

STARS AND STRIPES®

Wednesday, October 7, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Russia fires cruise missiles into Syria

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Russian warships in the Caspian Sea fired cruise missiles Wednesday as Syrian government troops launched a ground offensive in central Syria in the first major combined air-and-ground assault since Moscow began its military campaign in the country last week.

The missiles flew nearly 930 miles over Iran and Iraq and struck Raqqa and Aleppo provinces in the north and Idlib province in the northwest, Russian officials said. The Islamic State group has strongholds in Raqqa and Aleppo, while the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front has a strong presence in Idlib.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Russia was continuing to strike targets other than Islamic State militants, adding that he was concerned about the Syrian ground offensive backed by Moscow's airpower.

The latest developments came a week after Russia began its airstrikes in Syria, its longtime ally, on Sept. 30, and added a new dimension to the

complex war that has torn the Mideast country apart since 2011.

A Syrian official and activists said government troops pushed into areas in the central province of Hama and south of Idlib in the boldest multipronged attack on rebel-held areas, benefiting from the Russian air cover. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Moscow has mainly targeted central and northwestern Syria, strategic regions that are the gateway to President Bashar Assad's strongholds in Damascus, and along the Mediterranean coast where Russia has a naval base.

The Russian airstrikes appear to have emboldened Syrian troops to launch the ground push after a string of setbacks in northwestern Syria in recent months.

The Islamic State group is not present in the areas where the ground fighting is underway.

The offensive in central Syria and the ensuing clashes with militants, including the Nusra

Front, was the first major ground fighting since the Russian campaign began.

In televised remarks to President Vladimir Putin, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said 26 missile strikes were carried out from four warships in the Caspian. Shoigu insisted the operation destroyed all the targets and did not launch any strikes upon civilian areas.

Andrei Kartapolov, of the Russian General Staff, told Russian news agencies that Russia had planned the missile strikes from the warships so that they would fly "over unpopulated areas." Shoigu also said Russia has carried out 112 airstrikes on Islamic State positions since Sept. 30.

Activists and rebels say the targets have included Western-backed fighters and other groups opposed to Assad's government.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a government offensive began on four fronts early Wednesday in Idlib and neighboring Hama provinces in what the group's director,

Rami Abdurrahman, described as "the most intense fighting in months."

In Syria, the leader of a U.S.-backed rebel group, Tajammu Alezzah, confirmed the ground offensive in a text message to The Associated Press, saying Russian and Iranian soldiers were involved in the operation. Russian officials deny sending any ground troops to the battlefield.

Maj. Jamil al-Saleh said the offensive, accompanied by air cover and shelling, came from three fronts, including Latamneh, north of Hama province where his group is based, and Kfar Zeita to the north. The offensive targeted the rural areas of Hama and Idlib that are almost totally controlled by rebel groups, he said.

Activist Ahmad al-Ahmad, who is in Idlib, said government troops "heavily" shelled central areas after rebels attacked an army post and destroyed a tank. He said the government advance covered an area of more than 10 miles, and was a coordinated multipronged attack.

Carter says US will not collaborate with Russia

Associated Press

ROME — U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Wednesday the U.S.-led coalition has not agreed to cooperate with Russia in the fight against the Islamic State group and no collaboration is possible as long as Moscow continues to strike other targets.

He said the U.S. will conduct basic, technical talks with Russia about efforts to ensure that flights over Syria are conducted safely, and, "That's it."

Carter spoke during a press conference in Rome with Ital-

ian Defense Minister Roberta Pinotti. A Russian official has called for broader talks on cooperation in the Syrian conflict.

The United States, Carter said, is not prepared to cooperate with a strategy of Russia's that is "tragically flawed."

"They continue to hit targets that are not ISIL," Carter said, using an acronym for the Islamic State group. "We believe that is a fundamental mistake."

Carter said he is concerned about the Syrian ground offensive that began Wednesday backed by Russian airpower.

Russia, which backs Syrian President Bashar Assad, has hit Western-backed rebels fighting Assad. The U.S. maintains that the only route to peace in Syria is to remove Assad from power.

