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Army officer testifies about Ukraine call

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An Army officer at the National Security Council who twice raised concerns over the Trump administration's push to have Ukraine investigate Democrats and Joe Biden, testified behind closed doors against White House orders Tuesday in the impeachment inquiry.

Alexander Vindman, a lieutenant colonel who served in Iraq and later as a diplomat, told House investigators that he listened to President Donald Trump's July 25 call with new Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and reported his concerns to the NSC's lead counsel, according to an advance copy of his testimony.

His arrival in military blue, with medals, created a striking image as he entered the Capitol and made his way to the secure briefing room.

"I was concerned by the call," Vindman was saying, according to the testimony obtained Monday night by The Associated Press. "I did not think it was proper to demand that a foreign government investigate a U.S. citizen, and I was worried about the implications for the U.S. government's

support of Ukraine."

Vindman, a 20-year military officer, was the first official who listened in on that phone call to testify as the impeachment inquiry reaches deeper into the Trump administration and Democrats prepare for the next, public phase of the probe. He was also the first current White House official to appear before the impeachment panels. With the administration directing staff not to appear, he was issued a subpoena to testify.

The inquiry is looking into Trump's call, in which he asked Zelenskyy for a "favor" — to investigate Democrats — that the Democrats say was a quid pro quo for military aid and could be an impeachable offense.

Trump took to Twitter on Tuesday to denounce the probe as a "sham," adding: "Why are people that I never even heard of testifying about the call. Just READ THE CALL TRANSCRIPT AND THE IMPEACHMENT HOAX IS OVER!"

Vindman, who arrived in the United States as a 3-year-old from the former Soviet Union, wrote that it was his "sacred

duty" to defend the United States.

Some Trump allies, looking for ways to discredit Vindman, questioned the colonel's loyalties because he was born in the region. But the line of attack was rejected by some Republicans, including Rep. Liz Cheney, who said it was "shameful" to criticize his patriotism.

His appearance came a day after Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the House will vote on a resolution to affirm the impeachment investigation, set rules for public hearings and outline the potential process for writing articles of impeachment against Trump.

The vote is expected Thursday.

Vindman said that in spring of this year he became aware of "outside influencers" promoting what he called a "false narrative of Ukraine" that undermined U.S. efforts.

Other officials have testified that Ukraine policy was increasingly being handled by the president's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, and others in the administration outside regular policy-making channels. One diplomat testified it was "highly irregular."

Despite delays, Navy optimistic on Ford carriers

(Newport News, Va.) Daily Press

The aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford has passed the halfway point of sea trials, running at full throttle and tracking simulated targets in exercises somewhere in the Atlantic.

The future USS John F. Kennedy hit the water Tuesday off Virginia. Newport News Shipbuilding began flooding the dry dock where the carrier rests, bringing the second Ford-class ship afloat for the first time. Its christening is set for Dec. 7.

This is all good news to James Geurts, the Navy's acquisition chief, who told reporters Monday that he remains upbeat about Ford Class carriers despite delays and a history of struggles with new technology.

"There's lots of things we're going to keep tracking, but there's not anything that's keeping me up at night," said Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition.

The first-in-class Ford left the Newport News shipyard Friday after spending 15 months undergoing repairs and upgrades. That was three months longer than expected, one reason being problems with its weapons elevators. The Navy still hasn't cracked the code, although four of the 11 elevators are certified and progress is being reported on others.

Navy Secretary Richard Spencer has expressed his frustration with shipyard senior leaders about the elevators, saying the company didn't adequately inform the Navy about the problems.

Geurts, who joined Spencer in visiting the Ford on Monday, deferred questions regarding the shipyard. He praised the progress made during the last three months as the Ford prepared to leave Newport News.

"While there is some frustration at our speed to get around this problem initially, my focus is how do I take the great pride, spirit, hunger, teamwork, I saw out on that

ship — and in the last 90 days — and make that the way we do all business."

The Ford is scheduled to be at sea until about midweek, Geurts said. It will return to Naval Station Norfolk and begin a new series of workups. The Navy isn't saying when it will be combat-ready, but Spencer said Monday it would reach that point well before 2024, a date floated in a congressional hearing last week.

Geurts pledged to allow journalists to embark on the Ford during future at-sea trips as it prepares for its first deployment.

"I encourage you to talk to sailors up on the deck," he said.

Commissioned in 2017, the first-in-class Ford is packed with new technology. That speaks to its potential, and to its struggles. Problems have arisen in critical systems, including the electromagnetic catapults and advanced arresting gear, designed to allow aircraft to take off and safely land on the flight deck.

Police arrest 4 sailors in disturbance on Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japanese police have arrested four sailors with Naval Special Warfare Command visiting from Hawaii over the weekend on suspicion of causing a drunken disturbance and then fleeing the scene.

Desmond Ruffin, 23; Mark Elam, 30; Colter Krebill, 21; and Todd Casselman, 23, were taken into custody Sunday night in Onna village, Okinawa Police said in a statement Tuesday. Ruffin is charged with trespassing and the others with obstruction of performance of public duty.

