Dover International Speedway. Reigning series champion Kevin Harvick is 15th in the standings and will likely have to win to advance and remain in championship contention.

— Associated Press

Moore throws 2 TDs as Cincy tops 'Canes

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Two quick touchdowns settled Hayden Moore's nerves.

The redshirt freshman threw two touchdown passes and ran for another score in his starting debut, and Cincinnati's struggling defense held on for a 34-23 victory over Miami on Thursday night to end the Hurricanes' streak of 10 straight wins over the Bearcats.

Moore followed up the best passing game in Cincinnati history with a solid performance. The Bearcats (3-2) surged ahead 14-3 and overcame a scoreless third quarter behind Moore, who was 22-for-33 for 279 yards with an interception.

"He grew up a lot tonight," coach Tommy Tuberville said. "I saw his eyes. He was a little nervous going into the game. He knew what he was going to face. But he held in there good."

Good enough to end Cincinnati's streak of two straight last-minute losses and create a competition for the starting job when Gunner Kiel is healthy. Tuberville said Moore will get a chance to keep the job.

Moore filled in with Kiel sidelined by a neck injury suffered during a 53-46 loss at Memphis a week earlier. Moore took over in that game and threw for a school-record 557 yards with four touchdowns and two interceptions in only three quarters.

Kiel helped him get ready for the game

and cheered him on.

"Literally nothing changed," Moore said. "He was in the locker room beforehand. At halftime, he was pumping me up."

Miami (3-1) was coming off a 36-33 win over Nebraska that featured five field goals by Michael Badgley. He made three more Thursday but missed from 51 and 53 yards as the Hurricanes repeatedly failed to reach the end zone.

Trailing by 11 points, the Hurricanes went for it on fourth-and-goal from the 5 instead of taking the field goal. Brad Kaaya's pass was incomplete with 4:41 left. Kaaya finished 24-for-39 for 255 yards without a touchdown or interception.

Tion Green's 41-yard run then put Cincinnati in position to finish it off. Green had 90 yards on 15 carries.

"Our offense has played well all year," Tuberville said. "Our defense finally grew up a little bit."

Moore got off to a solid start, leading the Bearcats to a 27-20 halftime lead. He completed his first three passes as Cincinnati pulled ahead 14-3, the first time the Hurricanes had trailed this season. After five straight completions, he threw an interception — hung the ball in the air too long — that set up a Miami touchdown.

The Bearcats had 300 yards in the first half, with Moore throwing for a touchdown and scoring on a 1-yard sneak.

"It was tough to watch that first half, but it's something I had to deal with,"

Hurricanes safety Deon Bush said. "We got better in the second half because people just did their jobs."

The main point of emphasis for Cincinnati was avoiding turnovers. Cincinnati led the nation in turnovers going into the game with nine interceptions and five fumbles. Miami has been among the best at forcing turnovers.

Aside from a first-quarter interception, the Bearcats avoided the big mistake.

Both defenses regrouped in the second half. The Hurricanes had 38 yards in the third quarter and missed a field goal, while Moore was sacked twice as the Bearcats managed only five net yards.

Moore finally got going, Mekale McKay in stride for a 52-yard gain. He then threw a 7-yard touchdown pass for a 34-23 lead with 6:54 to go.

"They played really well, but we aided them," Miami coach Al Golden said. "We were playing better defense in the second half but they got that one in the fourth quarter that was a back breaker. We haven't given up one of them in a while."

The Hurricanes then had the chance to cut it to an eight-point game, but came up empty on the fourth-down incompleteness.

Cincinnati's offense was missing running back Mike Boone and receivers Johnny Holton and Chris Moore to injuries.