The U.S. was still waiting Wednesday for a formal response from Russia on a draft document laying out proposed technical safety procedures for the aircraft flights, said a senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the official wasn't authorized to discuss the situation publicly.

Russia on Tuesday informed the United States that Moscow is willing to continue talks to ensure that the two countries' aircraft don't interfere with each other. But Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said the talks should also cover potential international cooperation between Russia and the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group.

The Pentagon only wants talks aimed at making sure there are no conflicts, collisions or other problems as the U.S.-led coalition and the Russians fly over Syria.

Green Beret who beat up alleged rapist gets reprieve

(Tacoma, Wash.) News Tribune

TACOMA, Wash. — A Green Beret facing an involuntary discharge from the Army because of discipline he received for assaulting an Afghan militia leader after a boy's rape will get more time to appeal his case, the Army announced Tuesday.

The decision is a temporary reprieve for Sgt. 1st Class Charles Martland, formerly of Joint Base Lewis-McChord's 1st Special Forces Group. It was a courtesy to Martland's supporters in Congress who say that he shouldn't be discharged because he "stood up to a child rapist."

Martland, 33, had been selected for a discharge this year in a sweeping Army downsizing that is cutting soldiers with demerits in their service records.

The derogatory mark for Martland was for his September 2011 assault of an Afghan police commander on the U.S. military's payroll after the Afghan admitted raping a boy. It violated Special Forces' standards that require soldiers to try to motivate allies rather than use force to change behavior.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, took up Martland's case Tuesday in a phone call with Secretary of the Army John McHugh. Thornberry is the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

Thornberry laid much of the blame on the Army's decision to discharge Martland on an Army drawdown that is shedding about 120,000 active-duty soldiers from its peak strength during the Iraq War.

Martland would have been able to stay in the Army despite the discipline if not for those cuts. Still, Thornberry said Martland's case warranted more consideration.

Army spokesman Lt. Col. Justin Platt later released a statement saying McHugh agreed to give Martland 60 days for an appeal "out of respect for Chairman Thornberry."

Did US exceed combat authority with strike on Afghan hospital?

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. airstrike on a hospital in Afghanistan, which U.S. officials have called a "mistake," might have exceeded the rules American forces have operated under since their combat mission ended nearly a year ago, officials say.

U.S. officials have largely declined to discuss the attack in Kunduz, which killed 22 civilians, because American and Afghan investigations are underway. Gen. John Campbell, top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, told a Senate committee

on Tuesday that as a result of the strike, he is requiring that every U.S. servicemember in Afghanistan be retrained on the circumstances in which U.S. firepower can be used.

"To prevent any future incidences of this nature, I've directed the entire force to undergo in-depth training in order to review all of our operational authorities and rules of engagement," he said. Campbell did not elaborate, but his statement suggested that the U.S. attack was undertaken in error.

Campbell said Afghan forces fighting to retake Kunduz from

the Taliban had requested U.S. air power, and that a U.S. special operations unit in the "close vicinity" was communicating with the crew of the heavily armed AC-130 gunship that pummeled the hospital.

U.S. forces do not have blanket authority to fulfill every Afghan request for U.S. firepower.

President Barack Obama apologized to Doctors Without Borders on Wednesday and also offered an assurance that there would be a thorough and objective accounting of the facts, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said.

SC braces for a new round of flooding

Associated Press

GEORGETOWN, S.C. — Along South Carolina's coast, residents were preparing for a second round of flooding as rivers swollen from days of devastating rains make their way toward the Atlantic.

In the Columbia area, where some have started to return home to assess damage and clean up, the threat of more flooding still hadn't lifted.

In coastal Georgetown, one of America's oldest cities, Scott Youngblood was putting more sandbags Tuesday by the door of the Augustus & Carolina furniture store. Residents are concerned there may be more flooding on the Black and Waccamaw rivers.

The Waccamaw was expected to crest at 5 feet above flood stage in Conway, in Horry County, on Thursday. The Black crested Tues-

day upstream at Kingstree at about 10 feet above flood stage, breaking a record, town officials said.