The sailors are assigned to a special operations unit that's on Okinawa for routine training, said Commander Fleet Activities Okinawa spokesman Robert Purdy. He declined to provide their rank or duty station due to the "sensitive nature of their work."

The incident occurred at approximately 9 p.m. Sunday when police were called to a disturbance at a Japanese pub-style restaurant, according to the Okinawa Times. Three men entered the restaurant to ask directions to a "strip bar." The men were loud and reportedly threw a reservation board, prompting the manager to call police, the newspaper said. They fled when they heard sirens, according to the report.

Ruffin was found hiding in the yard of a local resident and arrested on a trespassing accusation at 9:42 p.m., the Okinawa Police said. Elam, Krebill and Casselman were found walking in the Fuchaku area of Onna village at 11:33 p.m., according to police.

When stopped by police, the men started banging on the windows of a police car, according to Okinawa Police. Police say Elam cracked a windshield with a piece of wood.

Pentagon will buy more F-35s though readiness goals unmet

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has agreed to purchase hundreds more F-35 Lightning II aircraft from Lockheed Martin for the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and international partner nations even as a shortage of spare parts has kept the costly fighter jets from achieving combat readiness goals.

Top Pentagon officials announced Tuesday that the military would buy another 478 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters in a \$34 billion deal that will reduce the average cost of the aircraft about 12.7% in three installments of aircraft deliveries. The purchase announced is the biggest yet for the F-35 program, the Pentagon's most expensive-ever weapons program that has faced criticism for years over delays, cost overruns and problems that have grounded jets delivered to the military.

"I have full faith and confidence in the F-35 program and

our ability to deliver F-35 combat capability anywhere in the world," Ellen Lord, the Pentagon's top acquisition official, told reporters at the Pentagon.

The new contract covers three upcoming batches — called lots — of aircraft to be delivered to the U.S. and partner militaries. The first batch will include 149 jets, the second 160 and the third 169 fighters.

But the F-35 program has continued to face problems, including its failure this year to reach the goal set last year by then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis for all variants of the U.S. fighter aircraft to achieve 80 percent of aircraft available to fly combat missions at any given time. In September, U.S. F-35s reached a 73% mission-capable rate, up from about 55% one year earlier, said Air Force Lt. Gen. Eric T. Fick, the chief of the Pentagon's F-35 program.

The problems hindering the F-35 program from reaching those combat readiness goals lie primarily with a shortage of

spare parts, Fick said, especially in three areas — issues with a shortage of replacements for the stealth coating on the jets' canopies, engine fuel hydraulic tubes and wing-tip light lenses.

The Government Accountability Office warned in April that the Pentagon was removing spare parts from some of its existing planes to keep others flying. Lord said the military was improving and working with Lockheed Martin to increase the number of spare parts available, which has helped to increase the combat readiness numbers.

The cost of the F-35A — the traditional take-off and land variant of the Joint Strike Fighter flown by the Air Force and international partners including Israel, Italy and the United Kingdom — will fall below \$80 million per aircraft for the first time in the new contract's final batch. The aircraft is also built in two other variants: the F-35B, which is flown by the Marine Corps, and the F-35C, flown by the U.S. Navy.

USAF defines criteria for drone pilot medal

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

A new Air Force campaign medal will recognize drone operators and other airmen who directly supported a combat operation from a remote location.

The Remote Combat Effects Campaign medal is part of an effort to better recognize the combat contributions of airmen who are not deployed, the Air Force said in a statement announcing the award's criteria Monday.

Former Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson established the decoration earlier this year.

Airmen serving in the following career fields are eligible

for the award: remotely piloted aircraft; cyber; space or intelligence; surveillance and reconnaissance. Airmen from other career fields may be considered for the medal on a case-by-case basis, service officials said.

To be eligible, an airman's contributions must have occurred on or after Sept. 11, 2001, while assigned or attached to a unit directly in support of a Pentagon combat operation, the criteria states.

An airman must have "personally provided" hands-on employment of a weapon system that has a direct and immediate effect on combat operations, the Air Force said. The airman also cannot have been physical-

ly exposed to hostile actions or at risk of exposure to hostile action, though that could qualify them for other awards. Qualifying combat operations involve several in the Middle East and elsewhere in Asia: Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, Nomad Shadow, Freedom's Sentinel, Inherent Resolve, Odyssey Lightning and Pacific Eagle — Philippines.

Drone pilots have played a central role in U.S. efforts targeting extremists, often putting in long hours. The Air Force has struggled to retain drone pilots, with some developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, studies have shown.

Army also captured 2 ISIS fighters in raid

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army commandos captured two Islamic State fighters in the raid of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's northwest Syria compound that led to the death of the ISIS founder and leader, the top U.S. general said Monday.

The men were taken to a "secure location" after their capture, said Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The fighters and other information collected Saturday during the Delta Force raid on the compound could provide the United States invaluable insight into future ISIS plans. News reports, including from The Washington Post citing unnamed U.S. officials, indicated former ISIS members provided information about al-Baghdadi's location since ISIS lost the last bits of territory that the group controlled in eastern Syria.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said al-Baghdadi's death would not mean an end to ISIS, an organization still intent on reconstituting its so-called caliphate, which at its height in 2014 stretched across eastern Syria and northern Iraq in an area about the size of the United Kingdom. But the operation presented a warning to terrorists who continued to threaten the United States, he said.