Youngblood hopes things won't be as bad this time as earlier in the week.

"We're hanging our hat on that we're not going to have that combination of tide and rain and such," he said.

The storm has killed 15 in South Carolina and two in North Carolina.

Japan thanks US for aid after quake, tsunami

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Japanese officials formally thanked U.S. military personnel for supporting survivors of the devastating March 2011 earthquake and tsunami during a ceremony in Washington.

About 500 people from both nations attended the event Monday — which also marked the 61st anniversary of the Japan Self-Defense Forces — at the U.S. Capitol, Japanese broadcaster NHK reported Tuesday.

Kenichiro Sasae, Japan's ambassador to the United States, presented a letter of appreciation to Capt. Thom Burke, former commander of the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, which served as a floating refueling station for Japanese and U.S. helicopters flying Operation Tomodachi relief missions to Japan's battered east coast. More than 15,000 people died in the disaster.

The Ronald Reagan — which returned to Japan last week to serve out of Yokosuka Naval

Base as the centerpiece of U.S. Pacific forces — was one of the first Navy ships to respond to the disaster.

"We knew where we were going, and we knew what we were going to do and we were proud to support them," Burke told NHK.

During the ceremony, the U.S. Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force bandmembers played "Hana wa Saku" — "Flowers Will Bloom" — a song written to encourage survivors struggling to rebuild their lives.

Astros shut out Yankees in wild card

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A year ago, no one could've pictured this. Yet here they were, Dallas Keuchel and the Houston Astros, soaking in champagne, merrily posing for a victory shot on the mound at Yankee Stadium.

After all that losing, this was one October win to remember.

Pitching on three days' rest for the first time in his career, Keuchel baffled New York for six innings of three-hit ball. Colby Rasmus and Carlos Gomez homered, and the Astros beat the Yankees 3-0 Tuesday in the American League wild card game.

"Nobody really gave us anything at the start of the year. And I don't think anybody gave us a shot at the end of the year," said Keuchel, the AL's only 20-game winner.

The orange-clad Astros, who secured their spot in this winner-take-all game on the last day of the regular season, advanced to the Division Series against the defending AL champion Royals starting Thursday night in Kansas City.

Aggressive from the start in their initial playoff appearance as an AL club — and first since being swept by the White Sox in the 2005 World Series — the Astros came out swinging against Masahiro Tanaka in front of a revved-up Bronx crowd.

Rasmus sent Tanaka's first pitch of the second inning soaring into deep right

field. Gomez, who only had five plate appearances after missing nearly two weeks with a strained chest muscle in September, connected on the first offering of the fourth.

"That really settled me down, and that's who we are," Keuchel said. "We hit a lot of home runs, pitch well and play defense."

AL hits leader Jose Altuve had an RBI single off All-Star reliever Dellin Betances in the seventh.

Reliever Tony Sipp walked one, and Will Harris and Luke Gregerson were each perfect for an inning to finish the three-hitter.

The boos from the 50,113 stunned fans in the crowd grew with each out as Gregerson closed for a save.

The Astros raced to an area between first and second after Brian McCann grounded out to end it and jumped up and down in a big scrum.

As he was coming off the field, Keuchel pumped his fists toward a group of cheering Astros supporters in orange shirts — a few in big black beards — behind the visiting dugout.

It was a celebration a few years in the making, a raucous 30-minute party in the visiting clubhouse that carried onto the field. The Astros had averaged 104 losses in their previous four seasons.

"Now we get to go to Kansas City. It's going to be some grind-it-out baseball," Rasmus said. "We have to come in there

the way we came in tonight. It's going to be fun."

In a matchup of teams that surprised many by building big division leads and then wasting them, the upstart Astros, just two years removed from a 111-loss season, looked the more comfortable team in the October limelight.

They clown around during pregame introductions, and stayed loose the whole game.

The Yankees lost six of seven to close the regular season.

Then, before working out Monday, they learned CC Sabathia was checking into an alcohol rehab facility and would miss the postseason.