Esper credited President Donald Trump with ordering the operation some seven months after the United States announced the Syrian Democratic Forces had liberated the last of ISIS-controlled territory

in Syria. The raid sent a roughly 100-soldier Delta unit on eight helicopters through hostile territory into the facility about 4 miles south of Turkey's border in Syria's Idlib province.

Trump on Sunday said al-Baghdadi had attempted to flee the compound after the U.S. commandos attack, and he was chased into a dead-end tunnel by a military dog before setting off an explosive vest, killing himself and three children, and wounding the canine. Milley and Esper confirmed many of those details on Monday, but they declined to characterize al-Baghdadi as "screaming, crying and whimpering" like "a coward" in his final moments, as Trump said repeatedly during a Sunday news conference to announce the terrorist leader's death.

Milley and Esper were photographed alongside Trump and other top administration and military officials watching the raid from the White House Situation Room. Milley said Trump might have learned such details by talking with service members present on the raid, but the general said he had not yet talked to those troops.

Al-Baghdadi's remains were removed from the compound after his death and were transported to a secure location where his identity was verified through DNA forensics, Milley said. His body was then disposed of "appropriately," the general said, declining to confirm al-Baghdadi was buried at sea as U.S. special operations forces had done after killing a previous most-wanted terrorist, al-Qaida leader Osama bin

Trump feeds into intrigue with his tweet about dog

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — In the midst of the raid targeting the leader of Islamic State was this: at least one military working dog who chased Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi into a tunnel before he detonated a suicide vest and died.

Intrigue about the dog began building after the president disclosed that al-Baghdadi died during a U.S. special operations raid and that the dog was injured.

On Monday, the Pentagon kept most details about the covert canine, including its name and background, on a tight leash.

On Monday, President Donald Trump boosted the story, tweeting a declassified photograph of the furry special operator — a Belgian Malinois — in an armored vest. In the image, its ears stood alert and its tongue hung loose — and it appeared that the Secret Very Good Boy might actually be a Secret Very Good Girl.

"We have declassified a picture of the wonderful dog (name not declassified)

that did such a GREAT JOB in capturing and killing the Leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi!" Trump wrote.

The decision followed nearly a whole day of the Pentagon wrestling with how much to say about the pooch. Three U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity due to sensitivity about the raid, said Monday morning that the dog's identity was classified because of its affiliation with a classified unit.

By midday, the Pentagon's top general was answering questions at a news conference about the pooch.

"We're not releasing the name of the dog right now," said Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Milley, standing alongside Defense Secretary Mark Esper, said: "We're not going to release just yet photos or names of dogs or anything else."

"Protecting his identity," Esper interjected.

"Protecting the dog's identity," Milley agreed.

Laden.

Milley did confirm the Pentagon on Monday was reviewing video and photographic evidence captured during the

raid and could release imagery in the coming days. Trump, too, hinted Monday that he hoped to release some video from the mission.

Covert Air Force shuttle returns after 780 days in space

Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel

A U.S. Air Force space shuttle landed at Kennedy Space Center in Florida early Sunday morning after spending a record-breaking 780 days in space.

The covert orbital test mini-shuttle, named X-37B, arrived at the Kennedy Space Center's Shuttle Landing Facility at 3:51 a.m. on Sunday after being in orbit for

two years since its initial launch on Sept. 7, 2017.

"The safe return of this spacecraft, after breaking its own endurance record, is the result of the innovative partnership between Government and Industry," said Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein in a news release.

This was the second time the X-37B shuttle landed at the Kennedy Space Cen-

ter, as the fourth mission landed after 718 days in orbit on May 7, 2017.

X-37B is the Air Force's reusable and unmanned spacecraft that has taken multiple classified missions to recover experiments and has been tested in a long-duration space environment.

The sixth mission for X-37B is prepared to launch from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida for 2020.

California fire crews race to contain blazes

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Crews fought Tuesday to drown, slash and smother wildfires that have incinerated dozens of homes in Northern and Southern California before returning windstorms can blow them back into furious life.

In California's wine country, firefighters worked to reinforce fire lines in western Sonoma County while rushing to shore up the eastern side that could be the new focus as winds switched direction.

"We're playing both offense and defense right now on two different sides of the fire," said Jonathan Cox of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Bulldozers carved firebreaks, hand crews attacked hot spots with hoses and

shovels, and aircraft painted hillsides with fire retardant.

The fire that began last week near the town of Geyserville had destroyed 57 homes and damaged another dozen, with 90,000 homes and other buildings considered threatened. About 156,000 people were under mandatory evacuation orders.

The blaze was 15% contained.

Evacuation orders were downgraded to warnings for some 30,000 people in the west but new warnings were issued to people in the east, with Calistoga in Napa County and Middletown in Lake County — a community badly damaged by a 2015 wildfire.

Winds were expected to hit 20 to 30 mph Tuesday, with gusts of up to 50 mph by af-

ternoon. The winds will peak by midnight before easing, forecasters said.

In the south, a brief lull in the wind helped crews attacking a blaze that swept through the star-studded hills of Los Angeles on Monday. The fire roared up a steep hillside near the J. Paul Getty Museum in the Brentwood section. It destroyed at least eight homes and damaged at least six, forcing Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James and thousands of others to flee.

The Getty, with its collection of priceless art, was not threatened, fire officials said.

Much of the blaze was reduced to smoldering ruins and hot spots but hot, dry Santa Ana winds that could blow them to life and spread embers were predicted beginning Tuesday night.

In Chicago, Trump calls city an embarrassment

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Visiting Chicago for the first time as president, Donald Trump disparaged the city Monday as a haven for criminals that is "embarrassing to us as a nation." The city's top cop sat out Trump's speech to protest the president's immigration policies and frequently divisive rhetoric.

"There is one person who is not here today," Trump told a friendly audience at a conference of police chiefs. "Where is he? I want to talk to him. In fact, more than anyone else, this person should be here because maybe he could learn something, and that's the superintendent of the Chicago Police, Eddie Johnson."

Johnson's decision to boycott the event angered the city's chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, which said in a Facebook post that "such a gesture would be an insult to both President Trump and the office of the presidency itself and would be a mark of disgrace upon the city throughout the entire nation, including Mayor Lori Lightfoot."

But the Democratic mayor and Illinois' Democratic governor stood in solidarity with Johnson, who announced days before the International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference that he would not attend.

"This is the land of Lincoln and when you come to the state of Illinois you should respect all the people who live here in the

state of Illinois," said Gov. J.B. Pritzker.

Lightfoot also refused to meet with Trump, and said on Twitter that she supports Johnson.

"It's no surprise that (@)realDonaldTrump brought his insulting, ignorant buffoonery to Chicago," the mayor tweeted. "Luckily, in this city, we know the truth and we will not let anyone — no matter how high the office — denigrate who we are as a people or our status as a welcoming city."

"Rather than belittle Chicago's communities with hateful and dishonest rhetoric, he needs to go back to D.C. and face his fate," Lightfoot said, apparently referring to the House impeachment inquiry against the president.

Masked gunmen shoot protesters in Iraq holy city

Associated Press

Masked gunmen opened fire at Iraqi protesters in the Shiite holy city of Karbala on Tuesday, killing 18 people and wounding hundreds, security officials said, in one of the deadliest single attacks on protesters since anti-government demonstrations erupted earlier this month.

The attack, which happened overnight, came as Iraqis took to the streets for a fifth consecutive day, protesting their government's corruption, lack of services and other grievances.

The bloodshed in Karbala, a major pilgrimage site where a revered Shiite figure was killed in a 7th century battle, could mark a turning point in the demonstrations

in which 240 people have been killed so far this month.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attack, and protesters said they did not know whether the masked men were riot police, special forces or Iran-linked militias. Protesters said Iraqi soldiers had been stationed around the protest site but withdrew after the attackers began firing tear gas and live fire.

Amid a clampdown by security forces, it was difficult to piece together what exactly prompted the attack, although eyewitnesses told The Associated Press that masked gunmen opened fire on the camp. There were differing accounts and death tolls and details were still emerging.

The provincial governor, Nassif al-

Khutabi, denied that any protesters were killed but said there were some injuries among security forces.

He said videos that had spread online were fabricated and not from Karbala. Footage circulating online purporting to show the aftermath of the attack showed fires and people running away to the backdrop of heavy gunfire. His description contradicted that of people who were at the scene.

An AP video showed a nighttime fire and young protesters, some of them taking cellphone footage, as gunfire echoes in the background. An ambulance can be seen trying to drive amid the chaos, and Iraqi security forces arriving at the scene.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Attorney general warns of word game scam

NH CONCORD — New Hampshire Attorney General Gordon MacDonald is telling residents to be aware of scammers targeting personal information through the use of popular phone-based word games, such as Words with Friends.

The game's app is downloaded for players to take turns building words in a crossword-style fashion, similar to Scrabble.

Authorities said scammers use the app's communication function to ask users questions to gain personal information that's used to exploit the individual. They say scammers also try to seek a personal or romantic connection and urge the user to send gift cards, money and valuable property.

Scammers also will send harmful links and ask users to switch to other platforms that make it easier for the scammer to access the user's personal information.

Authorities say players should only communicate with people known to them.

Police: Victim shot himself with flare gun

SD SIOUX FALLS — Sioux Falls police said a man accidentally shot himself in the leg with a modified flare gun.

Police were called to a residence Friday night about someone with a gunshot wound. Officers arrived and determined the man had accidentally shot himself with a modified flare gun.

The man was taken to a hospital, where he was in stable condition.

Police continue to investigate.

Dad accused of injuring man at crash scene

FL PEMBROKE PINES — Police said a South Florida man is accused of showing up at a crash scene involving his son and slamming the other driver to the pavement, resulting in a serious head injury.