Despite all the talk of a playoff reset for the struggling lineup, New York went bust against a new nemesis in its first postseason game of the post-Derek Jeter era.

"Just didn't get it done," manager Joe Girardi said.

Fans taunted the 27-year-old Keuchel the moment he walked to the outfield for warmups. Then he toyed with the Yankees from the first batter, striking out Brett Gardner looking.

"It's hard not to get up for a game like this," Keuchel said of pitching on short rest. "I've worked so hard the last four years in the big leagues, especially with rebuilding with our team. I knew if we had a shot, I was going to give everything I possibly could."

Gardner, McCann, Chris Young and Girardi had words with plate umpire Eric Cooper as Keuchel cruised through New York's lineup for the third time this season.

The AL Cy Young Award contender held the Yankees scoreless for 16 innings in two regular-season starts. On this much bigger stage, the lefty was just as confounding, dropping his slider and two-seam fastball seemingly wherever he wanted in striking out seven as nearly all his teammates and coaches stood along the dugout railing for every pitch.

When he gave up two singles in the sixth — bringing the crowd to its feet with Alex Rodriguez stepping into the batter's box — manager A.J. Hinch took a walk to the mound to give Keuchel a breather. Keuchel responded by getting A-Rod to fly out lazily to center field for his final out.

"He was as good as it gets," A-Rod said. "He was Greg Maddux from the left side."

Keuchel is the first pitcher with a scoreless postseason start on three days' rest since Josh Beckett pitched a shutout for the Marlins at Yankee Stadium in the clinching Game 6 of the 2003 World Series, STATS said.

Tanaka struggled with the long ball, giving up 25 homers in 24 starts this year. He only allowed two more hits in five innings but matched a season high with three walks.

Hamels gives Texas boost

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Cole Hamels was certainly a good addition for the future of the Texas Rangers.

And this season, too. Eight games out of first place after Hamels made his Texas debut Aug. 1, the Rangers are back in the playoffs for the first time in three seasons.

Texas (88-74) clinched its sixth AL West title on the final day of the regular season when Hamels pitched his first complete game for the Rangers, a three-hitter by the left-hander that general manager Jon Daniels described Monday as a "get-on-my-back kind of start."

Shin-Soo Choo, with an incredible closing stretch of his own, said Hamels "showed why he's a great pitcher."

The late surge by Texas included winning Hamels' last starts. The clincher Sunday over the Angels also eliminated Los Angeles for the playoff chase.

Texas, which lost ace Yu Darvish to Tommy John surgery before the season even started, opens the AL division series Thursday at AL East champion Toronto.

"As soon as we had Cole, we weren't thinking about next year," said shortstop Elvis Andrus, the Rangers' most-tenured position player and a member of their only two World Series teams in 2010 and 2011. "We were thinking now we have the guy that we need with Darvish out. A guy that has been there."

Imagine having Hamels, the 2008 World Series MVP, and Darvish in the rotation together?

That will be the case when Darvish re-

turns at some point next season, since Hamels is no short-term rental like Cliff Lee was for Texas in 2010. Lee was acquired in a midseason trade before the Rangers went to their first World Series, then left as a free agent.

Hamels was coming off a no-hitter against the Chicago Cubs when Philadelphia traded him to Texas. The lefty is signed through 2018 with a club option for 2019.

"I liked this team a lot," Hamels said. "Guys were coming off injuries, so everybody was going to get healthy. I thought it was good timing. The type of moves that Texas made with the bullpen guys, and getting (Mike) Napoli and a bunch of outfield guys, we really did feel comfortable and we knew we could do something special."

Left-handed reliever Jake Diekmann came with Hamels from the Phillies on July 31, the same day Texas acquired right-handed reliever Sam Dyson from Miami. Diekmann has a 2.08 ERA in 26 games for the Rangers, and Dyson a 1.15 ERA in 31 appearances.

A week later, they re-acquired Napoli, who had 10 RBIs in the Rangers' 2011 World Series.

Choo, hitting .096 at the end of April, has reached base in 53 of the last 55 games and hit .397 with 25 runs and 16 walks the last 23 games. The right fielder goes into the postseason with a season-high .276 batting average.