Pembroke Pines police said Ray Batten, 18, and Raul Umana, 65, were involved in a crash Sunday night. The South Florida SunSentinel reported both drivers contacted police. As officers were investigating, Pablo Batten, 46, arrived at the scene, grabbed Umana by the neck and "slammed" him to the ground. Umana was taken to a hospital for treatment.

Pablo Batten was charged with aggravated battery on a person 65 or older, and resisting arrest without violence. Bond was set at \$10,000. A lawyer wasn't listed on jail records.

Voters to decide if King Boulevard will stay

MO KANSAS CITY — Kansas City, Mo., voters will decide if a street named for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. should keep that name or revert to its old one.

Until January, the street through the city's predominantly black east side was known as The Paseo. The City Council voted to rename it after King, but many in the community want the old name back. The Kansas City Star reports that a petition drive put the issue on the Nov. 5 ballot.

Members of a group called Save The Paseo said they want to honor King, but that the street is the wrong choice because of its historic importance to the city. Ministers who pushed for the initial change worry about the message that will be sent if King's name is removed.

Psychiatrist who used whip may lose license

TN MEMPHIS — A Tennessee psychiatrist whose license was suspended last year for using riding crops on patients may now lose her license again over allegations that she violated her professional probation.

The Tennessean reported the state Board of Medical Examiners says Dr. Valerie Augustus, 57, didn't participate in therapy sessions or reimburse the state \$50,000 for the cost of the case. The newspaper recently obtained new charges the state Department of Health filed against Augustus last month, accusing her of misconduct and violating a board order.

The board has said the Christian Psychiatric Services operator used a crop or whip on at least 10 patients. Augustus appealed the ruling, saying the whipping was done jokingly.

A hearing is set for January.

Police: Man leaped high wall twice during chase

MD SILVER SPRING — Police in Maryland said a burglary suspect jumped over a 12-foot wall twice during a chase before being captured.

Montgomery County police said in a press release Steven Anderson, 56, is charged with burglary and assault. The Washington Post reported the "startling display of acrobatics" happened Oct. 19 in Silver Spring.

An officer with a K-9 tracked down Anderson. Police said he then "jumped over an approximately 12-foot wall," but jumped back over when he encountered more officers on the other side.

The newspaper reports the world high-jump record is just over 8 feet, so it's unlikely Anderson cleared the wall in a

single bound. It's unclear how it was climbed.

Man steals loader, drives through yards

KS TOPEKA — A 46-year-old man is facing several charges after stealing a piece of heavy equipment and driving it through several Topeka yards.

The Topeka Capital-Journal reported the man stole the construction equipment early Sunday morning and drove it through several yards in northeast Topeka. Topeka police evacuated several homes as a precaution before using bean bag pellets to stop the man driving the loader.

Police Capt. Colleen Stuart said the man refused to stop and turned the loader toward police before officers fired the nonlethal rounds at him.

Alexander, Southside Johnny hall of famers

NJ ASBURY PARK — "Seinfeld" star Jason Alexander, rocker Southside Johnny Lyon and the authors of "Jaws" and "Game Of Thrones" were among those inducted to the New Jersey Hall of Fame on Sunday.

Fellow New Jersey rocker Jon Bon Jovi, already in the Hall, inducted Southside Johnny during the ceremony in Asbury Park.

Other inductees include Martha Stewart, former New York Giants football players Harry Carson and Bart Oates, "Jaws" author Peter Benchley and "Game Of Thrones" author George R.R. Martin.

Alexander, who grew up in Livingston, played George Costanza on "Seinfeld."

Lyon, of Neptune, helped pioneer the Jersey shore sound with The Asbury Jukes.

From wire reports

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Howard no longer hated in Los Angeles

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Dwight Howard swatted the shot into the stands and playfully wagged his index finger, his famous smile visible to the back of the lower bowl at Staples Center.

And not for the first time Sunday night, thousands of Lakers fans rose from their seats and cheered for the single most reviled basketball player in Los Angeles for the past six years.

Hollywood loves a comeback story, but this big man's redemption arc is almost too unbelievable for LA.

Six years after Howard spent one tumultuous season with the Lakers and then spurned them in free agency, his unlikely return to the team this year has begun with an even more improbable development.

Howard is playing superbly, and Lakers fans have already embraced him again after just three games.

Howard made an enormous impact off the bench in Sunday's win over the Charlotte Hornets, scoring 16 points on

8-for-8 shooting and grabbing 10 rebounds with four blocked shots in just 23 minutes.

And the way he did it — hustling, grinding and playing stellar defense — was wildly appreciated by Lakers fans who largely thought of him as the epitome of an NBA diva just a few months ago.

"I'm just grateful," Howard said. "I think myself and the fans, we've been through a lot together. But just to be back here means a lot, so I'm just taking it all in. Every second, every moment on the court is valuable, and the fans enjoy when we go out there and put everything on the line."

It's difficult to overstate the about-face that has occurred for both Howard and Lakers fans. Howard's every appearance in any uniform at Staples since 2013 had been greeted with deafening boos and vitriol — but in the Lakers' first three games, he has earned multiple ovations for his selfless, energetic play.

"That's why we brought him here," LeBron James said. "We

felt like when everyone else was writing him off, we could give him a great opportunity. We believed in him, and his word, and he's making the most of it."

It all goes back to 2012, when Howard joined the Lakers from Orlando and teamed up with Kobe Bryant, Steve Nash and Pau Gasol on a potential superteam. Those Lakers foundered and crashed out in the first round after Bryant and Nash were injured while Howard struggled through a back injury.

After clashing with Bryant and reacting negatively to the Lakers' championship-or-bust culture, Howard was so eager to leave LA that he signed with Houston for \$30 million less than he would have made in the deal offered by the Lakers. LA's fans took it personally.

The Lakers haven't made the playoffs since, and Howard's career never reached its former heights. He bounced from the Rockets to five more franchises, including two that waived him before he even played for

them.

Howard is 33 years old now, and he missed all but nine games of last season with Washington after back surgery. A player who ranked among the league's elite during the first decade of his career had been reduced to a journeyman with no clear future.

Howard thought deeply about the state of his career during his recovery, spent largely alone on his farm back in north Georgia.

"You don't want to take anything for granted," Howard said. "Surgeries, missing games, being out for seasons — every moment that you have on the court is valuable. Before I even had the opportunity to come to the Lakers, I just kept telling myself, 'Wherever I'm at, whoever I'm playing for, when I step on the court, just give 110%. Even if it's 2 minutes, 30 seconds, 15 minutes, just do whatever you can to help that team win.' And now I'm coming back to the best team in the best city in the world, so I'm very thankful."

NBA roundup

Portis' 28 points helps Knicks get first win of season

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Bobby Portis scored a season-high 28 points against his former team, including a go-ahead three-pointer with 1:47 remaining, and the New York Knicks beat the Chicago Bulls 105-98 on Monday night for their first victory of the season.

Portis hadn't scored in double digits yet in his first season with the Knicks, but was superb in bringing New York back from an 18-point deficit. The reserve was 10-for-14, making all four three-pointers, and added 11 rebounds.

The Knicks needed all of it on a night when they fell behind with a dreadful start and stayed that way until the fourth

quarter. They never even led until Portis' go-ahead three.

Rockets 116, Thunder 112: James Harden scored 40 points and Russell Westbrook scored 21 and fell an assist shy of a triple-double against his former team, as host Houston beat Oklahoma City.

Pistons 96, Pacers 94: Derrick Rose made a driving layup with 28.3 seconds left to give Detroit the lead and the host Pistons beat winless Indiana for the second time in a week.

Raptors 104, Magic 95: Kyle Lowry scored 10 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, Pascal Siakam added 24 and host Toronto withstood a late rally to beat Orlando for its third win in four games.

Bucks 129, Cavaliers 112:

Khris Middleton scored 21 points, George Hill added 19 and seven Milwaukee players finished in double figures in a win over visiting Cleveland.

Warriors 134, Pelicans 123: Stephen Curry had 26 points and 11 assists, and visiting Golden State won for the first time this season, beating winless New Orleans.

76ers 105, Hawks 103: Joel Embiid scored 36 points, including the winning free throws with 5.3 seconds left, and visiting Philadelphia won its third straight game to begin the season.

Spurs 113, Trail Blazers 110: DeMar DeRozan scored 27 points and host San Antonio overcame a sluggish start to beat Portland and remain

undefeated.

Nuggets 101, Kings 94: Jamal Murray scored four of his 18 points in the final 31 seconds, Gary Harris added a pair of late free throws and visiting Denver held on to beat winless Sacramento after blowing most of a big lead in the fourth quarter.

Jazz 96, Suns 95: Donovan Mitchell scored 25 points, including the winning free throw with 0.4 seconds left, and visiting Utah rallied to beat Phoenix.

Clippers 111, Hornets 96: Kawhi Leonard had 30 points, seven rebounds and six assists, and Lou Williams scored 23 points in Los Angeles' win over visiting Charlotte.

Steelers, down 14, rally past Dolphins

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Mason Rudolph heard the boos. They were impossible to miss as the minutes passed, the mistakes piled up and the Pittsburgh Steelers found themselves down two scores on Monday night to arguably the worst team in the NFL.

Turnovers. Dropped passes. Penalties. Missed opportunities. For the better part of 30 minutes, it was hard to tell if the Steelers or the Miami Dolphins were the team in the midst of a massive rebuild.

"I would have booed that performance, too," Rudolph said. "Coming out slow and it's the Pittsburgh Steelers. There's a standard here and we weren't meeting it at the time."

Eventually, however, Rudolph found his footing. Eventually, the Dolphins morphed back into the team playing for a shot at the top pick in the

draft. And eventually the Steelers avoided an embarrassing loss that would have effectively ended the competitive portion of their season by rallying for a 27-14 victory.

Rudolph threw for 251 yards and two touchdowns in his first start after getting knocked unconscious earlier this month against Baltimore, and James Conner added 145 yards and a touchdown on the ground as Pittsburgh (3-4) won consecutive games for the first time since ripping off six straight in the middle of last season.