Third baseman Adrian Beltre, who hit the go-ahead homer Sunday against the Angels, is batting a season-best .287.

Harvey apologizes for missing workout

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Matt Harvey is off to a horrendous start in his first postseason.

The star pitcher missed a mandatory New York Mets workout Tuesday at Citi Field and apologized to the team for arriving late. Harvey did not give a reason for his absence when he spoke to reporters about 15 minutes after practice ended. He did not take questions, either.

"I just screwed up," Harvey said. Mets manager Terry Collins told reporters Harvey called and said he got stuck in traffic. Later, Collins told Newsday and the New York Post that when Harvey showed up, he said he had lost track of time.

Whatever the reason, captain David Wright definitely sounded annoyed. "It's about the guys that are here. And the guys that are here, we had a great workout," Wright said. "So you will have to talk to Matt about that."

New York opens its NL playoff series against the Dodgers on Friday night in Los Angeles. Collins told reporters Harvey will be fined but remains scheduled to start Game 3 at Citi Field next Monday.

Harvey was not on the field as the Mets went through drills from around noon to 2 p.m. General manager Sandy Alderson initially said he didn't know why Harvey was absent.

"Obviously, today was not the greatest. I know we had a mandatory workout. And

the last thing I ever want to do is not be here for my team," Harvey said. "Basically, there's no excuse. I screwed up. I wasn't here. I showed up a little late."

Harvey's agent, Scott Boras, also was in the dark at first. He told The Associated Press by phone he wasn't sure why his client wasn't at the workout.

"I've talked to Sandy and I've talked to Terry and my teammates and apologized to them and apologized to everybody," Harvey said, wearing sweats and a Mets cap while seated in front of a microphone.

"They understand I'm here to get my workout in and be with the team. Unfortunately today, I screwed up. So there's not really anything else to say. They know what happened and I told everybody and apologized to everybody, told them it's not going to happen again. It's never happened before and unfortunately it happened kind of at a bad time."

Harvey's time in New York has been anything but drama-free.

The right-hander was panned last month during a ruckus over his workload on the mound in his first season back from Tommy John surgery.

He finished 13-8 with a 2.71 ERA in 29 starts and 189¹/₃ innings, surpassing the 180-inning limit Boras said doctors recommended.



Ship's Store official new car program

Exclusive Navy at-sea offers:

www.navyauto.com or nasinfo@navyauto.com

NFL to play more overseas

Associated Press

NEW YORK — NFL owners approved more international games through 2025 on Wednesday, including ones in places other than England.

An agreement to stage games in the United Kingdom through 2016 not only was extended, but other nations will be considered for international games. Mexico, Germany and Canada are among those interested in regular-season games, with Mexico a front-runner next year.

The league will announce the 2016 international games this fall. Three games are being held at London's Wembley Stadium this season for the second straight year, and that number could be increased.

"This marks an important step in our long-term international growth," Commissioner Roger Goodell said. "We think it's time to expand our international series to other countries and respond to the growing interest in our game not only in the U.K., but elsewhere around the world."

The league also is looking at moving the Pro Bowl to international sites. Brazil expressed interest in the all-star game, and Mark Waller, the NFL's vice president/international, said Australia and Asia were potential sites.

Earlier this year, the NFL agreed with English Premier League club Tottenham to play at least two games a season at its new stadium in north London, which is scheduled to open in 2018. That is a 10-year deal.

In other NFL news:

■ Rams linebacker Alec Ogletree underwent surgery to repair his fractured right fibula on Tuesday, but coach Jeff Fisher said the team will wait to decide whether to make a roster move with him.

Fisher said the operation went "really well." Ogletree may be placed on injured reserve/designated for return, which would allow him to return after eight weeks.

Fisher said, "It's going to be longer than eight weeks, but there's a chance for a return."

Americans top Panama

COMMERCE CITY, Colo. — Substitute Jerome Kiesewetter sparked the offense with a goal and an assist in the second half, and the United States beat Panama 4-0 in CONCACAF Olympic men's soccer qualifying on a rainy Tuesday night.

Already through to the semifinal round, the Americans didn't have much to play for and rested several of their starters.

Luis Gil wrapped up the scoring by converting a penalty kick, helping the Americans advance out of Group A with a 3-0 record. Canada finished second.

Floods change LSU-SC venue

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The game between No. 7 LSU and South Carolina on Saturday is being moved to Baton Rouge because of ongoing problems after flooding around Columbia.

Gamecocks officials said Wednesday the kickoff time has not been announced for the Southeastern Conference matchup.

Authorities were worried about diverting law enforcement from clean-up duties. There also are dozens of roads in the Columbia area closed from flood damage.

In other college football news:

■ Injured UCLA linebacker Myles Jack has dropped out of school, and he plans to enter the NFL Draft next year.

UCLA coach Jim Mora expressed trepidation about Jack's decision when he announced it Tuesday.

Jack is out for the rest of his junior season after tearing a ligament in his knee during a non-contact drill in practice last month.

Mora said Jack and his family had already decided Jack should drop out of school to prepare for the NFL before speaking to Mora. The veteran NFL coach said the move is "very risky."

Spieth, D. Johnson to partner

INCHEON, South Korea — Jordan Spieth and Dustin Johnson battled at Chambers Bay in the U.S. Open. They will be partners in South Korea at the Presidents Cup.

Spieth and Johnson will be in the anchor match of foursomes Thursday against Danny Lee of New Zealand and Marc Leishman of Australia when the Presidents Cup begins at the Jack Nicklaus Golf Club Korea.

Sabres' Eichel set for debut

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Jack Eichel had no trouble interpreting the cautionary message the Buffalo Sabres sent when they randomly assigned him a No. 41 jersey to wear for the team's rookie developmental camp in July.

There would be no special treatment for the Sabres' top prospect no matter how much buzz the 18-year-old center had created in Buffalo upon being selected with the No. 2 pick in the draft. If Eichel wanted to one day wear the number of his choosing, he would have to earn it.

"I wanted to be treated just like anyone else," Eichel said. "When the time comes, if it does come, then I'll make the change from 41 to 15. But until then, I'll be 41."

Let the No. 15 Eichel era formally begin. After wowing fans with numerous highlight-reel plays over the past month, Eichel has secured a top-line spot on the Sabres' roster in preparing to make his NHL debut in Buffalo's season opener against Ottawa on Thursday.

"It's going to be a special moment for me," Eichel said after practice Tuesday. "It's something I've dreamed of my whole life, stepping foot on the ice. I made the NHL. I'm trying to soak it all in right now."

There has been a lot to take in even for a player accustomed to success.

At Boston University last year, he led the nation in scoring and became only the second freshman to win the Hobey Baker Award as college hockey's MVP.

Eichel has barely missed a step in making the transition to the NHL, while playing up to the pre-draft billing in which he and No. 1 pick, Edmonton's Connor McDavid, were both touted as "once-in-a-generation talents."

In four preseason games, Eichel led Buffalo with six points (two goals, four assists). Both goals were game-winners and scored on penalty-killing breakaways.

In the process, Eichel showed flashes of his deft playmaking ability as well as a powerful and effortless skating style.

That was no more evident than the opening goal he scored in a 4-0 win over Toronto last week.

Eichel began heading up the ice when teammate Nicolas Deslauriers intercepted a pass in the high slot. Fed the puck at his own blue line, Eichel took three strides to gain a clear-cut breakaway from center before snapping a hard shot that beat Jonathan Bernier on the glove side.

"I thought we had a 2-on-1. But at the end I saw that he was just a little faster than me," Deslauriers said, smiling. "If you get caught behind him, I don't think you're going to catch him."

Coach Dan Bylsma is most impressed by Eichel's all-around play.

"He's really been skating way more defending and way more competitive in the back end than he has on offense. And frankly, I didn't really see that in a lot of the games I saw him play (on tape)," said Bylsma, the former Pittsburgh Penguins coach who was hired by Buffalo in May. "And if there's anything that's changed my impression, that's been it."