"You dig a bit of a hole there in the first half and I was proud of the way we responded," Rudolph said.

Rudolph stressed he wasn't worried about the long-term effects of a frightening concussion he suffered against Baltimore on Oct. 6, when he was knocked cold on a helmet-to-helmet hit by Ravens safety

Earl Thomas. Still, he looked shaky at best during an ugly opening quarter that saw the Dolphins grab their first two-touchdown lead over any opponent in more than a year.

Pittsburgh's first possession ended with Rudolph throwing a pick to Xavien Howard — back in the lineup after missing two games with a knee injury — and its second ended with Rudolph misfiring badly on fourth down. Yet he remained upbeat amid the growing pains and eventually things started to click. Rudolph completed 20 of 36 passes, including a 45-yard touchdown to rookie Diontae Johnson late in the second quarter and a 26-yard strike to JuJu Smith-Schuster in the third quarter that put the Steelers firmly in control.

"We needed to get him going early on because all it takes is that one big play for him," Pittsburgh wide receiver James

Washington said. "His mind is going. He's got that adrenaline going and (once) we started moving the ball down the field running and passing, we were on."

And the Dolphins (0-7) were not.

Ryan Fitzpatrick passed for 190 yards with two touchdowns and two picks, both to Steelers safety Minkah Fitzpatrick, who orchestrated a trade from Miami to Pittsburgh last month. But a rare hot start couldn't prevent Miami from staying winless through seven games for the first time since 2011. The Dolphins have dropped 10 straight dating to last season.

"We just have to continue to keep fighting," Ryan Fitzpatrick said. "That's just kind of the place that we're at right now. Just continue to keep fighting, continue to keep going to practice and trying to get better every single day."

With every pitch, call for robot umpires grows louder

Associated Press

HOUSTON — From the box seats to the far reaches of the bleachers, all 40,000 umpires in the stands at Nationals Park were sure they could tell: Gerrit Cole's fastball to Victor Robles missed the strike zone.

By at least an inch, clearly.

That's not how Lance Barksdale saw it. He rung up Robles on strike three, leaving the Washington rookie hopping mad, and soon the ballpark was filled with angry chants at the plate umpire.

With every pitch at the World Series hurtling toward that strike zone box superimposed on TV screens, the call gets louder and louder: Bring on the robot umps!

"That's a hot topic," Houston manager AJ Hinch said Monday. "This is a big stage to be talking about hot topics. I guess it's always possible."

"I think it's a little naive to think that simply letting computers generate strike or ball,"

he said, "it's incredibly naive to think that there's not going to be pitfalls in that scenario, as well."

Shortly before Robles struck out, Washington manager Dave Martinez was perturbed when a pitch by one of his relievers didn't go the Nationals' way.

"C'mon, Lance!" he shouted from the bench. "It's the World Series! Wake up!"

Several umpires heard that hollering in Iowa. They'd met in Des Moines to attend the funeral service for one of their own, Eric Cooper, who died two weeks after working the AL playoffs.

To remember their friend, they went to a favorite spot of Coop's on Sunday night. Game 5 of the World Series was on, and soon the shop talk turned to the subject of robot umps.

"It did come up. And yes, it's frustrating," said Dale Scott, who umpired in the majors for more than 30 years and worked the World Series three times.

"We're never going to beat

technology," he said. "But do you want a video game or a game played by human beings?"

Major League Baseball is exploring the possibilities. The Arizona Fall League, made up of baseball's top prospects, used computers to call pitches over the past month.

Video quickly circulated of Giants youngster Jacob Heyward getting called out on a pitch that nearly bounced, then being ejected by a human ump for arguing. But the overall reviews weren't bad.

"For the most part, I don't think it's a terrible thing," Arizona prospect Seth Beer said.

No doubt there will be plenty of discussion about the robots in upcoming contract talks between umpires and MLB.

Meantime, what particularly peeves umps is that TV box.

Scott said the actual strike zone MLB uses to evaluate umpires isn't the same. Especially on high pitches.

"Ours is much more accu-

rate than what you see on TV," Scott said. "Do you notice how the zone is the same for Aaron Judge and Jose Altuve?"

"But people take what they see on TV as gospel. Then you see a 92 mph pitch with a lot of movement miss the box by a half-inch and the fans go crazy. It's like, my god, what was that guy looking at?"

Also, while the plate is 17 inches wide, the strike zone is three-dimensional. A curveball can clip the front and almost end up in the dirt, or hook down to catch the back part of the dish. Consider this, too: What is a strike?

As in, suppose the ball shows up side-by-side with the outside edge of the box, but there's no overlap. Ball or strike?

"If you're a catcher, you want more pitches. As a hitter, you want the strike zone smaller. It's definitely not easy," Nationals catcher Kurt Suzuki said. "You're not going to be perfect. Obviously we understand that."

IOC, Tokyo officials feud over marathon

Associated Press

TOKYO — Tokyo city officials are in a public feud with the International Olympic Committee over IOC plans — made without consulting the city or local organizers — to move next year's Tokyo Olympic marathons 500 miles north to Sapporo to avoid the capital city's summer heat.