At 6-foot-1 and 200 pounds, Eichel has a body already built to play in the NHL. He's also shown poise for someone being hailed as a would-be savior for a win-starved fan base of a team coming off two consecutive last-place finishes and has missed the playoffs for four straight seasons.

Veteran forward Matt Moulson has helped ease Eichel's transition, by having the rookie live with him and his family.

Falcons getting off to fast start

Associated Press

FLOWERY BRANCH, Ga. — Coach Dan Quinn has been trying to get the Atlanta Falcons to start games fast.

His message seems to be taking effect. In Sunday's blowout win over Houston, the Falcons did as he instructed, avoiding a sluggish first half by taking care of the ball on offense and taking it away on defense.

"For us, it was going to be about the ball, so for us to be plus-four and convert on some opportunities — all units improved," Quinn said Monday. "That's our goal going forward."

Quinn's halftime talk to the team was nothing like last week's when Atlanta trailed by 11 at Dallas and had to rally in the fourth quarter for the third straight week.

This time, the Falcons were up 28-0. Turnovers — no miscues by the offense, an interception by Jonathan Babineaux and two fumble recoveries by Desmond Trufant — were the reason why.

"The coaches give us a great game plan, and we go out and execute it," Trufant said. "We believe in each other, and it's really starting to show."

Turnover margin was one of Quinn's big themes at the start of training camp, and he will repeat it again this week when the Falcons (4-0) host Washington (2-2).

He wants the ball-hawking skills to improve. Strong safety William Moore has two of the team's four picks, but no Atlanta cornerback yet has an interception.

Did Harvick hit wall to hide something?

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — First, Kevin Harvick embarrassed the field with a dominating victory at Dover.

Then his victory celebration made some of his competitors wonder if the reigning Sprint Cup champion had something to hide.

Many believe Harvick backed his car into the wall during his celebratory burn-out perhaps in an intentional attempt to create damage to his Chevrolet that would limit NASCAR's ability to do a proper post-race inspection.

Harvick on Tuesday denied any knowledge of hitting the wall.

"I did?" he asked. "I didn't even know."

When told that a conspiracy was potentially brewing — and growing on social media — Harvick seemed unconcerned and chalked it up as competition doing "what they're supposed to do — they're supposed to try and create commotion."

"I don't actually remember hitting the wall," he said. "I remember the tires blowing out, but I don't know if I actually hit the wall. These things are hard to win and I enjoy celebrating, and I'm going to burn the tires off for sure."

Brad Keselowski said Tuesday it was "absolutely" common for drivers to intentionally damage their cars after a race.

Denny Hamlin called on NASCAR to figure out a way to keep cars intact for the technical inspection that occurs after a car is returned to North Carolina for a thorough review at the research and development center.

"You don't want to discredit anyone's win because what he did was really, really impressive," Hamlin said. "But all the other competitors, whoever doesn't win each week wants to make sure they're on a level playing field with whoever did win. Going forward, I would like to see some kind of way of ensuring our cars all stay intact for the R&D Center. Because right now, the R&D Center is kind of a moot point if guys tear up their cars."

Harvick led 581 laps in the first three Chase races, but he crashed in the opener at Chicago and ran out of gas while headed to the win at New Hampshire. It backed him into a must-win situation at Dover, a track where he had never before won a Cup race.

He dominated the race Sunday and easily grabbed the win he needed to advance into the second round of the Chase.

Kyle Busch declined — sort of — to speculate on Harvick's intent during his victory celebration, saying with an exaggerated eye roll, "Sometimes when you're in a burnout and you're in the smoke, you can't see where you're at."

But Keselowski said intentionally damaging the car is common and he has done it himself. NASCAR inspects several cars at the race track following a race, while three or so are brought back to North Carolina for a more detailed inspection.

"The cars aren't tech'd the same way at the track as they can be tech'd at the R&D Center," Keselowski said. "It's been going on for a long time. But I'm not making any accusations. I've definitely blown tires out. I think every driver has done things to do some kind of damage to their car."