The abrupt decision to shift the marathons and race walks was announced almost two weeks ago by the IOC.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike is angry about it. Her allies say no change is needed and have raised questions about who will pay if the move goes through, and have not ruled out a lawsuit to recover damages.

Taro Shirato and Hiroshi Yamada, members of Koike's political party in the metropolitan legislature, told a news conference Tuesday that moving the marathon would cost at least \$34 billion yen, about \$310 million.

The IOC said it's making the change, thinking first of athletes' safety from Tokyo's blistering summer heat.

Koike's allies offered a dif-

ferent take. Koike is one of Japan's most influential politicians and just a few years ago was viewed as a potential candidate for prime minister. And she's miffed about not being consulted.

"Although they (IOC) talk about so-called athletes first, this can only be perceived as IOC first," Shirato said through an interpreter.

"You get the sense that no considerations have been made for the athletes," Shirato added, "or the spectators who had already bought their tickets and who were looking forward to these events, or the potential spectators who will be cheering on the streets, and also to the people involved in the operation."

Don't expect the IOC to budge. It has inspectors in Tokyo this week looking at preparations with the Olympics opening in just under nine months on July 24.

IOC member John Coates heads the team and is an ally to President Thomas Bach. He has said repeatedly the IOC does not intend to change its plans,

and has told that to Koike.

The IOC fears worldwide television audiences might see a repeat of the recent world track and field championships in Doha, Qatar, where 28 of 68 starters failed to finish the women's marathon and 18 of 73 men failed to complete the course.

The races started at midnight in Doha with TV showing runners collapsing on the course. The scenes apparently shocked IOC President Thomas Bach.

Yamada acknowledged the heat posed a risk. He said Tokyo has proposed moving the start to 5 a.m., which is mid-summer sunrise in Tokyo. Last week city officials also floated the idea of a 3 a.m. start.

Estimates suggest the temperature would be about 81 degrees Fahrenheit at 5 a.m., and would be 78 in Sapporo for a 7 a.m. start. The starting temperature in Doha for the women's marathon was 91.

Yamada described the starting temperatures in Tokyo and Sapporo "on a par."

"We do recognize and understand that the heat is a very important factor, but we do not

believe that at this moment it represents an overly excessive risk."

Tokyo's soaring costs are also a major issue.

A government audit report last year said Tokyo was spending about \$25 billion to organize the Olympics, all of which is public money except for \$5.6 billion from a privately financed operating budget.

Tokyo said in its bid in 2013 that the Olympics would cost \$7.3 billion.

Yamada was asked who would pay for the increased costs.

"In the event this is changed to Sapporo, then I believe the citizens of Tokyo will not be convinced they need to pay. What I can say is that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government should not be the one to pay."

Tokyo's organizing committee president Toshiro Mori, a former Japanese prime minister, seems to have sided with the IOC and not with Koike. He suggested a few days ago that it was a done deal.

"Can we say no to the plan that the IOC and International Association of Athletics Federations already supported?"

NHL roundup

Canucks' Miller scores 100th goal in rout of Panthers

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Canucks forward J.T. Miller only knew he was on the cusp of his 100th career goal because his parents wouldn't let him forget.

"They've been putting pressure on me for about a week now so I told them to stop texting me," he said.

Miller had two goals Monday night, including his 100th in the NHL, and Vancouver scored five times in the first period on its way to a 7-2 victory over the Florida Panthers.

Josh Leivo added a goal and an assist for the Canucks. Brandon Sutter, Tim Schaller, Jake Virtanen and Brock Boeser

also scored. Alex Edler and Elias Pettersson contributed three assists apiece.

The first goal of the game for the 26-year-old Miller marked a milestone, but it wasn't something he was focused on.

"Honestly, you're so wrapped up in the game that you're not really paying attention," Miller said. "It's cool. Obviously I'm happy to do it. I've had a lot of help from other teammates along the way."

Traded to Vancouver from Tampa Bay last June, the versatile forward has concentrated instead on making his mark with the Canucks (7-3-1). He came into training camp wanting to make a good impression

and has excelled ever since.

Miller leads the team in goals with six and is second in points with 13.

"I think we're doing a lot of good things right now and the team's building a lot of confidence and I think that's really important," he said.

Miller's line wasn't the only one clicking for the Canucks. In fact, Boeser was the lone forward who didn't have a point in the first 20 minutes.

Vancouver got on the board less than two minutes in and kept up offensive pressure that overwhelmed the Panthers much of the game.

Coyotes 3, Sabres 2 (SO): Nick Schmaltz scored in the

shootout, leading Arizona to the win at Buffalo.

Conor Garland and Carl Soderberg scored in regulation for the Coyotes (7-3-1). Schmaltz scored the game-winner on a low shot to the glove side.

Darcy Kuemper made 24 saves and stopped all three Sabres attempts in the shootout.

Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner scored for Buffalo (9-2-2), which had won four of five. Carter Hutton made 41 saves.

Both teams had prime scoring opportunities in overtime. The Sabres hit the post twice, and Arizona's Clayton Keller nearly found himself with an empty net after Hutton mishandled the puck.